There were many things God made that the world took and twisted out of recognition. There were things that the Lord wept over that the world only spat upon. There were many children
the Lord made that the world threw into the cold. God made Alphas strong, thus the world denied them comfort. God made Betas calm, thus the world denied them emotions. God made Omegas nurturing, thus the world denied them strength. So when Abraham Erskine created a serum to create the perfect soldier and it could only be used on an Omega, the world needed Project Rebirth to create an Alpha out of Steve Rogers, and the world got what it wanted. For a while.

But it was bound to come out eventually. There are some secrets that are just too heavy to leave festering in the dark, yet not even Steve Rogers could have expected that the return of the long-dead Bucky Barnes to be the thing to push the world’s best kept secret into the light.

After that, the secrets just kept coming.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter Summary

i have lived with and without you

Chapter Notes

ha! i'm back! with more feels! bc it's valentine's day!
joking aside, there is a lot less dialogue borrowed from things than in the prequel to this. this is a sequel, btw, in case you didn’t notice, go back and read the first fic otherwise you will be confused as shit. secondly, in the interest of full disclosure for trigger warnings, those who are sensitive to the topics of rape/non-con and suicide should take caution. please skip to the end notes and check the full trigger warnings there, there is no actual rape/non-con in this fic nor is there any attempts or active desire to attempt suicide, but they are discussed, so please take caution if you need it.
now, you may or may not be wondering "is moony still the overachiever we all know and love?" (hopefully on the all know and love. pls. i love you.) "did moony make a playlist of songs specifically timed to enhance my experience of reading this story?" the answer is: duh. you can find it here!
edit: you can find this chapter's cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

edges blurred

o joy is me, for i have lived with and without you
o joy is me, for i have found home in your eyes
o joy is me
o joy
o
my love
i lived without you
i lived but i was dead
my lord my god never ask it of me again
i cannot live without air to breathe
without my heart to beat
i have lived so long
alone and so tired
my heart you have
put back together into
something new, something sweet
those pieces earned their edges,
you have made a mosaic
to guide you home.
the lord above is kind
he has sent you home
he sent you to me.
now i can shout
my love from the rooftops.
o joy is me
my love
Steve wasn’t sure when he’d fallen asleep. He’d opened his eyes briefly a while ago, saw the roof of a car and fallen asleep again. Then he saw Sam standing over him, but he thought it had been a dream when Sam pulled him to his feet, took him inside, dressed him in sweats and a shirt, pushed him into a new car and took him to a hospital. He had expected to wake to the sound of Bucky breathing, the fire gently cracking, not the soft beeping of hospital equipment and quiet jazzy music.
He turned his head and found Sam smiling at him.

“On your left,” Sam murmured.

Steve shut his eyes again. Bucky wasn’t in the room. He nodded to Sam, then passed out again.

He woke up again, properly, much later, a hitch to his breath and a tightness to his chest that, at first, he didn’t understand. There was a nurse standing over him, checking his vitals, and when he opened his eyes, she smiled brightly at him.

“Good morning, Captain Rogers,” she said, “welcome back to the land of the living.”

“Where’s Bucky?” Steve mumbled.

“Do you mean the man who brought you in? He just stepped out, he’ll be right back.”

Steve tried to sit up, but the nurse touched his shoulder, still smiling kindly. “Now, now, you’ve been badly hurt, your ribs are still going to be a bit tender, you need to keep still.”

“How long have I been here?” he asked. “Where is here?”

“You were brought in this morning,” the nurse answered. “You’re in MedStar Georgetown University Hospital. We’ve got police officers stationed outside, your friends vetted them themselves, you’re perfectly safe.”

Steve frowned, though. “I thought… I’m in DC?”

“That conk to your head did quite a number on you, huh?” the nurse laughed. “Yes, you’re in DC. Perfectly safe, like I said.”

The curtains blocking off his room shifted; Steve started to sit up, but the nurse touched his shoulder
again and Sam walked in.

Sam, to whom the nurse nodded, as if she’d been expecting him. Sam, who was far removed from who Steve wanted to see, who he needed to see. Sam, who would do nothing to ease what Steve was now recognizing as vague panic.

“Sam?” he croaked.

“Hey, buddy,” Sam said, sounding obviously relieved. “How you feeling?”

Steve didn’t answer the question. “Where’s Bucky?”

Sam’s relieved grin faded. He looked at the nurse, said: “Could you give us a minute?” and waited until she left to look back at him.

“Where’s Bucky?” Steve repeated. His voice sounded like shit.

“I don’t know,” Sam answered. “You turned up on my back porch this morning wearing nothing but a blanket and really out of it. I brought you here. I don’t know who brought you to me or where they went.”

Steve sank back against his pillow. He felt numb, somehow, and on top of that, the distant feeling of panic. He was alone, Bucky was gone, he was alone and surrounded by people but he wasn’t surrounded by the one person that mattered, so yeah, he was fucking alone. “I was with Bucky,” he whispered. And now, he was alone.

“We thought you were dead,” Sam told him. “They’ve been combing the Potomac for the past three days.”

“I was with Bucky,” he repeated, louder this time. “He brought me to a safe house in Virginia.”

“Then back to me?” Sam asked, sounding confused. “Why didn’t he keep you?”
Steve only shook his head. He recalled the look in Bucky’s eyes, the horror at what he’d done and the way he sagged against him and apologized over and over, telling Steve he shouldn’t forgive him. The way he’d looked surprised at the thought of being a man, of being a person and not just a weapon. “You should’ve put a bullet between my eyes and found someone better for you,” Bucky had said.

Then he had kissed him, and kissed him until they were both out of breath and unable to think. It had probably just been the heat, Steve realized dumbly. Bucky probably hadn’t intended to stay ever. Yet he’d bit into the scent gland at his neck like he wanted to bond him anyway.

With a flash, Steve realized that Bucky had bonded him. The distant sense of panic was not his own, it was Bucky’s, Bucky had bonded him, left him, and was now somewhere far away from him and afraid. Remembering the way he’d shaken and the look in his eyes, Steve thought maybe he was afraid of being a person. The idea didn’t comfort him any, he’d had Bucky back for a brief moment and lost him again. Steve felt betrayed.

“You’re here, anyway,” Sam was saying. “He didn’t do anything to other than beat the crap out of you on the helicarrier, at least, didn't touch you while he had you.”

Steve forced his eyes open to stare at Sam, who stared back at him in earnest. His nose was bandaged, he knew, but he could smell just fine, and he smelled like he’d spent three days in bed with Bucky, yet Sam thought Bucky hadn't touched him.

Or maybe Steve was just kidding himself. The scent was faint, even to him. And as he shut his eyes, trying to pick up what scent Bucky left on him, he felt another sensation like a punch to the gut when he couldn't smell the bond.

“You don't know what he wanted with you, do you?” Sam asked.

The heart monitor was starting to beep louder as Steve's heart rate picked up, his breathing got harder and he couldn't decide if he felt more like punching something or screaming. He could feel Bucky somewhere in the distance afraid of something or maybe nothing and he couldn't smell the bond on himself. Had it always been that way, had it been that if Bucky had bonded him in 1943 like they wanted the scent wouldn’t have given them away?

“Steve, you okay?” Sam was asking. He had rushed to his side, was clutching the rails of Steve's bed and looking at him with wide eyes. “What happened? What did Barnes do?”
Steve gritted his teeth and tucked his fingers into fists. The nurse said his friends had vetted the police, but he didn't trust a hospital not to have cameras or wayward ears trying to pick up any valuable information.

“When can I get out?” he asked.

“They said they'd release you in the morning,” Sam answered. “Why?”

“My apartment’s bugged,” Steve said. “Can I hole up at your place?”

“That's what I was thinking,” Sam admitted. “What happened, Steve? What did he do?”

“Nothing,” Steve lied. “He couldn't hurt me.”

“Steve, you've got about three hundred fractures in your face alone.”

“He didn't hurt me,” Steve promised. “He fished me out of the river and took me to a safe house. Like you said, he didn't touch me.”

The words tasted like ash in his mouth. Bucky had done so much more than touch him, and he couldn't even smell the result. Fuck, if he’d have known that in 1943, maybe things would've turned out different. Maybe if they had bonded, he would've known Bucky was alive, where to find him, how to help him heal. Maybe things would have been better.

“What happened after the helicarriers came down?” Steve demanded, needing the subject change. “Pierce?”

“He's dead,” Sam said and Steve breathed a sigh of relief. “Natasha dumped all of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s intel onto the internet, and I mean all of it, all HYDRA’s files got caught up in the purge. She’s been on Capitol Hill the past few days dealing with Congress. They’re pissed as all hell, man.”

Sam licked his lip, abruptly appearing hesitant. “They stormed Pierce’s estate yesterday,” he said in a softer tone. “They found this… facility under it. Machines, a cryo chamber. We figure it was where he kept the Winter Soldier when they weren't using him.”
“What machines?” Steve asked, and the look on Sam's face half answered his question. “What machines, Sam?”

“There was this device,” Sam said quietly. “A chair with restraints, this thing that attached to the face and head. Sent out controlled electric shocks. Stark and Dr. Banner flew in and looked at it, some other scientists too. They all agreed, it was definitely used to electrocute, like, the hippocampus and stuff in the brain. Memory centers.”

Sam stopped. Steve's heart monitor was beeping loud again, and Sam looked like he was regretting saying anything at all.

“Tell me, Sam,” Steve rasped. “Just tell me.”

“It was probably what they used to wipe his memory,” Sam admitted, and he didn't need to tell Steve who he meant. “The shocks would have burnt out pathways, destroyed brain cells. It would have been very effective and very painful.”

Steve swallowed, his throat felt like sandpaper and the act hurt. He looked around, raising a weak hand to point to a cup of water on a nearby table. Sam moved around to grab it, sticking the straw in his mouth and holding it while Steve gulped down the water. When he pulled back, Sam set the cup down and just looked at him, waiting.

“He remembers some things,” Steve said eventually. “Said he remembered fragments.”

He stopped, feeling like he was choking with what Bucky had told him.

“Natasha found his file,” Sam told him softly. “They had him brainwashed heavily, but they had to wipe him every few days he was out of cryostasis. He kept going unstable, his neural pathways kept fighting the wipes. One time, around the 80’s, he got away from them and went to New York.”

Steve lowered his hand, looking at the ceiling and feeling numb all over again.

“They found him holed up in an abandoned building, in the smaller bedroom. The place where you lived with your mom.”
Steve sucked in a breath and tried to let it out slowly, the result making the sound shake like he was hyperventilating. After a few seconds, Sam grabbed his hand and squeezed it and Steve realized he was.

“You were right, Steve,” Sam promised. “He knows you.”

Steve nodded. Bucky knew him and had left him. Now, he didn't know what to do.

“I'll tell you about what happened back at your place,” he said quietly.

“Alright,” Sam replied, giving his hand another squeeze.

Spending the night in the hospital was terrible. Sam slept in the hospital recliner and woke up complaining about being stiff all over. Steve didn’t even have the energy to ask how Sam had convinced the staff to let him stay, since he wasn’t family or anything. He had tried to sleep, then tried watching TV, but it all eluded him and he ended up staring at the ceiling the whole night not sure what to feel or how to express it.

The next morning, the nurse – a woman in thirties who wore a headscarf, her name was Tiffany, Steve learned – came back, bright smile included. “You about ready to check out, Captain?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, too tired to fake a smile or pretend to make jokes. Sam glanced at him, face serious.

Tiffany kept smiling, though. “Great, we just need to do go over a few routine checks before you do. We did bloodwork yesterday before we gave you any medications, but as it happens, we neglected to do a pregnancy test.”

Steve’s jaw twitched. He hadn’t taken a pregnancy test in years, not since 1943. Then his heart kicked over the thought of what he’d been doing those three days with Bucky, and for a second he panicked before remembering Erskine had practically promised that he’d never get pregnant.

“It’s okay,” he said finally.
“It’s hospital regulation,” Tiffany admitted. Steve noticed she was starting to look uncomfortable; he doubted having to discuss pregnancy with Captain America wasn’t something covered in med school. “So, we’re going to need a urine sample from you. Just to make sure.”

“Isn’t there a waiver I can sign?” Steve sighed.

Tiffany shook her head. “Uh, no. Our department head is insisting we have the test done, since, uh, you seemed to have gone into heat while you were, well, I guess, missing. And we found traces of semen…”

She trailed off, cheeks dark.

Sam looked at Steve sharply, eyebrows high on his forehead, but Steve managed to not react at all to the nurse’s words.

“Fine,” he said. “It’s not a possibility.”

Tiffany smiled uncomfortably. “It’s still required.”

So, Steve peed in a cup. He didn’t even wait for the test to be completed, he told Tiffany he was leaving and made Sam bring the car up. Waiting in the lobby, he listened to a newsreel and pretended it wasn’t making his stomach turn.

“It’s true, John, every file ever entered into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s database has surfaced on the internet, uncensored and unfiltered, just to be sucked up by every other intelligence agency in the country. It makes you wonder, what else is being hidden from us? Turns out, the fact that Captain America is an Omega is one of them, but apparently, not even the head of S.H.I.E.L.D. knew it. More on how he managed to fight HYDRA during World War II and why a national hero has spent over seventy years lying to his country at nine.”

Steve was silent on the ride back to Sam’s house, and Sam apparently knew better than to try to get him to talk. He made a conscious choice that until he’d figured out what he was going to do about Bucky, he wasn’t going to deal with being called a liar on national TV. He didn’t want to think about either of them.
Sam helped him out of the car, as if he was some pregnant Omega, Steve thought bitterly for a second, before reminding himself that he had been shot several times and suffered numerous broken bones in the past few days. Steve leaned his elbows on the counter of Sam’s kitchen, silent and numbed while Sam vanished into the back of the house and a toilet in the distance flushed. He returned to the kitchen and pulled out a jug of orange juice, pouring two glasses.

Steve stared at them for a second. Sam set the bottle down and smiled tightly at him.

“I’d offer to put vodka in it, but I figure it wouldn’t do anything for you,” he said.

“Wouldn’t do shit,” Steve agreed softly, and sipped at the orange juice. “Tony said he was gonna work on some super alcohol for me,” he remembered suddenly.

“Well, let’s wait to see what that test says before you go downing super alcohol,” Sam suggested.

Steve set down the glass. He didn’t feel like faking a joke about that now.

“You want to tell me what happened now?”

“Can you smell him on me?” muttered Steve in answer.

“A little. It was stronger when I found you.”

“Do I smell bonded?”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “No,” he said. “Do you think you smell bonded?”

Steve shook his head. “Honestly, I think that’s the shittiest thing I’ve found out this week.”

“Fuck, man,” Sam murmured. “He bonded you?”
“Feels like it,” Steve admitted, gulping down half his orange juice just for something to occupy his mouth and hands with. “Bucky’s in the area. He’s afraid of something. Panicky.”

“Fuck,” Sam repeated softly. “That’s fucked up.”

Steve only nodded. Sam’s words described everything perfectly. “I don’t even know if he meant to. He probably didn’t. He was probably planning this the entire time.”

“Now, I definitely think we should check on the results –”

“M not,” Steve cut him off. “Not a chance.”

“Steve, I don’t know what kind of things they knew about heats in the 40’s, but these days, we got the statistics on how easy it is for Omegas to get pregnant in heat. It’s in the nineties, Steve.”

“I know,” Steve answered, Sam only continuing to look at him like he was insane. “I’m not just saying it. It’s the serum.”

Sam’s eyebrows rose, if possible, even higher. “Okay,” he said slowly. “The serum made you grow a foot and a half, gain over a hundred pounds, cured your asthma, heart defect, and fuckin’ HIV, and it made you infertile?”

“Erskine developed it to take the strength of childbirth or something and make it work on everything else the body does, take the Omega instinct to nurture and protect and put it in soldiers,” Steve told him. Sam’s mouth dropped open. “By accident. When Schmidt took it, Erskine took a long, hard look at it and figured that if an Omega took it instead, they’d come out the ultimate soldier instead of a monster. Turns whatever it does to keep the body going during childbirth, makes all the other cells work at the same rate or whatever, but it makes the reproductive system work at the same ratio to the rest of the body, I don’t know, they didn’t know that much about childbirth then. ‘S why they didn’t give it to an Alpha to begin with.”

“Okay,” Sam repeated. “That needs to be in the history books.”

“Lots of things need to be in the history books,” Steve said bitterly. He really wished the orange juice were vodka. “So, yeah. Can’t be pregnant. Not an Alpha in the world with a sperm count high enough to knock me up.”
“Right,” Sam muttered. “God. Everything is fucked up.”

Then Sam grabbed a barstool, dragged it around to Steve’s side, and patted it. “Sit,” he commanded.

Steve sat. “Why am I sitting?”

Sam grabbed a second barstool, refilled their glasses of orange juice, and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I’m betting that in all your time, nobody ever offered you a shrink. I ain’t a shrink, but I’ve been talking to vets for five years about the shit they’ve seen, we’ve all seen. And if anyone’s needed a listening ear, it’s you.”

For a second, Steve said nothing. He stared into his orange juice, and thought not about the men he saw die, the lie he had been forced to be, or even the haunted and wretched way Bucky had told him he would be better off without him for the second time in his life.

“After my mother died, I started going to confession,” he whispered. “Went all the way across town to confess to a priest I didn’t have to see in Mass every Sunday. It took a while for me to actually confess, though. It was a big thing, back then, prostitution ‘n’ all. I half thought I’d get arrested walking out of the church.”

“Did it help?” Sam asked gently.

After considering it, Steve nodded slightly. It had helped then. He had found God, had confessed his sin and then later, when he’d been able to stop, sought absolution, done his penance as best he could and held his back straight in the face of the enemy. He had found God in the way Bucky didn’t give a shit what he’d had to do, only that he was there and alive, found God in the way he still fit in Bucky’s arms even though he was so much taller and broader than he’d been when he was fourteen, then had lost Bucky all over again.

Now, he didn’t know where God was anymore. It seemed that in this modern world, God wasn’t around for a lot of people and they liked it that way. To them, God was a name to hiss as a curse or sigh as a blessing, just a word, no longer a presence at their backs. Steve couldn’t decide how he felt about that. It rather felt like God was only a word, no longer watching his back with an all-seeing eye these days.

“I don’t know,” he said after a while. “Father Elliot, he told me God wouldn’t turn his back on me
even though I was doing what I was doing. Swore that God had bigger plans for me, that one day I would be able to walk into confessions with nothing to confess.”

Setting down his glass, Steve thought and remembered, added on the afterthought: “He called me brother of Rahab.”

There couldn’t have been a way for Father Elliot to know what Steve would wind up doing. Rahab had saved the nation of Israel, and at the time, Steve couldn’t even save himself. There was no way for Father Elliot to know he’d end up saving over four hundred men just to rescue one, not if God didn’t have a place in the world after all. And yet, brother of Rahab he had called him, as if he really did know that Steve really would go on to do great things.

“I’m not a priest, either,” Sam prompted quietly. “But I feel like you don’t need to confess as much as you need to just talk.”

Sam might be right, Steve thought as he sighed and drank some more orange juice. They were quiet for a while, long enough that several minutes went by, until suddenly, Steve was talking.

“When he fell, the Howlies had to gang up on me to drag me out of the car they had Zola in, ‘cause I was just going to shoot him. I didn’t even question it, I just grabbed a gun and shoved it in his face. They spent the next week making sure I was never alone and I never had a gun in my hand or even in the room, otherwise I would’ve used it on myself. Then we got word that Schmidt’s fortress was found, and it was like I had a purpose again, and that purpose was to finish the fight. It was like I could see the end of the story, I was getting to the last pages, then I could go. I didn’t want to live in a world where Bucky was dead, and when I saw that the only way to stop the Valkyrie was to take it down, I was so relieved. It felt like God was handing me a death that wouldn’t be at my own hands, handing me off to be with Bucky again, like he was trying to be kind to me for once.”

Steve looked into his glass and fancied he saw Bucky’s face in the sheen of orange. “Before I got him out of the Azzano, I thought that he didn’t love me and that was why he never came back for me. It hurt so much all the time, I just lost the ability to feel much other than the pain and the shame from what I was doing. Then, he did love me, and he still loved me despite what I’d done, and now —”

He broke off to press his hands against his face. Beside him, Sam reached out to grip his shoulder again until he uncovered his face to take a deep breath.

“Bucky doesn’t remember a lot,” he said eventually. “And it seems more like things come to him in the moment. Like, when I told him about chocolate not being rationed anymore, he mentioned how I
“Did he cry at all?” Sam asked abruptly.

Steve looked up, lips parted and eyebrows scrunched together. Then he nodded, looking away. “Yeah. I mentioned Zola, and I think he had a flashback or something. I got him to calm down, then he just collapsed in my arms and started sobbing.”

“Then he doesn’t think he’s only a weapon now,” Sam said. “Weapons don’t cry.”

Steve thought about it, and then he set down the glass and covered his face with his hands and groaned into them. “Sam, what am I going to do? He bonded me and then he dropped me off, and now I don’t know where he is, where he’s going, what he’s doing; how am I supposed to help him if he’s left me?”

His voice hitched. Sam squeezed his shoulder.

“Something tells me he’s not too far,” Sam whispered.

Steve rubbed at his temples. “He’s in DC,” he muttered. “That’s as much as I know.”

“No, I mean, something tells me he’s not just leaving you.”

Steve looked at him, lips turned down at the corners, nose wrinkled and eyes doleful. “Right,” he said, with sharp sarcasm turning his tone into a jab. “Because dropping me off at your back door half-unconscious from post-heat wasn’t leaving me.”

“Steve, my dog tags are on my bed.”

Steve blinked. “Okay…?” he said questioningly.
“I keep ‘em hung on the mirror,” Sam told him. “They’re on the bed right now. And the lid on the orange juice was screwed on wrong. The toilet seat was left up in my bathroom, and I shared a bathroom with my sister so long I never leave it up.”

“Wait –”

“Your boy’s been in here,” Sam interrupted. “I don’t know if he left those things on purpose, I doubt it, but my dog tags got this faint scent, like somebody spent time worrying over them. Same scent I smelled on you yesterday morning.”

Steve frowned, confused and definitely twice as upset. “Why would he do that? Break in and then leave again?”

“I’m thinking he was making sure the place is safe,” Sam said. “Maybe he was looking for bugs. But I when I drove you to the hospital, I left the glass door unlocked for him, ‘cause I figured he’d want to check the place out.”

Steve just shook his head, covering his face again and wishing that he did have some super alcohol; this was too much, he was on edge thanks to Bucky off somewhere not with him and scared of something, having just spent two or three days getting fucked to heaven and bonded as well only to be left alone by his Alpha, who’d been dead for the 70 years for the world and the past three years to him that Steve’s been awake since thawing from the ice. He wanted to curl up into a ball and die, and that wasn’t even touching the results of having been outed to the world as an Omega or Natasha’s wide-scale info dump onto the internet.

“I don’t understand why he left me,” he hissed. “Why would he do that but leave me? Why?”

“Do you remember at the meeting you came to last week, there was an Omega woman in the crowd?”

Steve gave pause. “No,” he said finally, looking up. “What’s that got to do with Bucky?”

“So, her name’s Leah,” Sam began, ignoring Steve’s question. “She did two tours as a field doctor in Iraq. Met her wife over there. But that was before the end of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, so she and her girl couldn’t do anything other than sneak around. Her girl got moved without her, then she got captured and spent six months with ISIS fucking with her head.”
Steve looked down around the start of Sam’s monologue, jaw clenching as Leah’s story began to unfold.

“Her girl got rescued, though, thank God, they gave her a medal and an honorable discharge, and then almost right after, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell got repealed, so Leah and her girl, they get married. Her girl’s an Alpha, and after Leah goes home, she finds out her girl’s had bad PTSD and never told her. One night, in a flashback, her girl accidentally hits Leah and gives her a black eye. When she gets out of it, sees what she did, she runs out.”

“Is this supposed to make me feel better?” Steve interrupted.

“Hush, I ain’t done,” Sam scolded. Steve tried for a sigh, but it was weak and half-hearted. “Anyway, Leah doesn’t go looking for her, thinks she’ll come back by morning, but she doesn’t. She checks all the places her wife ought to be, she’s in none of them. When she gets home, she sees that there’s a cabinet open that was closed when she left, and realizes that even though her wife’s run out, she still went back and did the perimeter check she does three times a day.”

Steve started to unclench his jaw as Sam went on. “This keeps up, Leah goes to work in the morning, comes back and finds that something is just a little out of place, and her girl’s scent never fades. After about a month of this, Leah cracks and just doesn’t go to work one morning and catches her wife sneaking in to check that the place is still secure.”


“Her wife cried a lot,” Sam told him. “Seeing that she’d hurt her Omega put her in a really bad place, but the compulsion to keep checking perimeters, make sure everything was safe, that her girl was still safe, that outweighed everything else. So she spent that month tailing her wife, spent the entire time in a constant state of panic, hell, there were nights when she just snuck in to watch her girl sleep. She was terrified of hurting Leah, but more afraid of Leah being hurt by something else.”

“Are you telling me Bucky’s probably watching us through a window?” Steve asked wryly.

Sam shrugged. “Who knows? But I’ll bet you that he probably trusts me with you more than himself, you know why?”

“Why?” Steve muttered.
“I see it all the time at the VA. Half the time, it isn’t even like Leah, that someone hurt their Omega by accident and convinced themselves they were a threat, it’s usually just they convince themselves they’re not worthy of their Omegas’ love. I have seen Betas do this, Steve, I have seen Omegas do it. I got a guy who after six years here, one morning he decided to go back to bed when his wife got up for work, then woke up in a panic attack and ran half an hour in his bathrobe and slippers to her office in the snow ‘cause she didn’t answer her phone and he thought she’d left him.”

Sam gripped Steve’s shoulder, shaking it a little, looking struck himself by what he was saying. “Six years, man. He stopped having the compulsion to check her car for bombs after a year home. These people, they see shit, they do shit, they have shit done to ‘em, and they come back thinking they don’t deserve anyone’s love.”

Sam gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “We come back thinking we’d be selfish to eat a brownie.”

Steve’s shoulders deflated and he stared into his orange juice, as if maybe if he looked long enough, he’d see Bucky’s crooked grin reflected in its surface.

“But they always come back,” Sam promised.

Steve wasn’t sure if he believed him. He wasn’t sure if Sam believed himself. But, it was nice to pretend, to think that Bucky was watching over him from a distance, doing his own penance and thinking Steve was safer away from him. It didn’t make the ache in his chest go away, it didn’t make his desire to curl up in a ball any less. It was nice to pretend.

“Why don’t you go take a rest?” Sam suggested after a while. “I know you didn’t sleep a wink at the hospital.”

“Is the bed gonna feel like a marshmallow?” Steve asked suddenly.

Sam grinned at him. “Like a melted one,” he said, and let go of his shoulder. Steve rose from the stool, walked out of the kitchen and towards the spare room. After he collapsed onto it and drew the blankets around his shoulders, he realized how tired he really was, and fell asleep immediately.

[Excerpt of Captain America: The Mythos That Captured the United States, by Professor]
“... We, as Americans, have come to love our drama. We love our heroes and our mythical figures, and Captain America is no exception. Where children were raised playing Sheriff versus Billy the Kid and Washington versus King George in the time that Captain America was growing up, now children play Captain America versus the Red Skull. The comics young boys read split the difference between Batman, Superman, and Captain America in popularity and profit, and the number of graduate students I have had to write their theses on Captain America has grown to such a number I have taken his life and successes from the pool of options...

“The mythos of Captain America has entranced the American public for the past thirty-five years, and it is highly possible that it will entrance the public for the next thirty-five...”

[september 25th, 2014, location undisclosed]

“What’re we gonna do?”

“Somebody’s gonna kill us, we’re gonna turn around, and the fucking Winter Soldier’s gonna be there with a garrote wire – I’m too young to die, Jimmy –”

“The Winter Soldier’s gone AWOL.”

“What?”

“He’s – Oh, fuck, what was that?”

“Your fucking overactive imagination, Jones, now shut the hell up so I can think!”

“What are we gonna do, boss?”

“You say it, we’re there.”
“We need to regroup.”

“Yeah, but who’re we gonna regroup with?”

“I know some guys.”

Chapter End Notes

trigger warnings, and these apply to the fic in whole not just this chapter: for rape/noon-con, bucky states that his mother told him he had raped steve while in heat when they were kids, a point in time where steve was unable to give full consent bc of being in heat not to mention his health was too fragile for heat/rut-induced intercourse, this is not what actually happened, as seen in the prequel, bucky did not touch steve more than a kiss and scenting him once before locking him up out of bucky’s reach, and as seen in the prequel, steve did correct bucky on what actually happened.
for suicide, steve briefly talks about previously wanting to attempt suicide just after bucky fell from the train in kinda graphic detail, and tells bucky that he had intended to let the winter soldier kill him bc he didn’t want to live in a world where bucky didn’t remember him.

as always, you can follow me on my tumblr and catch the first excerpt i posted to my tumblr, which is from the next chapter, here. i'll catch you back here, not tomorrow, unfortunately, in a couple of weeks. sorry. i don't have the whole of the fic written yet i have a good portion, so it's going to be more spread out than intertwined. tbh the reason intertwined was posted in a weekend was bc i wrote it in a weekend and that was 'cause i had the plot of the film to follow. anyway, a couple of weeks and you get chapter two! see you then!
a mosaic to guide you home

Chapter Summary

you have made a mosaic \ to guide you home.

Chapter Notes

yo it's two weeks to the minute almost, i have succeeded. y'all can check out the playlist for this chapter here, make sure you hit play when you start reading and pause when you stop reading so that the timing doesn't get thrown off. anyway, here we go, let's go see soldier claus.
edit: you can find the cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes
[First grade Historical Figures standard themed worksheets for Math, Phonics, Art, and History, from the state of Virginia public school curriculum]

September: Christopher Columbus

October: John Calvin
It felt like only a few minutes after he fell asleep that Sam was knocking on Steve’s door with a rapid rap of knuckles. Steve stirred, groaning and rubbing at his eyes.

“Hey, you can get beauty sleep later,” Sam said, tone strangely serious. “You gotta see this.”

“Wha’s the matter?” Steve slurred, but got up anyway and draped a blanket around his shoulders, as the house was somehow chilly. It was only September. Only halfway through the hallway did Steve realize it was the blanket Bucky left him with.

In the kitchen, thoughts of the chill and blankets went far from his head. His mouth fell open and he stared, completely taken by surprise.

“I told you your boy was watching over you,” Sam said in vaguely shocked awe and horror, pointing needlessly at the agents hanging from the rear porch rafters.

Steve walked cautiously to the glass door, holding the blanket tightly and vaguely aware of Sam behind him talking. There were five of them, Alphas that stank of blood and sweat even through the glass door, STRIKE agents and almost definitely HYDRA. Rumlow or Rollins weren’t there, they were all men Steve didn’t recognize, but they were there, clearly beaten to a pulp and hanging from the ropes tied around their waists.

“I think they’re alive,” Steve murmured.
“What?” Sam screeched.

Steve winced and touched his left ear. It was probably five a.m., he hadn’t been prepared for loud noises or unconscious HYDRA agents. The sky was barely pink from the dawn.

“... I mean, I get that he’s paranoid and protective, but holy shit, Steve!” Sam was saying.

“Give me your phone,” Steve announced.

“What?” Sam said again, though less panicky.

“Your phone,” Steve insisted, snapping his fingers. Sam grumbled but pressed it into his palm and Steve dialed Natasha’s number from memory.

She answered on the third ring. “You’ve reached Joe’s Drycleaning, you stain it, we clean it.”

“Nat, that one doesn’t even rhyme,” Steve said distractedly.

He heard her sigh, a sound of faint relief. He’d called her personal cell, a number very few people had; she’d answered as she always answered her personal cell, with a completely obscure shop name. “A number I don’t recognize calls at five fucking o’clock, I am allowed to not rhyme. What’s up?”

“Barnes left Steve a present!” Sam called, probably too loud. At least, Steve winced again.

“What kind of present? Is it diamonds? Only take it if it’s diamonds, Steve, you’re worth diamonds.”

“It’s a bunch of HYDRA agents,” Steve snapped.

Natasha was silent for a while. “I’ll be there in fifteen.” With that, she hung up.
Steve passed the phone back to Sam. “She’ll be here in fifteen,” he murmured, still staring out the window.

“Why couldn’t Barnes be a normal boyfriend and leave you flowers?” Sam grumbled.

“Hang on,” Steve said, unlocking the glass door.

“Yeah – hey, wait where are you –”

But Steve wasn’t listening. He stepped outside, skirting around the hanging HYDRA agents. They made no noises and gently swayed in the wind, like heavily armored and pointedly disarmed wind chimes.

“Whoa,” Sam said. Apparently, he’d followed Steve.

Sam’s backyard was destroyed. He had had a swing set, a picnic table, a covered pool and shed. The swings were pretty much the only things left intact. The pool cover had been riddled with holes, scrunched up like someone had fallen into it, cut in several places as well. The picnic table was in pieces, part of it floating in the pool. The door of the shed had been smashed down as well. The ground looked trampled, like an army had fought a battle there.

“Okay then,” Sam murmured under his breath.

Steve ran around to check the front yard. Sam’s mailbox was crooked and the ground was trampled there, too, as were both side yards. He came back to the backyard, finding Sam still standing there and looking a little lost.

“At least the swing set’s okay,” Steve pointed out. He wasn’t sure why exactly Sam had a swing set in his backyard. He assumed it had to do with his nieces and nephews.

“My yard!” Sam spluttered, throwing his hands in the air. “HYDRA! Destroyed my yard!”

“Sorry,” Steve offered with a sympathetic pat on the back.
“Are there bullets in my pool?” Sam whispered. “I don’t want to know. There probably are. Oh, god.”

“I can replace –” Steve started, but Sam rounded on him with eyebrows near his hairline and he faltered.

“Are you gonna believe me now when I say your boy’s watching out for you?” Sam pointed to the yard, the HYDRA agents, the smashed picnic table. “’Cause this is a bit more than leaving you a present. These guys tried to break into my house, they would’ve turned my kitchen table into chop suey, too.”

Sam jabbed a finger into Steve’s chest, who was suddenly feeling very claustrophobic. “I didn’t even wake up, and that’s saying something, because none of these assholes are dead, so Barnes had to fight them head on, take them down, and do it all quiet and quick enough that I didn’t wake up and I wake up at a pin dropping, Steve, this is some serious shit.”

Steve swallowed and looked away. It was a thought that had occurred to him, and it was one he didn’t want to consider. He didn’t want Bucky thinking he had to do things like this, but at the same time, he was both grateful and pissed Bucky had saved him from a fight. Seventy years and plenty of ice and amnesia into the future, and Bucky was still swooping in and saving his ass.

He was saved having to respond as Natasha parted the row of HYDRA agents like a curtain – one of them half grunted, but didn’t stir on his own – and looked out at them.

“We brought donuts,” she said flatly, and disappeared behind the unconscious bodies.

Sam looked at Steve, eyebrows scrunched together. “Donuts?” he muttered. “How did she have time for donuts? It’s barely been ten minutes.”

Steve shook his head; he had learned long ago not to question Natasha’s ways. He pulled his faux-shawl around his shoulders tighter, walked around the hanging HYDRA agents instead of through them, and re-entered the kitchen. Natasha and Hill were inside, armed with donuts and a pistol each.

“I have to know,” Sam said as he walked in.
“We already had the donuts,” Hill said before he could even ask. Sam opened his mouth, closed it, then sighed and took a donut from the box on the counter.

With Sam occupied, Hill looked at Steve and raised her eyebrows. Natasha crossed her arms over her chest and nodded to a stool.

“Why does this feel like an interrogation?” Steve asked, sitting.

“Because it is,” Natasha said, crossing to stand opposite the counter from him and glare at him in the eye. “You vanish, we think you’re dead, you show up four days later, and the next morning your also dead Alpha, whom no one even knew was your Alpha, is leaving HYDRA agents in the backyard. Spill.”

Steve glared back at her, crossing his arms and mimicking her stance to a T. Natasha did not look impressed; she raised the slim corner of one eyebrow.

“I don’t know,” he told her stubbornly. “Bucky didn’t fill me in on his plan before he dropped me off here.”

“So, what were you doing those four days?” Hill inquired suspiciously.

Steve shut his eyes and exhaled forcefully. “Mostly we were driving,” he offered evasively. He may have been thrust into a century with much more blasé attitudes to exactly what had happened in the safe house between arriving and leaving, but there was no way in hell Steve was just going to announce to a couple of ladies that he’d spent the entire time begging to be and actually being fucked over and over. Sure, both Hill and Natasha could probably kill him with their little toes with ease – or maybe just Natasha —, but they were still a pair of classy dames, and Steve’s ma raised him better than that.

However, it appeared Sam was in the mood to betray him. “After Steve’s suppressants wore off, he went into heat, Barnes and him were highly emotional, one plus one, et cetera.”

Steve spluttered as Hill frowned and Natasha raised her eyebrow half an inch higher.

“Did you use a condom?” Natasha asked in a flat, casual tone, as if asking him if he’d brushed his teeth that morning.
“It wasn’t like I was expecting Bucky to surface from the dead,” Steve muttered shamefully.

“Great,” Hill sighed, “you’re probably –”

“No, I’m not,” Steve cut her off sharply, “because it’s practically impossible.”

“Steve –”

“Because of the serum,” Steve snapped at Natasha, who increased her glare.

“That doesn’t explain *them* ,” Natasha retorted, throwing a hand out to the back porch.

“They were going to attack my house,” Sam answered before Steve could. “Barnes took them out. They’re alive. They’re also probably way too heavy to be hanging from the roof of my back porch. Can we cut them down and get them somewhere other than my backyard before we hash out the traumatic details of Steve’s star-crossed romance?”

“It’s not –” Steve started, but Sam held up a hand.

“You watched him die, Steve,” he insisted. “Then not be dead. It’s traumatic.”

“I’m taking care of them,” Hill spoke up. Steve looked back at her, then out the kitchen door. Sam turned around and let out a quiet *huh*. There were, in fact, FBI agents cutting down the guys Bucky had tied to the porch already, the fourth man being lowered to the ground as they watched. After a minute, the FBI agents hauled away the would-be-attackers, and engines roared and left the front of the house.

“Agent Stiler is heading the investigation of S.H.I.E.L.D. and HYDRA,” Hill explained. “He owes me a few favors.”

“They’ll do,” Sam muttered, but Steve was rounding on Agent Hill again.
“There’s an investigation?” he asked.

Hill raised her eyebrows. “You said it yourself, Cap, S.H.I.E.L.D. needed to come down, but it wasn’t just gonna be an info dump and done. S.H.I.E.L.D. was too massive and too involved in too much. The FBI’s got an entire new task force dedicated to tracking down every bit of skewed data from our files and every HYDRA agent or affiliative known. There’s been a dozen US congress members arrested already, they’re talking about opening Alcatraz again just to hold HYDRA members.”

Natasha took a step closer to him as Hill crossed her arms over her chest and the both of them fixed him with almost identical glares. They worked together too much.

“The president is calling for the Winter Soldier’s head,” Natasha said bluntly, blunt enough that her words may have been a sucker-punch to the stomach with the way they hit Steve. “His killings on American soil alone are enough for death row. The UN wants him found and prosecuted.”

“He wasn’t in control of himself!” Steve snapped. Hill let out a sharp breath and turned to the fridge, yanking it open as if escaping a petulant three-year-old. Steve did not appreciate it and crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at her back.

“We know that,” Natasha cut him off before he could launch a tirade, “but there’s hundreds of fingers pointing and voices shouting, and before I can do damage control, I need to know what his status is.”

“I don’t know what his status is!” Steve shot back. “I do know that they fucking tortured him until there was nothing left in his brain but how to kill!”

“We need to prove that, Steve!”

“Show the fucking president the machines in Pierce’s basement!” he half-yelled. “Hell, hook him up to it for a second, show him some concrete proof of exactly what they did to Bucky to get him to comply! He was fucking tortured!”

Natasha grabbed his shoulders and shook him, Steve attempting to jerk out of her grip, but she held on tight. “Steve, I need him to testify,” she said. “I need him to go before Congress, who have had me on trial for the past three days, and testify. There’s no way I can get them to pardon the man who shot JFK, and he shot JFK, it’s in the file –,” this seemed to be something that highly startled Sam,
but Steve had to admit he didn’t know what JFK stood for “– without him getting up there and
telling them in graphic detail what they did to him. The public won’t let Congress pardon him
without knowing what they were doing to him.”

“The FBI and CIA and NSA immediately took every document Natasha released and classified
them,” Hill added helpfully, though she didn’t look at him. “About a third are left for public viewing.
Barnes’s file is not one of them.”

“He has to testify,” Natasha repeated. “So I need to know his status.”

Steve shut his mouth with a snap. He thought back to Bucky’s body going rigid, his breath coming
unevenly from his chest, the horror in his eyes when Steve had barely mentioned Zola’s name.

“I don’t think he’s in a place to do that,” he said.

“I need him to get there,” Natasha snapped.

“Hey,” Sam spoke up. Natasha swiveled her hard stare onto him, but Sam held his ground. “The
guy’s messed up, dude. He’s been a prisoner in his own mind just as much as he has been a prisoner
of HYDRA for seventy years.”

Natasha opened her mouth, when Hill abruptly pulled her head and something in her hand out of the
fridge. “You said Barnes swept the place for bugs?” she said.

Natasha, Sam, and Steve jerked their gazes around to look at her. Hill held up a tiny object. “So, this
is a bug,” she said dryly. “S.H.I.E.L.D. standard tech. It was in your egg carton.”

“That – I thought – I haven’t –” Sam spluttered.

“How did you know Bucky –” Steve started at the same time.

“Sam told us yesterday,” Natasha cut in.
Hill set it on the counter and raised the butt of her pistol. “Whoever’s listening, we’ll be in touch.” Then she smashed the butt of the pistol onto the bug, turning it into dozens of tiny fragments.

“Continue,” Hill said, pulling out her phone.

Natasha pinched the bridge of her nose. “We should have checked earlier,” she muttered.

“I’m having my guys check through our records, see who placed it,” Hill said. “Continue,” she repeated.

“Fine. Barnes is fucked in the head and not in a place to testify,” Sam announced. “You’re going to have to find out how to get him pardoned without his testimony.”

“He should be considered a prisoner of war,” Steve snapped.

“Unfortunately, at the moment he’s wanted internationally for a thousand different crimes,” Natasha informed him.

“Can we get, like, an expert witness?” Sam asked. “Someone to outline the procedures done to wipe his memory? Describe that in graphic detail on the stand?”

Steve pointed to Sam. He had no clue what an expert witness was, but Natasha looked like she was considering it so whatever it was had to be enough.

“Maybe,” she said. A glint appeared in her eye and she turned it on Steve. “If you testify, too.”

“What?”

“If you testify, too, we get some experts to graphically describe what HYDRA did to him, you tell them who he was before and who you see now.”

Steve slumped. “Nat, he left me here,” he snapped. “I don’t think “He nearly punched me to death, then kidnapped me and fucked me for three days straight before abandoning me at my friend’s”
“God, you are being difficult on purpose!” Natasha exclaimed.

“Bucky has left me!” Steve abruptly roared, and Natasha took a hasty step back. “I don’t know what he’s doing, I don’t know where he is, I feel like shit, and you’re calling me difficult!? I can’t take up the witness stand and play the part of a teary-eyed Omega who just wants her Alpha to come home, ’cause I’m fairly certain that the next time I lay eyes on him, I’m going to clock him! I can’t tell you what his status is, all I know is he’s gone, he’s scared, I don’t even know if he’s coming back!”

“Steve,” Natasha started, but he pushed past her and stormed out of the kitchen. He slammed the door of the guest room, dropping onto the bed and sinking his head into his hands. He felt like clocking Natasha, too, now. He let out a hiss of frustration, knowing that the next time he did see Bucky, he’d probably be too relieved to remember to knock his block off, but his point stood. Natasha wanted him to play her role, not really her role, just the role that had been expected of him until the serum; lay his emotions on the line, expose something he’d had to keep secret for years, expose himself in ways he had been told not to since Project Rebirth, but he’d been playing the Alpha too long to know how to.

He heard slightly muffled, angry voices in the kitchen. Sam was yelling about something. Probably how he and Bucky were traumatized little bastards and needed to be stepped carefully around. He covered his eyes and let out another breath, trying to calm down. Sam wouldn’t baby him, that wasn’t any more true than him saying he’d punch Bucky for leaving him. And honestly, even he was surprised at how much this was fucking him over. He would have thought that he’d handle Bucky abandoning him better a second time.

The angry voices abruptly stopped. Steve lifted his head up, ears pricked, listening carefully to the utter silence. He half rose, going to lift his shield and cracking the guest room door.

“... it’s okay, big guy,” Sam was saying. “It’s all good here. You don’t gotta worry about a thing.”

“Drop the gun,” he heard Hill snap. Steve tightened his grip on his shield and slipped out the door.

“We’re all friends here,” Sam added as Steve tiptoed down the hall. “We can all put away the guns.”

“Speak for yourself,” Natasha’s voice hissed.
“Where is he?”

Steve froze, foot in the air as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and his chest buzzed with a twisted lump of emotions that ranged from relief to delight to anger to relief again. His breath hitched in his throat.

“Steve’s just fine,” Sam promised Bucky. Steve couldn’t move. “He’s back in the guest room. I can go get him.”

“Stay put!” Bucky’s voice snapped.

“Drop the gun, Barnes!” Hill repeated.

“We’re not going to hurt him or you,” Sam insisted. “Everyone, please, lower the guns. Please do not destroy my kitchen. Barnes, you very kindly kept some HYDRA goons from doing that this morning, I’m very –”

“Shut up!”

“Hey, it’s chill, man,” Sam added, calmer than Steve thought he would have been.

Steve sucked in a breath and stepped into the kitchen doorway. Natasha and Hill were flanking each other, backs to him and guns drawn. Sam had his hands held out, trying to placate the Mexican standoff in the room.

Bucky was standing by the sliding glass door, weapon held at the ready. The second Steve stepped into view, he visibly relaxed, tensed again, then dropped his gun to point at the floor, but kept his stance on edge, his expression didn’t change from the tight jaw, furrowed brow, and thinned lips that meant he was ready to fight still.

“There, see,” Sam said, glancing towards Hill and Natasha. “You ladies can drop the stance, too, right?”

Steve dropped the shield with a clang and strode between them, jaw set, to Bucky and his widening
eyes, as his Alpha took a step back and almost tripped over the track of the glass door.

“You asshole,” Steve hissed, and grabbed him in a rough hug.

Bucky tried to pull away from him, but Steve’s hands clutched tightly to his shoulders and back. After a second, Bucky’s arms circled hesitantly around his waist, the gun pressing against his back, and Steve buried his face in Bucky’s neck. He felt the urge to sob again, but held it back in favor of breathing in slowly Bucky’s scent. The twisted lump of emotions ebbed and softened into something resembling calm and he nearly purred despite being extremely pissed at him still.

The hand holding the gun lifted then. Steve stiffened, lifting his head, but Bucky’s hand pressed to the back of his neck, holding him closely despite raising his gun again.

“Drop your guns,” Bucky said.

“Everyone drop the guns!” Sam insisted.

“Bucky –” Steve started.

“It’s one thing when you’re pointing at me!” Bucky snapped, not to Steve, to Hill and Natasha and Steve dropped his head again, understanding now and sighing frustratedly because of it. “Drop ‘em!”

“Guys,” Sam repeated.

“Not while you’ve got Cap as a human shield,” Hill called.

Bucky spun him around abruptly, shoving him behind him fluidly so that Steve was now pressed to Bucky’s back with his hand firm on his waist, all the while keeping his gun level on Natasha and Hill. Steve blinked once. Natasha looked like someone had just flicked her in the ear and Hill’s expression was vaguely constipated.

“Drop the guns,” Bucky repeated slowly.
“See, he doesn’t want you shooting Steve is all, can we drop the guns?” Sam hissed.

Natasha met Steve’s gaze, raising an eyebrow. She lowered her gun. Hill glanced at her, eyebrows high, but Natasha shot her a look and Hill huffed. She lowered her gun, too.

Bucky dropped his again immediately, this time stuffing it into the waistband of his jeans.

“Thank you,” Sam whispered, lowering his hands to rub at his eyes. Steve wasn’t sure if he was thanking them or the hypothetical God the modern world possibly didn’t believe in or just the air.

“Why are you here?” Natasha asked in a demand.

“You crushed my bug,” Bucky snapped.

“You bugged my house yourself?” Sam burst out, dropping his hands to ogle Bucky like he had just confessed to having three nipples. Steve had similar thoughts, gaping open-mouthed at Bucky and unable to form words yet. “Dude!”

“I needed to be able to know what was going on inside,” Bucky said, and Steve could almost hear him rolling his eyes. “Not like I was actually intending to drop Steve off and head out to Fuck-off-ville without finding a way to put an ear inside this place.”

A twinge of pleased relief went through Steve, before it was squashed by the shock and distress at the levels of not okay bugging people’s houses were.

“Are there more?” Sam muttered. “When did you even –”

“Where did you get it?” Hill cut him off.

“The HYDRA agents had them in their van,” Bucky answered. “There’s one more in the living room.”

“Bucky, you can’t go bugging people’s houses,” Steve started. Bucky turned around to look at him,
his expression neutral first, then the corners of his eyes drooped. He looked so much older than he should have. There were lines under and around his eyes, creases in his forehead that hadn’t been there before Steve lost him, there was even a touch of steely gray to his temples. Steve faltered a little.

“‘M sorry,” Bucky mumbled. “I – I needed to be able to know what was going on inside. Better than sitting on the neighbor’s roof with binoculars.”

“That sorta makes sense?” Sam mumbled.

“No, Bucky, you can’t go bugging people’s houses!” Steve insisted. “You can’t watch through binoculars! That’s a huge invasion of privacy!”

Bucky dropped his gaze. He took a step away from Steve, only stopping when Steve snatched his hand. He looked at their joined hands for a long time, then pulled his hand out of Steve’s grip.

“So, Maria, Natasha, let’s go get breakfast,” Sam announced.

“We already have donuts!” Hill said in a tone of incredulity at the same time as Natasha shot her eyebrows up and exhaled a disbelieving “Excuse me?”

“Breakfast,” Sam repeated firmly. “We’re gonna go get these bagels from this place about fifteen minutes from here,” he said, his tone casual despite his tense body language and Steve recognized immediately that he was just looking to give them some space to talk privately. “Maybe ten if there’s no traffic. It’ll take five minutes to get them, another fifteen to get back. Thirty to forty minutes there and back tops. Let’s go.”

Sam walked out of the kitchen, grabbing Hill and Natasha and tugging them along behind him. The front door opened and then shut. Steve turned to face Bucky, finding his expression back to the wide eyes and slightly slack mouth they’d been right before Steve had hugged him.

“Why did he just do that?” Bucky said. He sounded a little panicked. “He shouldn’t have left us alone.”

Steve let out his breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. “He left us alone so we could have an adult conversation,” he told him stiffly, looking up again. Bucky glanced at him, eyes wide still.
“Because we’re having this conversation,” he added insistently. “Now.”

“No, I –”

Steve grabbed both of his arms and steered him away from the door when it looked like he was about to bolt. Bucky almost tripped over his feet, trying to pull out of Steve’s grip, but he held on with iron fingers. “We are going to have this conversation,” he repeated darkly. Bucky looked like he wanted to melt into the floor just so he could escape. “Sam’s under the impression that you don’t trust yourself with me. I’m under the impression that you lied to me when you said you loved me still.”

“No, no, no, Steve –” Bucky looked horrified at the idea, or maybe he was just still scared to be there “– I didn’t mean – I can’t –”

“So either way,” Steve continued louder over Bucky’s flailing words, and impressed with himself on how steady his voice was despite the fact that he felt like exploding any second, “we’re going to have this conversation and it’s going to end one of two ways but we’re having it. First, you bonded me and then left me. That’s a major problem.”

Bucky blinked. He opened his mouth, shut it, then blinked again. “I didn’t mean to,” he murmured haltingly.

Steve felt like he’d been run over by those soft words, and had yet to explode. “I thought that,” he whispered as his grip slackened, the hurt leaking into his voice.

“No, sweetheart, I didn’t mean it like that,” Bucky said hastily, Steve doubled his grip again when Bucky tried to pull away but he couldn’t meet his eyes all of a sudden. “I can’t be here,” he insisted, “I shouldn’t have come, I had to – I needed to make sure you were okay, I’m sorry, Stevie –”

“Don’t call me that,” Steve broke him off in a hiss. “Just… Not unless you mean it.”

Bucky shut his mouth with a snap. It hurt so much, but Steve couldn’t trust Bucky not to just keep hurting him after he’d been abandoned, and if he couldn’t trust him, then no amount of crooning whispers of sweetheart or Stevie or sad eyes that looked sorry but didn’t mean it would make him feel better.

“Did you only come because Hill destroyed your bug?” Steve asked, abruptly realizing it.
“I didn’t know what was happening,” Bucky mumbled. “I panicked. I needed to know you were okay.”

“I’m not okay,” Steve said bluntly. “That’s why we’re having this conversation. I’m not okay with being bonded and you running out on me.”

“I need to keep you safe,” Bucky insisted. “I can’t do that if I’m with you.”

Steve almost dropped Bucky’s arms to clap his palm to his forehead and scream in frustration. “That doesn’t make sense!”

“I almost killed you!”

Steve did drop him. Bucky took several hasty steps back, looking like Steve had just slapped him in the face. No, like he had just slapped Steve in the face. He curled in on himself, his shoulders hunching and his eyes dropping to the floor as he clenched his hands into fists and clenched his jaw. His whole body screamed like he wanted to run, but he held his ground for once.

Then his expression became flat again despite his whole body remaining rigid. “Mission ongoing,” he said in an empty voice that sent Steve’s heart skipping a beat, “Protect Gingerbread. Threat: the asset.”

“So, Sam was right,” Steve muttered. He hardly reacted to what Bucky had called him, referred to him as gingerbread, too focused on what Bucky meant and only numbly realizing that Bucky had always sworn, long ago, that Steve still smelled like the gingerbread cookies they’d been baking when he went into heat for the first time. “You’re afraid of yourself.”

“I am the threat,” Bucky insisted. His voice gained a little more tone to it, but his face and eyes remained empty, emotionless. “I hurt you.”

“You’re hurting me now,” Steve snapped.

Bucky reeled. “No, no, Wilson, Samuel Thomas is trustworthy,” he hissed, a finger raising to point accusingly at Steve, “Wilson, Samuel Thomas can protect you from me. I can protect you, if I don’t
“No, Bucky, you’re not hurting me physically,” Steve interrupted. Bucky faltered again, his hand dropping to his side. Steve took a cautious step closer and Bucky copied it in the opposite direction. “Do you feel,” he started, voice thick and half unable to think, “in your chest? Like you can’t breathe right?”

Bucky swallowed visibly.

“Like your heart is going to burst out of you?” Steve asked softly.

“Diagnosis,” Bucky muttered, “panic. Inconsequential.”

“Consequential,” Steve insisted sharply. “It hurts, Buck.”

“No physical damage –”

“It’s not physical!” Steve repeated and he let out a frustrated, distressed noise somewhere between a groan and a snarl; for a second, Bucky almost started forward, as if he wanted to comfort Steve but thought better of going near him. “Bucky, you’re hurting yourself! You’re hurting both of us, the bond’s making everything worse! You’re not supposed to leave each other’s side for even a week after first bonding, you left me right away!”

“Non-physical damage to the asset is inconse –”

Steve surged forward and grabbed Bucky by the shoulders, then cupped his head when Bucky tried to yank himself backwards and clutched him close, pressing their foreheads together.

“You are not just the asset,” he whispered in an exhale. “And any hurt is consequential, Buck. Any hurt."

“Status, functional,” Bucky said flatly.
“That’s not enough,” Steve told him.

Bucky’s eyes searched his face. He slid his arms around Steve’s waist again, drawing him in, then his eyes shut and he inhaled shakily.

“Meaning unclear,” he said softly.

“Kiss me,” Steve mumbled back.

Bucky did, a soft and chaste press of the lips that sent sparks down Steve’s spine. The knot in his chest was coming undone, the same was happening to Bucky, he could feel it.

“There,” he whispered, and pressed a hand to Bucky’s heart. “Feel that? That matters. That’s consequential. That’s important.”

“You do not want me to feel panicked,” Bucky said questioningly.

“No. I never want you to feel like that.”

“I don’t want you to feel panicked, either.”

“Leaving me is going to do that,” Steve said honestly. “To me and to you. It’s going to hurt, even if it isn’t physical, it’s consequential.”

“I don’t ever wanna hurt you,” Bucky mumbled, “I’m sorry, Stevie.”

“Stay with me,” he begged, because he heard the but coming in Bucky’s voice. He curled his fingers into the front of Bucky’s shirt and balled his hand into a fist, thinking if maybe he held tight enough, he could pin him down and keep him there. “Don’t go again.”

“I can’t,” Bucky said, a little desperate, too, their foreheads pressed together and their breath mingling, and it hurt still. “What if I forget who you are? I can’t risk it.”
“You’re not gonna –”

“My brain feels like it’s gonna explode,” Bucky admitted, his voice coming fast now. “Every time I look around, something new hits me and I gotta take a breath ‘cause I got thirty or forty new memories rushing back, half of ‘em don’t even stay and the other half get so mixed up I can’t make heads or tails of ‘em. I can’t think straight, I can’t focus on anything, I just know I have to protect you –”

Steve kissed him again, pressing their lips together harder this time, longer, and when he pulled back, Bucky’s breath was evening out again. “You promised to take care of me, too,” he said quietly, quietly but firmly. “You asked if what I said was a vow, with you ‘til the end of the line, you asked if it was a vow. It was, Buck, but it wasn’t just to keep me from dying, it wasn’t even just your vow to me. I made the same vow. We both promised to have each other’s backs, to take care of each other, ‘til the end of the line.”

“I’m not the same guy –”

“I don’t care,” Steve admitted in a breath. “I don’t care if you never remember half of your life before, Buck, you’re still my Alpha and I need you. I love you, I always will.”

“I love you, too,” Bucky said back, and after a second they both opened their eyes. Bucky looked shocked that he’d said it. “I don’t even know what that means,” he whispered.

“You know me,” Steve promised, “you know who I am in your bones, you know I’m yours and you’re mine, you know it like you know how to read and write and ride a bike, Buck. It’s not something you can forget.”

“I can forget your face!” Bucky insisted. “I can forget who I am, I can forget or get lost in a memory, I can lose control at any second, if I hurt you again –”

“I can protect myself,” Steve cut off. “If you get lost, I’ll help you, I’ll get you back to now and today –”

“But if I hurt you again –”
“If,” Steve repeated stubbornly. Bucky set his jaw. “It was instinct that made you hug back, instinct that tells you what you smell is me and that I’m yours, Bucky, you know me in your heart, in your soul, not just your head. Instinct’ll tell you all that over again and again until you don’t need it to remind you.”

“On the helicarrier,” Bucky started and Steve shut his mouth, “I’d catch your scent and know it was you, and forget it the next second.”

“With me hitting you over the head with my shield,” Steve interjected.

“Stevie, I’m serious,” Bucky snapped. “I don’t know what I’d do if I hurt you seriously, I could kill you and not know it was you until you were already dead.”

“Then I promise not to let you,” Steve said, lifting his hand from Bucky’s heart to cup the back of his neck. “I meant it when I said I can protect myself.”

“You wouldn’t fight back,” Bucky said, “I was trying to kill you and you wouldn’t fight back!”

“I wasn’t fighting back to kill,” Steve pointed out, “I was trying to get the server blade in and knock you out.”

“What then?” Bucky asked. “Were you going to drag me off somewhere to have this exact same conversation?”

“Probably,” he lied with a shrug.

Bucky suddenly grabbed the back of his neck too and dragged him in for a searing kiss, his metal fingers cold against Steve’s skin and his lips hot on his mouth. He pulled back, but only enough to hiss, distressed and angry like a cat with its back to a corner, “No, you weren’t. You were going to let me kill you.”

Steve sagged against him. His nose brushed Bucky’s, his hands dropping to Bucky’s waist as he let his weight lean on him.
“You were,” Bucky murmured, sounding horrified. “Steve…”

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Yeah, I was. I thought there really was nothing left of you. I lost you once, I didn’t think… I couldn’t stand losing you again.”

“There is nothing left of me! The guy you fell in love with, I’m not him anymore, there’s nothing left of him in me –”

“There’s enough left of you to be standing in this kitchen arguing over what’s good for me!” Steve insisted. “That’s enough of you that I know that you’re there, you’re here, that you care at least a little.”

“I care a whole fuckin’ lot, Stevie,” Bucky growled.

Steve shivered. Bucky held him closer, pulling his head into the crook of his neck and wrapping the metal arm around his shoulders, holding him like he’d done back during the war, when Steve would get so tired of having to be strong all the time that he barely had the energy to stand. He said so, whispering into Bucky’s neck all the times they’d stood just like this, in the dark when no one was looking, in their camps with the Howlies when it was just them, when someone they knew had just died or another battle had been lost, when Steve felt like the weight of the whole world was on his shoulders and he just needed to be held.

“There’s enough of you,” he finished softly.

“I’m afraid,” Bucky whispered. “I don’t even understand it, I can’t remember being afraid before. But I’m afraid, of me.”

“I’m afraid of being alone again,” Steve said brokenly.

Bucky went quiet.

“I lost you once, Buck,” he told him. “Please, don’t leave again.”

Bucky’s lips pressed to his hair, then brushed his nose and cheeks over the crest of his ear, over the
side of his neck, scenting him lightly. For a long time, they stood there, Bucky’s arms wrapped around him, both of them drawing comfort just from the skin pressing against skin, the scent of each other filling their minds, dwelling in that comfort, even though Steve feared that if he let go for even just a second, Bucky would be gone.

“You gotta promise you’ll fight back,” Bucky hissed, voice cracking like he was close to tears, and a little bit of hope flared in Steve, “if I forget you; baby, you gotta fight back.”

“I promise,” he whispered. “You gotta promise to stay.”

“I’ll try a week,” Bucky said. “If I don’t… If I stay myself, if there’s enough of me that I don’t lay a hand against you… I’ll stay.”

Steve pressed his lips to Bucky’s neck, relief flooding him. “Thank you,” he murmured.


“Love you, too,” Steve answered. He lifted his head, kissing Bucky’s lips briefly and looking at him again. “When’s the last time you slept?”

Bucky’s jaw tightened and he scowled a little. “I do not require sleep.”

“Bullshit,” Steve declared. “When’s the last time you showered?”

Another time, Bucky might have made a joke about Steve not liking the way he smelled. Bucky, however, only said: “After the bridge. They hosed me down then.”

Steve stiffened. “Hosed you down?” he repeated darkly.

Bucky nodded. “They always do that.”

“We’re taking a shower.”
Another time, Bucky would have smirked and made lewd jokes. He just shook his head.

“Not here. Here is compromised, they know you’re here.”

“We’ll shower when Sam, Nat, and Hill get back,” Steve tried to compromise.

“Showers are vulnerable,” Bucky argued. “HYDRA knows you’re here. Really, you should be moving already, they might be sending more people after you as we speak.”

“Where are you gonna shower then?” Steve asked.

Bucky blinked, then scowled a little. “I do not require a shower. My smell is not offensive.”

“That’s not the point,” Steve told him. “The point is I want to wash your hair.”

Bucky’s scowl became a frown. “My hair is offensive?”

“No,” Steve said quickly, a furrow forming between his brows, the gusto deflating from his stance with Bucky still not understanding, “no, it’s fine. Well, it does need to be washed, but that’s not why I want to wash it. You used to love getting your hair washed. It’s part of the taking care of each other thing.”

Bucky’s frown didn’t go away, in fact, it grew. “I do not understand. What does washing my hair have to do with caring?”

Steve sighed a little. “It’s okay,” he said, dropping their foreheads together again gently. “I’ll show you, okay?”

Bucky nodded a little, his eyes falling shut. Steve brushed his fingers over Bucky’s pulse, satisfied to feel that it was steady and gentle, that his own feeling of calm was reflected in Bucky, then caressed the underside of his wrist against Bucky’s neck to scent him. Bucky let out a soft breath, bringing their lips together again, a chaste and gentle touch.
“We’re back!” Sam’s voice shouted suddenly. Bucky stiffened, started to pull away, but Steve held on tightly, too desperate and touch-starved to let him go. “Bagels!”

“You like bagels,” Steve promised.

“I – It is food,” Bucky mumbled.

“It’s nice,” Steve said. “Food can be more than just nourishment.”

Bucky blinked at him as if what Steve had just said was a foreign concept. Sam appeared in the doorway as Steve sighed again. He was doing a lot of sighing.

“I can go for another lap around the block,” he suggested upon seeing them.

“We’re okay,” Steve said, letting Bucky take a step back but keeping his arm wrapped around his waist. He was afraid that if he let go, the feeling of dread would settle back in Bucky’s stomach and in his own, that Bucky would still run away again, so he kept them in contact.

“Good,” Sam sighed as he dropped two paper bags onto the kitchen counter. Natasha and Hill entered the kitchen again, Hill looking surly and Natasha emotionless. “Can I have my house debugged now? Y’all can share that guest room.”

“No,” Bucky said. “This house is compromised. He can’t stay here.”

Steve opened his mouth to tell Bucky that he couldn’t just decide that for him, when Natasha spoke.

“Barnes is right.”

“You – What?”

Natasha blinked at him. It was the face she made when someone said something stupid, and
considering that it was the same as her normal neutral expression, she made it frequently. “Barnes is right,” she repeated evenly. “HYDRA knows that you’re here, obviously. You should move.”

“And go where?” Steve asked. “My apartment is trashed, the –”

He stopped in the middle of saying _the Winter Soldier_. Bucky was the one who had shot it full of holes.

“HYDRA knows where it is,” he said instead. “I don’t exactly have many friends outside S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“I have safe houses,” Natasha replied.

“I have safe houses,” Bucky growled back.

“You have HYDRA safe houses,” Natasha answered him sharply. “I have safe houses unknown to S.H.I.E.L.D. and therefore unknown to HYDRA. Besides, a safe house would only be for tonight.” She fixed Steve with a look, a firm expression that meant whatever she was about to say, she wasn’t going to take no for an answer but Steve was sure as hell going to try. “Tony’s outfitted a floor for you.”

“No,” he said immediately. “No, I do not want to live with him.”

“Who’s Tony?” Bucky demanded.


“I am not living in Stark Tower,” Steve insisted. “I said no before, I’m saying it again, no, not happening.”

“It’s the safest place for you in the country right now,” Natasha insisted. “The commute between there and Capitol Hill to deal with Congress wouldn’t even be that bad, Tony’ll lend you a helicopter.”

“Yes, him,” Natasha said breezily. Sam looked mildly disturbed by Bucky’s emotionless regurgitation of information.

“Stark Tower, built to run on completely clean energy, powered by StarkTech Arc Reactors,” Bucky went on. “Theoretically impenetrable.”

“And inhabited by Tony Stark,” Steve added firmly. “I’m not living there.”

“I vote you live there,” Bucky said in response.

Steve gaped at him. Even Sam’s eyebrows rose.

“I don’t know how to break in off the top of my head,” he explained. “Theoretically impenetrable.”

“Did you miss the part where Tony Stark lives there?” Steve insisted. “I can’t stand him for longer than five minutes once a year. He’s egotistical and agitating and likes to poke things until they explode in his face because he thinks its fun.”

“He outfitted you an entire floor, Cap,” Natasha said in an exasperated tone. “Set it up to be old man friendly, gym, kitchen, living room, full-size master bedroom and bath with two guest rooms and their own bathrooms, laundry room, a study, and I think just one empty room that he doesn’t know what to do with even. JARVIS is programmed to not let anyone onto the floor without your confirmation at the time of their entrance.”

“JARVIS?” Bucky repeated.

“The AI that runs the Tower, practically,” Natasha said.
Bucky scowled. “Surveillance?”

“Enough to keep security tight enough that not even you could break in,” Natasha answered. “It’s disabled in my apartment except for manual alarm systems, so I’m sure Tony could turn him off in yours.”

“I don’t want to live in Stark Tower,” Steve repeated.

“Look, Steve, even Soldier Claus thinks you should go,” Sam said.

“You’re invited, too,” Natasha added before Steve could protest to Bucky being called Soldier Claus.

“Wait, excuse me?” Sam asked, eyebrows shooting up.

“He set up a floor for you, too,” Natasha said.

“How many floors does he have lying around?” Sam pressed.

“Two, at this point,” Natasha answered, turning back to Steve. “It’s the safest place.”

“I vote you go,” Bucky said.

Steve looked at him with a scowl. “You gonna come with me?”

Another time, Bucky would have smiled and said something about Steve trying to get rid of him. Bucky just blinked, though, and said instead: “Of course. Even if I hadn’t promised, I’d follow you there.” Then he frowned a little and added in a mutter: “Just would hafta figure out how to break in without being detected.”

“I’d give you clearance,” Steve said immediately, softened by the way Bucky’s accent was creeping back into his voice instead of the cold and blank tone of the Winter Soldier.
“That’s the whole point of not bein’ detected, Stevie,” Bucky said with a roll of his eyes.

“That’s romantic and creepy,” Hill sighed. “Are we settled?”

“HYDRA knows where you live, too, Sam,” Natasha said, “and that you’re friends with Steve.”

Sam sighed heavily. “Is Tony gonna lend me a helicopter to get to VA meetings twice a week until I can phase in a new guy? I got meetings every Tuesday and Thursday at 5 o’clock and 9 o’clock sharp, I ain’t missing ‘em.”

“Sure,” Natasha said easily.


“There,” Hill said decisively, a note of exasperation of her own creeping into her voice, as if she found the back-and-forth between Natasha and Steve more than a little frustrating. “Let’s take the bagels and go.”

“Wait, now?” Sam demanded.

“Safe house for the rest of today,” Natasha answered. “Go pack.”

“Wait, I got a whole house here –”

Natasha pulled out her phone immediately. “Tony will send his people down.”

“What about my apartment?” Steve asked suddenly.

“Tony already sent his people.”
“You moved my stuff already?” he muttered in disbelief.

Natasha tapped something on her phone, her nail making a sharp noise, then she blanked it and shoved it back in her pocket. “How else was I supposed to get you to go?” she asked, exasperated. “Other than getting your boyfriend to agree with me, which was not expected.”

“Boyfriend?” Bucky muttered under his breath, apparently confused by the term. Granted, it was a rather modern term.

“I’m eating my bagel first,” Sam declared.

“Can we shower now?” Steve asked Bucky.

Bucky flushed, which at least told Steve he had the capacity to flush over such things. Natasha raised an eyebrow. “This place is compromised,” he insisted.

“Yeah, we have to go,” Natasha said, then snatched the bagel out of Sam’s hand, ignoring his protest, and shoved it back into the bag, boxing up the donuts as well. “Go pack your stuff before I do it for you.”

“Fine, fine,” Sam grumbled, stalking out of the kitchen. “I meet one relic, now I’m shacking up with the Avengers,” he muttered as he walked away.

“Wait, who else lives there?” Bucky asked, jerking his head to look at Natasha.

“The Avengers,” she repeated. “Stark’s debating having the tower renamed to Avengers Tower and everything.”

“Remind me who the Avengers are,” Bucky said dryly.

“Iron Man, Thor, the Hulk, Hawkeye, me, Captain America. Falcon, too, probably, once we get there.”
While Bucky frowned, probably trying to think of ways to run background checks on the Avengers, Steve heard Sam crash into something in his bedroom. “Say what now?” he shouted.

“Falcon,” Natasha repeated, “you.”

“Since when am I an Avenger?”

“Since three days ago,” Natasha decided.

“Who put you in charge?” Bucky asked.


“To be fair, I put you in charge in case I died,” he reminded her. Bucky stiffened a little, and Steve dropped his head onto his shoulder.

“Cute,” Natasha quipped. “And, legally, you’re still dead, so I am in charge.”

“I am?” Steve said.

“Your death certificate was signed the day before you got back,” she answered. “The public hasn’t been notified, thankfully. It’s in the process of being redacted, but until it is, I’m in charge.”

“Am I legally dead?” Bucky asked.

“Actually, yes,” Natasha said, as if a sudden thought was occurring to her. “But not from yesterday, you were declared legally dead after your fall in 1945.”

“Oh,” Bucky muttered. Steve couldn’t tell how Bucky felt about that. He didn’t know if Bucky could tell how he felt about that.
“Wait,” Hill said, a sudden air of thought about her frown, “if he’s legally dead…”

“But there’s proof that it is actually him,” Natasha said, turning to face her.

“Please don’t discuss me like I’m not here in front of me,” Bucky snapped.

“We could argue with Congress that since he’s legally dead, they can’t charge him for anything,” Hill continued, completely ignoring Bucky’s request. “And if they declare him legally alive, then they’d have to admit that he was a prisoner of war because the Nazis capturing him was the only way he didn’t die of exposure after the fall, no matter his enhanced status.”

“Which would force them to officially declare him a POW,” Natasha said in continuation of Hill’s apparent thoughts. She snapped her fingers, a smile overtaking her face. “Which means we wouldn’t have to first prove that he wasn’t there of his own accord.”

“Hey!” Bucky shouted.

Natasha and Hill looked at him blankly.

“I asked you not to discuss me like that in front of me,” Bucky said sharply.

“Sorry,” Hill said, shaking her head a little. “Work mode.”

“What’s this about Congress?” Bucky asked, ignoring her apology.

“Congress wants you prosecuted for –”

“Nat,” Steve interrupted, glaring at her. She set her jaw, returning the look. He gave a short shake of his head and she let out a huff.

“Congress wants me what?” Bucky snapped. “Spit it out.”
“They need someone to burn on the stake,” Hill said, a little more kindly than Natasha would have. “Publically, so they can reassure the population that they have this under control.”

Bucky tensed his shoulders and his jaw. Steve tried to lean into him, tried to calm him, but Bucky remained stiff beside him.

“They want me to pay for what I did,” he muttered.

“HYDRA has to pay for what they did,” Steve insisted.

“I was the one killing,” Bucky argued.

“You were being used,” Hill said. “We have plans to ensure you are not charged with anything, or at least pardoned.”

Bucky looked at the ground. Steve felt the guilt stirring in him and squeezed his waist.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he promised. “You said yourself, you weren’t in control.”

“I still did it,” he muttered.

Steve opened his mouth again, trying to think of a way to convince Bucky that it wasn’t his fault, but before he could, Hill spoke again.

“But we’re not going to let Congress use you as their patsy,” she insisted. “They’re going to have to acknowledge that this was a problem inside their own ranks, they’re not going to just prosecute the Winter Soldier and forget the people brainwashing you.”

Bucky said nothing. Steve wished the bond wasn’t so weak, so he could know more of what Bucky was feeling. It wasn’t his fault, but it seemed that he blamed himself for all of what he’d done while under HYDRA’s control just as much as he blamed himself for hurting Steve. All Steve could do was press close and hope that his presence did anything to comfort whatever was going through his head.
Steve caught Natasha looking at him strangely, a little confusion and something else. He looked back at her, having little energy to do much else but try for a reassuring expression. She looked away, crossing her arms over her chest and turning to face the hallway.

“Are you done yet?” she shouted.

“This is kinda my life for the past three years I gotta pack up here!” Sam responded.

“Grab a couple changes of clothes and let’s go, Wilson,” she called.

“Yeah, yeah. Y’all better not be eating my bagels!”

Natasha turned back and rolled her eyes.

“Respect the man’s bagels,” Bucky said abruptly. “They’re one of the major five food groups.”

Steve glanced at him, at the way he looked startled at what he’d said, and smiled. “You used to say that all the time,” he murmured fondly.

Bucky shrugged. He probably didn’t want to go into detail over all he remembered and especially not in front of Hill and Natasha. Steve understood. It was like when he’d remembered Steve hoarding the chocolate; things came out, spur of the moment, whether he remembered enough to understand why he was saying them or not. It was enough.

Finally, Sam reappeared in the kitchen, tucking a chain under his shirt. Steve saw the outline of the dog tags under the fabric. “Alright,” he said. “I’m good for now.”

“Good,” Hill said, snagging the bag of bagels and box of donuts off the table. “Let’s go.”

Bucky pressed one last kiss to Steve’s temple and a brush of his nose against his ear as Natasha and Hill strode out, Sam on their heels, then dropped arm from his shoulders to tangle their fingers together. Steve let Bucky lead him out, waited while Bucky paused at the door to check the street,
for snipers or just incoming attackers, Steve didn’t know, just followed on at the gentle tug of his hand Bucky gave to the van Hill was getting into.

“I thought super secret spies would drive something cooler than Toyota Siennas,” Sam was saying, shoving his bag into the back of the van. “Like, seriously. It’s a minivan.”

“It’s nondescript,” Hill replied curtly, getting into the driver’s seat. Natasha got into the middle of the van, climbing into the backseat.

“You got weapons at this safe house?” Bucky asked as they neared the van. “Cause I just have this pistol, and I feel better when I’ve got more than a Glock to my name.”


Bucky checked the car first. Steve waited, remembering what Sam had said about the vets who came to his sessions, and let Bucky nod and confirm it was okay for him to get in. He climbed in, followed by Bucky who shut the door and grabbed his hand again. Steve squeezed it, giving him a smile, glad he was initiating the contact, glad he was even there at all. Sam got into the front seat, and Hill cranked the engine.

“You’re going to have to give me directions,” she called to Natasha.

“Why isn’t she sitting up here?” Sam asked, digging into his bagel. He passed the bag around as well; Bucky only took one after Steve gave him an encouraging nod.

“I don’t like the front seat,” Natasha answered. “Head northwest.”

“Great,” Sam muttered as Hill pulled out of the driveway. “I’m not selling the house, though,” he announced abruptly. “I’m gonna retire in that house, raise kids there.”

“After HYDRA is dismantled properly,” Hill said.

“Yeah, after that,” Sam mumbled.
Steve knew how he felt, leaving his home for good, maybe.

Bucky’s thumb brushed over his knuckles. It was grounding, having him there, clarifying in a way that Steve hadn’t felt since…

Since 1945, easily.

“I’m turning on the radio,” Sam announced twenty minutes later, when all sound had been Natasha telling Hill where to turn and when.

“Don’t change the station,” Hill ordered as Sam switched it on.

“HOT BLOODED! CHECK IT AND SEE! I GOT A FEVER OF A HUNDRED AND THREE! COME ON BABY, DO YOU DO MORE THAN DANCE? I’M HOT BLOODED, HOT BLOODED!”

Sam hastily decreased the volume.

“What is this?” Steve said, wrinkling his nose at the loud, guitar-heavy music now blaring moderately loudly from the speakers.

“Fuck you,” Hill announced. “This is Foreigner.”

“Not on the list?” Sam asked, chuckling.

“Never heard of them,” Steve muttered.

Bucky was gently nodding his head along to the music, looking out the window. Steve glanced at the radio, then back at him, a little smile curling his lips again, thinking that maybe it wasn’t so bad anymore that his Alpha seemed to be enjoying the music at least a little. Bucky had loved dancing, before. Even when they were kids, he’d used to turn on the radio when the house was empty, swing him around the room and pretend either of them really knew how to dance. He’d learned how to
dance properly when he was fifteen, when Steve was thirteen, and had tried to teach him. He’d kept stepping on Bucky’s toes, as Bucky tried to teach him how to lead and he just hadn’t had the coordination for it.

“C’mon, Stevie, it’s not that hard, just tuck me under your arm!”

“My arm doesn’t go that high, moron, you’re too tall!” Steve insisted. Bucky laughed and ducked under Steve’s wrist, spinning himself more than Steve was. Bucky rocked back on his feet then tried to twist back into the correct position, but Steve forgot to shift his arm and Bucky only twisted out of his grip. “Can’t I just have two left feet, Buck?” he sighed.

“How’re you gonna get a dame without knowing how to sweep her off her feet, huh?” Bucky argued in return. He grabbed Steve’s hands when he tried to step back as the song changed and set them at his waist, putting his own hands on Steve’s shoulders. “C’mon, let’s just try a slow dance. This one’s not fast enough to swing proper anyway.”

Steve wrinkled his nose at Bucky, who could easily rest his elbows on Steve’s shoulders instead of his hands while Steve was eye level with his Adam’s apple after Bucky’s growth spurt in the early spring. “‘M too short for this,” he argued.

Bucky rolled his eyes, then lifted Steve’s hands up and placed them behind his neck, grabbing him by the waist and tugging him in. “There,” he said. “You follow this time.”

Steve swallowed as his heart rate picked up for no reason and looked down at his feet. Bucky’s finger caught his chin and he looked up. “C’mon, Stevie,” he said, grinning crookedly down at him, “one slow dance. It ain’t gonna kill you.”


“What, you don’t like eau de James?” Bucky shot back, flashing another grin at him.

Steve felt his ears going hot. Bucky gave a gentle tug on his waist, pulling him in a gentle sway.
“Now, when you’re a little older, slow songs’ll be the best,” Bucky promised him. “For now, you can listen to the nuns about leavin’ room for the Holy Spirit, but in a couple of years, you can try getting a little fresh with a dame during a slow song.”

As if to prove his point, Bucky abruptly scratched his fingers at Steve’s ribs to tickle him. He gave a snort and jerked an elbow down in reflex, Bucky laughing as he half lifted him off his feet in spinning them around.

“Don’t try getting fresh with me,” Steve warned.

“Aw, but Stevie,” Bucky laughed, giving an exaggerated pout. Steve’s ears were definitely very red.

“Your eyes of blue. Your kisses too, I never knew what they could do, I can’t believe that you’re in love with me,” the radio crooned.

“I’m no dame, James Barnes,” Steve said, sticking his nose in the air.

Bucky laughed, a sound Steve could listen to forever, and squeezed his waist with both hands in a completely casual way that didn’t send Steve’s heart kicking off-beat, it was probably just another palpitation. “Really, hadn’t noticed before, Stevie.”

“Shuddup,” Steve grumbled, looking down at his feet.

Bucky’s finger caught his chin again, forcing him to look up. “Hey, staring into each other’s goo-goo eyes is the best part of slow dancing.”

“Who says I wanna stare into your goo-goo eyes?” Steve quipped.

“I’m hurt,” Bucky said sarcastically. Steve rolled his eyes. He stepped on Bucky’s foot and his friend winced. “Don’t worry, that’s why I’m wearing shoes,” Bucky added when Steve flinched sympathetically.

“Still,” he grumbled, looking down again.
“Hey,” Bucky repeated, catching his chin a third time. “Stop looking at your feet. It’ll trip you up more.”

“That seems counterintuitive.”

“When somebody’s been reading Sister Thomas’s dictionary,” Bucky chuckled. Steve’s ears were still hot. He could blame it on Bucky’s teasing. It certainly wasn’t Bucky’s hands wrapped around his waist. It definitely wasn’t the way Bucky was filling out, or how his scent had started to sharpen and define itself since he’d presented a month earlier. It couldn’t be that they were so close, that if Bucky leaned down even just an inch or three, their lips could easily connect. There was no reason for any of those things to affect him; Bucky wouldn’t ever try something like kissing Steve, anyway, that would be ridiculous. Bucky was like an older brother to him. Steve blushed easy from teasing. That was all.

“Just ‘cause I got more brains than you got boogers in your nose don’t mean I read the dictionary,” Steve assured him.

Bucky laughed again. Steve loved making him laugh. “Joke’s on you, pal, I picked my nose clean before coming over.”

He wiggled a finger in Steve’s face, who made a grossed out sound and batted his hand away. He took half a step back, almost escaping Bucky’s arms, but he pulled him back in and wrapped his arms around his waist once again.

“Song’s not done, Rogers,” he said, raising a cocky eyebrow, a corner of his mouth lifting. “Don’t go jilting a guy now.”

Steve’s whole face was hot now, too. “You mean a dame,” he corrected, and pulled Bucky’s arms from off his waist.

Bucky’s smile dropped, then turned into something else. “Yeah,” he said. “‘S what I meant.”

“I have always placed you far above me. I just can’t imagine that you love me. And after all is said and done, To think that I’m the lucky one. I can’t believe that you’re in love with me,” the radio purred, and the song ended.
“There,” Steve said. “You’ve taught me to dance.”

“I’ve taught you how to step on my toes,” Bucky argued with a roll of his eyes.

“You gonna help me make dinner or you gonna complain about your poor, trodden-upon toes?” Steve shot as he walked away.

“I’m gonna watch you make dinner,” Bucky said.

“Oh, sure, now you’re a big ol’ Alpha, you can’t chop up carrots.” Steve copied Bucky’s roll of the eyes to punctuate his sentence.

Bucky grinned and winked. Steve’s ears didn’t heat up again. “’S the point, dollface.”

Steve shoved at him lightly and shook his head. “Come help me,” he said again. “And don’t call me dollface,” he added with a scolding wag of his finger.

“Sure thing, sugar.”

“Don’t call me that, neither.”

“Hear ya loud and clear, sweetheart.”

Steve sighed and rolled his eyes a second time. “You’re an ass,” he declared.

“And a fine ass I make, baby,” Bucky said with a grin.

Steve’s ears weren’t hot. He wasn’t blushing. He wasn’t affected by Bucky’s wink or lazy grin or easy drawl of sugar, baby, dollface and sweetheart. He wasn’t. It was just warm for an April afternoon and his body temperature reflected it. Maybe he was getting a fever. Even that would make more sense.
They’d heard the song again, years later, on a half busted radio Morita had salvaged and gotten to play something in English, in an abandoned inn they were holed up in for the night in the middle of nowhere in Europe. Steve remembered the way Bucky’s face had gone from exhausted to that old, lazy grin in just a few seconds with the first few notes, how he’d tugged him from his seat and wrapped an arm around his waist while the rest of the Howlies wolf whistled and cheered. Steve had stepped on his toes and Bucky had murmured the lyrics in his ear, like he’d memorized them back in April of 1932 and kept them close to his heart ever since then.

Now Bucky nodded along gently to the last strands of a band called Foreigner, a song vastly different from the gentle ballad by Billie Holiday, and Steve wondered if he remembered anything about dancing.

“I predict next up is Queen,” Natasha announced as the song ended.

“Is this the real life, or is this just fantasy?” the radio crooned.

“Witch!” Sam called while Natasha shoved her hands in the air, elbows bent to accommodate the too close ceiling, the gesture of triumph differing from the way her face remained neutral.

“This band was on the list,” Steve said.

“Tell me you listened to Queen right away,” Sam begged.

“No?” Steve answered hesitantly.

Sam sighed disappointedly. “Listen now. This is Bohemian Rhapsody.”

He listened. He glanced at Bucky, who was stiff in the shoulders and neck again. He didn’t like it.

“This song is vital to American culture past the mid 70’s,” Sam assured him during the guitar solo.

“It’s depressing,” Steve decided.
“So’s America in the mid 70’s,” Hill muttered.

“So, you think you can stone me and spit in my eye? So, you think you can love me and leave me to die?”

Steve didn’t like it. Bucky didn’t relax until the song was over and something brand new played, a song called Don’t Stop Believing that Sam also swore was vital to modern culture.

Bucky sometimes nodded along, as they drove for the next hour, sometimes just looked out the windows, likely watching for anyone following them too closely or for too long, sometimes would stiffen and then take a long time to relax his shoulders again. If there hadn’t been a gap between their two seats, Steve would drop his head onto Bucky’s shoulders, lean into him, anything, but all he could do was keep his fingers laced tightly with Bucky’s, even if he tried to pull away. He only did once. Steve held on tighter after that.

Natasha’s safe house was on the outskirts of a little Virginia town, three or so hours south of DC and several hours east of the safe house Bucky had brought him to, Steve imagined, built on the beach and near the water. The beach was deserted, being the middle of September, and after they got out of the van, Bucky let go of Steve’s hand to walk the perimeter of the house. Natasha walked up to it and unlocked it with the vast set of keys she just carried everywhere apparently, though even she drew her gun on principle as she entered to check the interior. Bucky followed her after walking around the outside of the house, while Hill, Sam, and Steve waited outside.

A few minutes later, Natasha stuck her head out the door. “Clear!” she called.

Hill mounted the steps, Sam behind him, and Steve lingered in the doorway until Bucky reappeared from the second floor. A flash of relief settled over his face when he saw Steve waiting in the doorway, and Steve walked to him immediately, taking his hand again.

“I’ll run to the grocery store and pick up some rations later,” Natasha said. “There’s two bedrooms upstairs, a couch down here. Sam, you’re on the couch.”

“Why am I on the couch?” Sam countered.

“One bedroom has a bunk bed,” Natasha said calmly. “Hill and I will take that one. The other bedroom has a double bed. I’m pretty sure Barnes would prefer to have Steve somewhere he can
reach him, and definitely not bunking with you.”

Bucky only grunted to acknowledge that she was right. Sam sighed. “Better be a comfortable couch,” he said.

“It’s a comfy couch,” assured a man’s voice.

Steve jerked around, but then again, Bucky had already inspected the house and hadn’t insisted they immediately leave, so he wasn’t worried as he peered into the living room.

“We’re this guy?” Clint Barton asked casually, sat on the couch Sam would supposedly sleeping on.

“Wilson,” Natasha answered, dropping beside him and throwing her feet in his lap. “Sam.”

“Hey,” Clint said, waving before tugging off Natasha’s boots. “God, your feet stink.”

“Nobody said you had to rub ‘em,” Natasha grumbled as Clint proceeded to do exactly that.

“What kinda guy would I be then, huh?” Clint argued.

“Romanoff said he was her Alpha,” Bucky murmured to Steve. “Unbonded, S.H.I.E.L.D. regulations.”

“She never told me that,” Steve answered softly, more to himself than to Bucky. He hadn’t even confirmed Clint was an Alpha, the guy was always on so many suppressants, like the rest of S.H.I.E.L.D., like Steve himself, that it was difficult to distinguish him as an Alpha or a Beta. He’d thought there might be something between them, but thought it wasn’t his place to ask.

“Figured it make yours rest a little easier,” Natasha commented.

Clint waved to him as well. “’Sup, Cap. Congrats on being an Omega, always knew you had it in you.”
“Hey,” Steve said in return, ignoring his comment.

“So, I have to sleep under you two?” Hill grumbled.

“Over,” Natasha corrected. “The bottom bunk is a double bed.”

“Great,” muttered Hill. “Way to remind a girl she’s single.”

Sam looked over and smiled at her as he flicked his eyebrows up. Hill raised an eyebrow in return and turned to vanish into the kitchen.

“I already bought food, by the way,” Clint told Natasha.

“Oh, good,” Natasha sighed. She slumped against the arm of the couch, an arm draping over her eyes as Clint continued to massage her feet. Steve pulled on Bucky’s hand gently, then led him to a wide, squashy armchair and sat down. Bucky looked at him for a moment, then stood awkwardly next to the chair. Steve rolled his eyes and tugged on his hand. Bucky frowned at him again.

“Sit,” Steve said.

“It’s a one-person chair,” Bucky argued.

“Sit anyway,” he retorted. Bucky rolled his eyes in return but squashed in next to him. Steve pulled his arm over his shoulders and curled into his side. He pressed his ear over Bucky’s chest, listening. His heartbeat was going rapid-fire in his chest, but after a few seconds, began to slow down.

Sam dropped onto a footrest. “So, who are you?” he asked Clint.

“Agent Barton,” Clint answered. “Hawkeye. I’d shake your hand, but I got gross feet juice all over mine.”

“My feet aren’t that gross,” Natasha mumbled.
“Right,” Sam said.

“Before you ask,” Clint said, glancing at Steve as well, “I was in Latveria until this morning. I didn’t have any contact with anyone in the States, didn’t see anything on the news until after everything was over.” He fixed Steve with a look, eyes genuinely regretful. “I’m sorry, Cap.”

“You didn’t know,” Steve assured him.

“The kitchen is full of beef jerky and Powerade,” Hill announced, walking back in.

“I bought kale juice, too,” Clint said.

Hill did not look impressed with him. “I’ll get real food,” she offered.


Hill gave a nod and started for the door. “Wilson, you’re with me.”

Sam let out his breath and got back up from the footstool. “Sounds good,” he said and followed her back out.

Clint looked at Steve, one eyebrow raised. Steve didn’t say anything. Bucky’s heart rate was steadily slowing still and he kept his ear close to Bucky’s chest, just as much for Bucky’s benefit as his; slumped in the chair like this, it felt like a void in him was filling.

“So, what’s your name?” Clint asked, now looking at Bucky. “I’m assuming it’s not just Steve’s Alpha.”

Bucky’s heart skipped a beat. Steve felt it against his ear.

“Barnes,” Bucky answered softly, “James Buchanan.”
“No shit!” Clint laughed. “Huh. Guess rumors are true, then, you’re alive. Nobody’s saying anything about the two of you, though,” he added when Steve half lifted his head. “Which was why I was surprised to have this guy stalk in after Nat only to be introduced as ‘Steve’s Alpha.’”

“Rude,” Steve muttered to Natasha.


“By the way, you’re doing beautiful with Congress, babe,” Clint said to her.

“Fuck you,” Natasha yawned and squirmed lower on the couch so her knees were in Clint’s lap and her head was tucked on a throw pillow. Clint patted her hip and pulled a blanket off the back of the couch to drape over her.

Steve felt Bucky move and looked up. Bucky was looking around, then leaned over and pulled a blanket off the floor. He shook it out with one hand, then pulled it over Steve.

“I’m not cold,” Steve said, laughing a little. Bucky frowned. Steve shrugged and leaned back, taking what he could get.

“Cute,” Natasha mumbled.

“She talks in her sleep,” Clint offered to Bucky.

“Fuck you,” Natasha repeated sleepily.

“Colorfully,” Clint added with a grin.

“She is not asleep,” Bucky said.

“I’m kidding,” Clint said.
Steve looked up to find Bucky frowning still. Clint cleared his throat and picked up a TV remote. He pressed a button and audio switched on.

“– yes, Captain America is an Omega, there’s no denying it –”

Clint rapidly changed the channel. Bucky’s arm tightened around him.

“Here, Harry Potter,” Clint said, settling back happily, one arm resting on Natasha’s thighs and the other on the arm of the couch. “Always good to know ABC Family is still in love with him.”

“I do not know who that is,” Bucky said.

“It’s okay, this is the first one,” Clint answered. “Harry’s this orphan, lives with his aunt and uncle and cousin who all hate him ’cause he’s weird. Turns out, he’s a wizard. Now he’s going to wizard school.”

Bucky turned his gaze on the TV. “What is the purpose?” he asked slowly.

“It’s entertainment,” Clint said. Steve could only be grateful he was being so patient after having absolutely no explanation for what was going on. Or maybe Natasha had explained some things and he didn’t know. Either way, he was grateful. “It exists only to entertain people.”

Bucky frowned more. “Just watch,” Clint told him. “Tell me what you think later. The books are better, but the movies are pretty good.”

“I haven’t read the books yet either,” Steve mumbled.

“You horrible, horrible person,” Clint said flatly. “You owe solidarity to Harry, he’s an Omega, too, he paved the way for cool superhero Omega dudes. You guys are, like bros. Only he’s British. ‘Course, he doesn’t present until, like, book six, so you got no way of knowing from here. He’s small and skinny, too, though.”
“Book five,” Natasha mumbled. “Near the end.”

Steve rolled his eyes and looked at the TV screen. Hogwarts was a lovely place, at least.

Hill and Sam returned nearly an hour later, carrying two paper bags each. Steve started to sit up when they walked in, but Bucky’s arm tightened around him again and he fell back against his chest, not wanting to deny him the contact.

“This is all of it,” Sam said as he passed. “Don’t worry about it.”

They exited the kitchen again as the commercial break ended, Sam dropping onto his footstool again and Hill sitting down on the floor in front of the couch. Natasha’s hand flopped onto her head and she half jumped before rolling her eyes and letting Natasha sleepily undo her bun to scrunch up her hair.

“This one is always gonna be my favorite,” Sam announced, pointing to the screen. “They’re all so little!”

“They are children,” Bucky commented.

“Yeah, but they’re grown up now,” Sam told him. “This movie came out ten or fifteen years ago. They’re, like, babies here.”

Bucky had stopped frowning a while ago, though at Sam’s words the frown returned. It wasn’t an upset frown, just a confused one.

“‘S okay,” Steve murmured to him.

“You don’t even know what I’m thinking,” Bucky muttered back.

“It’s still okay,” Steve assured him. He pushed an arm around his waist and hugged him gently. Bucky hesitated, then picked up his hand and laced their fingers together. Steve smiled a little, content.
“So, what did you think?” Clint asked when the credits rolled.

“The old man attributes lots of power to love,” Bucky said cryptically.

“Yeah, it’s, like, a selling point of the series,” Clint said, shrugging, “but what did you really think?”

Bucky frowned again. He looked at nothing in particular, then a corner of his lip twitched. “The bookish girl reminded me of Steve,” he said finally.

“Hermione?” Clint repeated. “Not Harry?”

“Harry didn’t talk enough shit,” Bucky said. Steve snorted into his chest.

Clint gave a laugh as well. “I promise you, Harry talks more shit in the book. He is the king of sass in the books.”

“He also does stupid, reckless, hero things,” Natasha added. “Moral fiber, some called it. Plain old stupidity everyone else called it.”

Steve avoided looking at Bucky’s scowl, knowing that Natasha full well meant to rat him out. “Well, that’s what he’s got me for,” Bucky said, startling Steve. “Watching his six while he does stupid, reckless, hero things.”

Steve smiled warmly at him. The corners of Bucky’s mouth twitched again, as if he was trying to remember how to smile back. The room was quiet for a second. Then:

“Cute,” Natasha repeated.

“I’m hungry,” Hill announced, getting up. “I’m making sandwiches.”

“Yeah, thanks for that, Mary, not like there was clearly a moment happening here,” Clint called after
“Nat ruined it first,” Hill called over her shoulder.

Bucky abruptly pulled Steve into a short, chaste kiss. “Moment’s fine,” he said quietly. Steve grinned.

“Cute,” Natasha said for the third time.

“Nat, will you let the old men have their goo-goo eyes moment,” Clint sighed.

“Goo-goo eyes are for slow dancing only,” Bucky declared.

Steve snorted. “Never stopped you before,” he answered.

“Shh,” Bucky protested. Steve shut his eyes, listening to the steady beat of Bucky’s heart. They might as well have been transported 70 years in the past, with Dum Dum and Clint using the same tone, Falsworth and Natasha injecting the same cynicism, Bucky’s heartbeat thudding reassuringly in his ear.

“Hey, if you guys want to eat, you gotta make your own food!” Hill shouted from the kitchen.

Steve prodded Bucky’s hand. “You said we’d shower at the safe house,” he prompted.

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “I have no memory of such a promise.”

“Oh well,” Steve said, sitting up and pulling Bucky with him. It was nearing one o’clock, the TV already moving on to the next film. “I’m tired, I want a shower. I’ve had an eventful past few days.”

There was only one bathroom in the beach house, with a shower/tub combination that looked almost too narrow for Steve to stand right in it, but when he turned the water on, the pressure was good and it heated up quickly, so it would do. There was a cupboard filled with towels and washcloths over the toilet, so Steve took down two towels and tossed a couple of cloths into the shower. Bucky stood
awkwardly by the sink, looking at his shoes and picking at the hem of his shirt. Steve stepped up to him, pressed a hand briefly to his cheek to catch his attention, then carefully began to slide his jacket off his shoulders.

“I can –” Bucky started, and Steve shook his head.

“Taking care of each other,” he reminded him gently. “This is part of it.”

As Steve draped Bucky’s jacket over the counter, lifted off his shirt, slid his belt from the loops, Bucky watched his movements, jaw sometimes tight, sometimes slack. When Steve’s fingers came to the fastening of his jeans, Bucky’s hands settled on his elbows, not firm, just touching.

“Should I undress you?” Bucky asked a little stiffly.

Steve pushed the jeans past his hips, knelt down to lift one of Bucky’s feet to pull the leg of his jeans away, then remove his shoe and sock. There was little hair on Bucky’s body, and all of it was stubby and stiff. Steve supposed HYDRA had kept him shaved, for what reason he couldn’t know, but with Bucky no longer in their keeping, it was growing back. He looked strangely bare without the soft, downy smattering of dark hair over his chest, arms, and legs that Steve had grown used to before he’d lost him.

“If you want to,” he answered eventually. He took off Bucky’s other shoe and sock, let his fingers trail up the side of his leg as he stood back up. Bucky’s hand landed on his shoulder, then slid to cup the back of his neck. He didn’t pull him in, just held him there, as Steve pushed away his boxers and folded them along with the rest of his clothes on the counter.

“I do not understand the function,” Bucky murmured.

Steve let his hand fall to Bucky’s waist, just holding him there. “The only function is comfort,” he said. “For each other.”

“I do not…” Bucky stopped, licking his lips. His gaze was somewhere off to Steve’s right, somewhere on the wall and somewhere very far away at the same time. “I did not require comfort.”

“It’s okay,” Steve promised, gentle. “I don’t know if I have the words to tell you, so let me show you.”
He started to step back, and Bucky’s hand gripped the back of his neck more firmly. He stepped in closer, instead, and Bucky looped an arm around his waist. Steve lifted his hand to cup Bucky’s jaw, feeling for his pulse and finding it fast.

“I’m right here,” he promised. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Let me,” Bucky mumbled, shy and hesitant where once he had been persistent, “take care. Of you.”

“Go ahead, Buck,” he said. “It’s okay.”

Bucky’s flesh hand was shaking when he lifted it off of Steve’s waist. The metal one was steady, as both pulled at the hem of Steve’s shirt, the same one Sam had put him in when he’d arrived half-conscious two days ago. Bucky tried to fold it, like Steve had done, and ended up just clumsily draping it over the sink. His flesh hand shook and the metal hand remained steady as they pushed down the loose pants Steve was wearing, draped it over the sink, removed his shoes and socks, took away his briefs. In the same order that Steve had undressed Bucky, slower, a little clumsier, but Steve didn’t care. Bucky came back up and Steve took his hands, guiding him towards the shower. Bucky got in without a word, then just stood under the spray. Steve followed him in, Bucky turning to face him, his face blank.

Steve picked up a bar of soap and a washcloth. Bucky raised his arms to the side and they hit the sides of the shower; the metal clanged against the tiles and Bucky half jumped, Steve dropping the soap and cloth to grab his waist and steady him.

“Hey, it’s okay, you’re okay,” he said.

Bucky was breathing hard, his eyes wide enough that white ringed his irises.

“They did this,” Bucky whispered.

“What?”

“Protocol, washing,” Bucky recited, his flat tone a contrast to the width of his eyes. “The asset stood in a room. There was a hose. If the asset’s hygiene was too offensive, a handler would disinfect the
asset. Me. I hated it, I think, I don’t know. It was exposing, vulnerable, I never trusted them not to – not to –”

Steve abandoned the cloth on the floor and pulled Bucky to his chest when his ragged breathing took over his words, tucking his face against his neck and holding on tightly. “I’m not a handler,” he promised. “You’re not an asset. You’re a person.”

“Person,” Bucky muttered, sounding dazed.

“You are,” Steve repeated. “I promise. You can wash yourself if you want, you don’t have to do it at all if you don’t want. You get to decide what to do with your body, Buck, you’re a person.”

“I want?”

“Whatever you want,” Steve assured him.

“Meaning of ‘want’ unclear.”

The water was running over Steve’s face as he dropped his head to kiss Bucky’s ear, to bump his nose and cheek against his skin before lightly dragging his face down his neck to mix their scents again. “Something that may or may not be vital to normal physical functioning but that you choose to have anyway. Something that fulfills emotional needs. Like hoarding chocolate, then giving it to a little girl with a broken leg. The chocolate won’t make her bones heal any faster, but it’s something enjoyable that will make her feel better emotionally. Something wanted.”

“Meaning of ‘need’ unclear.”

“Need?”

Bucky nodded, his face tucked close to the crook of Steve’s neck so that his lips brushed against his skin as he spoke and moved. “Emotional need,” he said. “Meaning unclear.”

“Remember what I said about panic? How it hurts even though its physical?”
Bucky nodded again.

“That’s an emotion. There’s lots, some of them are more important to keep you happy than others. Some are bad, some are good, some can be both. An emotional need is something that you require to function normally that isn’t physical. Sometimes they’re to fix other emotions. Like, panic. It’s an emotional need of yours to be calm and happy, but panic makes it harder, so you need to find a way to fix it.”

“I need you,” Bucky murmured.

“You have me,” Steve promised.

“I don’t know if I understand.”

“It’s okay,” he said softly. “You don’t have to understand everything right away.”

“You keep saying that.”

“What?”

“It’s okay,” Bucky echoed. “You keep saying it, but earlier, you said you weren’t okay. I came to make sure you were, but you weren’t. Now you are?”

“I’m better,” Steve said quietly.

“’Cause I’m here?”

“Yeah,” he said, smiling a little. “You make it better.”

“I fulfill your emotional need?”
“Lots of ‘em, Buck,” Steve promised. “I need you like I need air.”

“Error.”

Steve’s breath hitched. Bucky’s voice sounded so flat, so blank, so empty.

“Logic unsound.”

“You think in errors a lot?” Steve asked in a whisper.

“Yeah,” Bucky admitted, and Steve felt a cold wash of relief when his voice had a tone to it again. “Error. Warning. Conflict, potential conflict. Override.”

“Tell me about them,” Steve asked. “Tell me how you think, maybe I can explain things easier to you.”

“Meaning unclear.”

“What is an error?” Steve rephrased. “What makes something an error?”

“Meaning unclear.”

Steve opened his mouth, but Bucky was continuing to speak. “Logic unsound or invalid. Memory? Gaps?”

“Those are all errors?”

“Yeah. Anything can be an error, I guess, those are the bigger reasons.”
“What makes a conflict?”

“Conflict between mission objectives.”

“What’s the difference between potential conflict and a conflict?”


Steve laughed. He felt Bucky’s lips move against his skin, like he was smiling or at least trying.

“Potential conflict,” Bucky whispered, tone falling out of his voice once again and Steve shut his eyes tight to keep back a wave of emotion, “mission: Protect Gingerbread, right now.”

“Right now?”

“Threat present.”

Steve tightened his arms. “I told you, you’re not going to hurt me.”

“Define ‘afraid.’”

Steve paused, thinking. “Are you trying to change the subject?”

“No,” Bucky murmured.

“It’s another word for fear,” Steve said.

“I remember,” Bucky started, “being afraid. Lots. Before. I was afraid, but there was no threat to me. There was no visible threat at all. I was afraid concerning you.”
“You been afraid of hurting me for a long time, Buck,” Steve whispered. “It’s not new.”

Bucky’s arms tightened. “I hurt you? Before?”

“Not really,” Steve said quickly, “but you thought you did. You had to go away because you thought you did.”

“What did I do?”

“Do you remember the gingerbread?”

“You are gingerbread.”

“No,” Steve said, a dry chuckle escaping his lips. “No, do you remember making gingerbread cookies with me? A long time ago.”


“It’s an adjective,” Steve answered, “referring to taste or smell. Something really good.”

“You smelled delicious,” Bucky repeated. “Smell. Present tense. I don’t know. You were small?”

“Yeah,” Steve sighed, relieved again to know that Bucky remembered some things of their time together at least. “The super-soldier serum made me bigger. Before, I was pretty scrawny.”

“Lithe,” Bucky said.

“What?”

“Lithe,” he repeated, less mumbling now, as he lifted his head and pressed his forehead against Steve’s. “You were slim and lithe, like a cat.”
"A cat?"

"You’d purr when I petted you, too," Bucky added, and a hand ghosted down his spine. Steve shivered, letting out an involuntary breathe. "More like a jungle cat now, but you purr still."

Steve swallowed and tried to assemble his thoughts, though Bucky didn’t slide his fingers down his back again, just held him around the waist with a firm grip, and though they were standing naked under a stream of hot water, skin to skin, chest to chest, wrapped around each other, there was very little that was sexual about their stances. It was intimate and intimate alone. They enveloped each other, for warmth even though the room was filling with steam, for trust and for comfort and safety. Steve, at least, felt safe and content standing there, he could only hope Bucky would find out what that felt like soon.

"That was the first time I went into heat," Steve told him, "while we were making gingerbread cookies. Except I was really too young for it, and I’d just gotten over a bad case of pneumonia. It was bad. You were there."

"I rutted, didn’t I?" Bucky murmured. "I remember kissing your neck. Not wanting to stop. I think I did, though."

"You had enough clarity to lock me in the bathroom so you couldn’t get to me, before your rut fully hit," Steve said. "When my mother came home, she locked us both in different rooms. You were in my room. When it was over, your parents made you move away. Your mother told you that you’d broken out and gotten into the room I was in. You never said exactly what she told you, just that she said you had hurt me."

"But I didn’t?"

"No, you never did."

"I remember wanting to be with you," Bucky murmured. "I don’t remember much else."

“What else do you remember?” Steve asked in a whisper before he could help himself. He shouldn’t pry, should just let Bucky’s memories come to him when they did and let Bucky tell him when he wanted to, but the question came out too quick for him to stop it. “Don’t tell me if you don’t want to, though,” he added quickly. “It’s up to you.”
“I can’t pick them all apart,” Bucky answered slowly. “I can remember some things, I remember that
you blush easy and I loved making you blush, I remember that your ribs and the backs of your knees
are ticklish, I remember that I missed you for a long time but I don’t know if I missed you while you
were with me ’cause I couldn’t have you or I missed you while you were gone or all of the above.
They’re all mixed together.”

Bucky pulled him in closer, pressing closer, like he wanted to wind himself around Steve and crawl
inside him and never come out. It was a feeling that Steve was very familiar with.

“It’s so loud in my head,” he whispered. “Every time I turn around something new is screaming for
my attention, I’m remembering things but there’s so many I don’t know where one thing starts and
another stops.”

“It’s gonna be okay,” Steve promised. “I’m so sorry, Buck, but it’s gonna be okay.”

Bucky’s eyes fell shut, he forced them back open and they fluttered shut again.

“Tired?” Steve asked.

Bucky nodded shortly.

“Do you want to wash yourself?” he prompted. “Do you want to get out?”

Bucky shrugged.

“Do you want me to do it?”

“We’ve done this before?” Bucky asked instead of answering.

“Yeah, lots of times. We didn’t get much occasion to shower or bathe or anything while we were on
the front lines, but we took every opportunity we could get.”
“Did we have a marble bathroom?” Bucky asked abruptly. “Once?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, laughing lightly at the memory then. “We holed up in this fancy hotel in French country once, the town had been evacuated, so we took advantage of the place being deserted.”

“There were others with us, right? I remember others.”

“Yeah, we had a whole team. The Howling Commandos, they called us. Do you remember their names?”

Bucky shook his head. “I remember some faces. I don’t know.”

“It’s okay,” Steve repeated. “There was Tim Dugan, we called him Dum Dum, Jim Morita, Gabe Jones, Jacques Dernier, James Falsworth, John Juniper, we called him Junior though, Percy Pinkerton, and Sam Sawyer.”

“Happy Sam,” Bucky muttered. “And Pinky.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Steve said, grinning now. “Dernier and Falsworth, we called ‘em by their surnames, too. You, Falsworth, and Jim all had the same first name, and you all hated being called James.”

“Dernier and Gabe were like you and me,” Bucky said. “Were they?”

“Sort of. Gabe was a Beta, but that was probably worse than me and you being together.”

“Tell me about the hotel.”

“It was February, 1944,” he started. “Like I said, the town had been evacuated. We were heading to a rendezvous near the outskirts of Paris, which was being occupied by the Nazis. We stopped in this little town, but it had this resort like hotel. We went in, it was still full of food and drink and firewood, we figured the town had only just been evacuated. There were enough fancy rooms fit for kings for all of us.”
“We shared?”

“We always shared,” Steve promised. “Didn’t matter if it was a deserted hotel or a crappy bedroll, we always shared.”

“And we did this?” Bucky asked. “We washed together?”

“Each other,” Steve answered. “There was real nice soap, and everything.”

Bucky lifted a hand to brush the hair out of his eyes. “I do not know how to take care of you,” he said haltingly.

“You’ll figure it out,” Steve promised. “I’ll help you.”

“I can wash your hair?”

Steve gave him a smile. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

He handed Bucky the bar of soap and Bucky’s fingers carefully worked themselves into his hair. He lathered up the soap, gently rubbing at Steve’s scalp with his nails, his face going from set determination to something gentler. Steve leaned into the touch, his smile constant, his eyes eventually falling shut. Bucky pushed the hair away from his forehead and leaned in, pressing his lips against Steve’s temple, then guided him around to stand under the fall of water. His fingers gently rinsed the soap from his hair, the water running down Steve’s back and neck, Bucky’s presence still close enough that Steve could feel his every exhale. The cloth that Steve had dropped came in contact with the back of his neck, soapy, and Bucky ran it over his chest, shoulders, his back and arms. Steve opened his eyes as Bucky washed his stomach, then knelt down and ran the cloth over his thighs and calves. He brought it back up the inside of his thigh, glancing up at Steve, then carefully washed around his groin and ass. When Bucky stood again, he kissed his lips gently.

“See,” Steve whispered, “it’s all muscle memory.”

“I guess,” Bucky muttered. He was still holding the cloth, picking at a loose thread. Steve held out his hand.
“Do you want me to do you?” he asked softly.

Bucky nodded. Steve kissed him again, then took the cloth and lathered it with more soap. He started with Bucky’s chest, his right arm and shoulder, working his way across to Bucky’s left shoulder. Bucky’s jaw tightened as the cloth ran over the seam between the metal and the flesh, the mass of scars, the screws and metal plates.

Steve leaned in and pressed his lips over a lump of scar tissue, lovingly, and he heard Bucky let out a sigh of breath. He moved down, washing his stomach, his legs, then his back and bottom. He moved Bucky back under the spray of water, using his hands to brush away the last traces of soap. After that, he lathered the soap into the ends of Bucky’s hair, working his way with soft fingers to his scalp. Bucky’s eyes fluttered shut as Steve began to massage at his scalp, washing his hair now an excuse just to touch him gently. He kept doing it until the last of the soap had been rinsed, until Bucky blinked sleepily and leaned on him almost under the water spray. Their lips met in a slow and languid kiss, and Bucky’s lips tasted like home.

Steve turned off the shower and slipped out, Bucky right behind him. Standing on the mat, he picked up one of the towels and began to dry him down. He gave Bucky a smile before taking the towel to his hair, working the water out and drying it best he could. After a second, he noticed that Bucky’s lips had lifted at the corners. Steve grinned back at him and kissed the tip of his nose, and the corners of Bucky’s lips lifted higher.

When he picked up the second towel, Bucky took it from him. Just as he had done, Bucky wiped the water from his skin, and now the flesh hand was as steady as the metal one. At his head, Bucky hesitated, then flicked the towel over Steve’s face and began to scrub at his hair; Steve laughed and caught Bucky’s attempt at smiling growing.

“You hungry?” he asked him as they dressed themselves in the same clothes.

“I’m fine,” Bucky replied.

Steve wasn’t sure if Bucky meant that no, he wasn’t hungry at all, or he was just fed enough to be functional. Instead of asking, he said: “I’m going to go get some of Hill’s sandwiches, if you’d like to join me.”

Bucky gave a shrug, an easy roll of the shoulders that was almost an exact mimic of how he’d done before had it not been for the metal arm throwing it off-balance. “Alright,” he said.
Steve laced their fingers together as they left the bathroom. Downstairs, Sam gave them a wave.

“Enjoy yourselves up there?” Clint called, his tone threatening a cackle, as they walked into the kitchen.

“Shuddup,” Steve called back, rolling his eyes to the ceiling.

Clint did cackle after that. Bucky frowned.

“He’s making an innuendo,” Steve explained. “He’s implying we had sex.”

“Why would we…” Bucky trailed off, then blushed. “Why would he even ask about that?”

“It’s a thing people do these days,” Steve said, half sighing. “They’re a lot more comfortable with sexual matters. They’re a lot more comfortable with a lot of things, too, which is usually nice, then you get your friends making innuendos like that all the time.”

“Friends?” Bucky repeated. Steve gave a nod, letting go of Bucky’s hand to check the fridge for sandwich supplies. Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, stopping in the middle of the kitchen, looking a little disgruntled and distinctly awkward, like he didn’t quite fit in his skin.

“Yeah, those people are my friends,” Steve answered him. He found bread in the fridge, though he wasn’t sure why the bread was in the fridge unless something had changed since 1945 and bread was meant to be refrigerated and no one had told him, as well as sliced meat, cheese, and a lot of other things. “What do you want on your sandwich?”

“Uh,” Bucky said.

“You want to try swiss cheese?” Steve asked. “I’m pretty sure you never had it before. I like it.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Bucky said.

Steve pulled out of the fridge, opened the package, and slid a slice of swiss cheese from it. He held it
out to Bucky, who looked at it for a long time.

“Swiss cheese,” he said.

Bucky took the cheese, but didn’t eat it. He approached the fridge himself, looking into the bag Steve was holding. He took it from him, then started to inspect it. For a second, Steve wasn’t sure what he was doing, but then realized he was probably looking for traces of tampering.

“Do you want to check the rest of the food too?” Steve asked quietly.

Bucky gave a curt nod. Steve stepped away from the fridge and Bucky stuck his head in, abandoning the slice of swiss cheese onto a shelf to look over the food inside.

“Hill opened some things,” he reminded him.

Bucky gave a grunt. He opened a jar and gave it a sniff, then scowled. “What is this?” he said, holding it up. “Smells like mold.”

Steve leaned in. “It’s blue cheese dressing.”

“She bought moldy food.”

“No, blue cheese is supposed to be like that,” Steve said quickly. “It’s good mold.”

Bucky did not look convinced. “Don’t eat it,” he said, screwing the lid back on and shoving it into the back of the fridge. Steve let out a breath and let it go; he didn’t like blue cheese anyway.

“All good?” Steve asked a minute later when Bucky pulled back from the fridge.

“I want to ask Romanoff if she has adequate medical supplies, antidotes, just in case,” Bucky said, then glanced at him. “It should be,” he added.
“I’m sure she has plenty,” Steve assured him, pulling the bread back out and setting it on the counter.

Bucky gave another grunt. Steve watched him take a step back, a glance between the kitchen doorway and Steve, then bite at his lower lip.

“I’ll be right here,” he said. “Making sandwiches.”

“I’ll be right back,” Bucky muttered, stepping backwards out of the kitchen. Steve half nodded to himself, pulling out slices of bread. Bucky would probably be hesitant like this for a while, he figured. He’d looked at him like Steve would vanish every time he turned around when they’d first gotten together, too.

“Sometimes I think you’re just a fever dream,” Bucky had said to him once. “That if I clear my head, you’ll go away. It’s hard to convince myself you’re real.”

Bucky appeared again a second later; Steve shot him a smile. He both saw the flash of relief in his eyes and felt it through their bond as Bucky walked closer, then stopped a few steps away. He shoved his hands into his pockets, looking at his feet. Steve felt a little tremor through the bond, like Bucky’s heart rate was accelerating again. So he reached out and pulled one of Bucky’s hands, the metal one, from its pocket and guided it around his waist before going back to making the sandwich. Bucky dropped his forehead onto Steve’s shoulder, a little hum of happiness going through the bond.

“You can touch me, you know,” Steve said. Bucky half lifted his head. “Whenever you need to.”

Bucky didn’t say anything. Steve finished the sandwich and set it on the counter, going to make a sixth.

“You real hungry there, Stevie?” Bucky mumbled after a second.

“I’m pretty much always hungry,” Steve laughed, “but three of these are yours.”

Bucky shrugged. “I’m fine,” he said, but picked up a sandwich and bit into it anyway. He leaned against Steve’s back, his chin resting on his shoulder. Steve picked up one of the other three, holding three in his hands now, and looked around for plates. There was a stack of paper plates on the other counter, and he had to step out of Bucky’s embrace to get to them. He felt cold immediately afterwards, and Bucky stood stiffly at the other counter. Steve set the plate on the counter by Bucky,
touched his arm briefly, then put away the food. He put the bread back in the fridge, though he wasn’t sure why bread belonged in the fridge still.

“Do you want to eat in here or join the others back in the other room?” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged again. He’d finished his first sandwich by then and started on a second. Steve picked up the plate, then took Bucky’s hand and led him out of the kitchen. In the living room, Natasha was still curled up with her knees in Clint’s lap, asleep, Hill and Sam sat in front of the coffee table on the ground with a bag of Doritos between them, and the wide armchair he and Bucky had left earlier was waiting for them. He sat down first, tugged Bucky down beside him, then pulled his legs up and draped them over Bucky’s lap and the arm of the chair, putting his plate in the V of his lap. Bucky looked at Steve’s legs, then at him, then flicked his eyes to the couch where Natasha was spread over Clint. He seemed to accept the position with a shrug.

“So, ABC Family no longer loves us and isn’t playing the whole of the Harry Potter series,” Clint announced. “This is Beetlejuice.”

“Haven’t seen it,” Steve said.

“Fuck you,” Hill repeated.

“That’s what he’s got Barnes for,” Clint reminded her.

Steve snorted and Bucky gave both Hill and Clint a dark look. Clint raised a hand, expression saying it’s true buddy don’t be mad, and Bucky flicked his eyes over to Steve, raising an eyebrow as his expression shifted.

“I think the Howlies made jokes like that a lot,” he murmured.

“All the time,” Steve grinned.

Natasha gave a sudden groan from the couch. “I’ve changed my mind,” she grumbled. “Don’t come to the Tower, stay here, I don’t think I’ll be able to handle this every day.”
“We’re not that bad,” Steve assured her, rolling his eyes.

“I meant him,” Natasha said, lifting her head and hand to prod Clint in the side of the head. “And his dumb jokes. I don’t think I’ll be able to handle this brand new source of inspiration for his dumb jokes.”

“You love my dumb jokes,” Clint protested.

“Says who,” Natasha quipped, and flopped back down to the sofa. She rolled over, putting her knees in Clint’s stomach and facing the back of the couch.

“She loves my dumb jokes,” Clint announced.

Natasha lazily threw up her middle finger. Steve chuckled. He felt Bucky prod him in the leg and looked up at him, eyebrows raised and smiling.

“Is this behavior pattern normal?” Bucky asked quietly.

“For them, yeah,” Steve answered. And it was, even when Steve hadn’t known for sure if she and Clint were together, it was normal for Clint to make bad jokes and Natasha to groan in disgust at them. It was actually what had sent Steve wondering if they were more than friends, since it was just how he and Bucky had been.

“For…” Bucky made a vague gesture, his cheeks darkening a little. “Bondmates?”

“We’re not bonded,” Clint threw in. “Though, hey, S.H.I.E.L.D. isn’t around to tell us not to anymore, Nat.”

“Fuck off,” Natasha mumbled into the couch.

“It’s kind of normal,” Steve said.

Bucky scowled, but not in the way that meant he was legitimately upset. “Meaning unclear.”
“People bicker and banter like that lots,” Steve tried, “some couples don’t, some do.”

“Do we?”

“Yeah, if you’d like.”

“I seem to remember calling you a moron a lot.”

Steve laughed and leaned up to kiss his cheek. “I called you a moron a lot, too,” he said reassuringly.

“You are pretty stupid,” Bucky added, a corner of his lip lifting.

“I get distracted easy,” Steve said, flashing him a grin and tweaking his nipple through his shirt. Bucky squirmed, his lips curled in an easy smile that Steve felt immensely proud of him for.

“It’s a good thing you’re gorgeous,” Bucky pretended to grumble, but he was still smiling.

“Oh, god, I don’t think I’ll be able to handle that, either,” Natasha actually grumbled.

“Let the boys flirt!” Sam butted in.

“Hey, no commentary from the peanut gallery,” Bucky called. Sam and Clint both snorted.

“The peanut gallery is trying to watch the movie,” Hill added.

Steve tweaked Bucky’s nipple again. He started, then tried to shoot Steve a disapproving look, but it was ruined by the way he was obviously trying not to smile. Steve gave him an innocent look and finished off his sandwich, licking a finger and fluttering his lashes shut intentionally. He felt Bucky’s chest lift as he drew in a sharp breath.
He looked up, slowly tugging his finger from his mouth. For a second, Bucky just sat there, a slightly glazed look in his eyes. Then, he cupped his jaw with his flesh hand, brushing his fingers over Steve’s pulse with reverent eyes, as if just realizing that he could.

“Whaddya say we blow this joint?” he murmured.

Steve blushed. Bucky’s lips curved again, this time into a smirk.

“I don’t know,” he said, a stupid, shit-eating grin taking over his lips, “I think Beetlejuice is a great movie.”

“‘M gonna have to convince you?” Bucky asked, eyes glinting in the light. They crinkled at the corners familiarly.

“I think you are,” Steve said.

Bucky dropped his hand and lifted Steve’s legs so they were now draped over his knees rather than the arm of the chair. He pulled at his waist, tucking him closer, then leaned his head against Steve’s and dropped his hand to his hip. The fingers drifted beneath the hem of his shirt, circling his waist to his stomach. Steve sucked in a breath, Bucky’s fingers beginning to draw light patterns on his skin. His heart sped up in a good way and the gentle touch of Bucky’s fingers sent shivers down his spine to all the right places. He wanted to let his head fall back, to expose his throat to Bucky’s lips and let him suck the same light patterns into his neck, but he couldn’t really do that in polite company.

Bucky’s fingers trailed past the waistband of his pants. Steve jumped, grabbing his hand and flushing dark. He’d spent two years in a state where face could make him blush any longer, but any touch of Bucky’s fingers still drew blood to his cheeks like he was a schoolboy. Bucky grinned at him and kissed the side of his head.

“‘M not doing anything,” he whispered, then gently brushed his nose down his cheekbones, dropping another kiss onto his jaw. His other hand came to rest on the top of Steve’s thigh, then drifted down and inward a little. Steve’s eyes fluttered shut.

“Get a room!” Clint shouted. Steve’s eyes jerked back open and he flushed all over again, grabbing Bucky’s hand and tugging it against his chest where it couldn’t do anything worse.
“Hey, I’m tryin’ here, pal,” Bucky called back.

“Let your boy take you upstairs,” Sam said to Steve with a wave of his hand.

“Shush!” Hill added.

Bucky kissed his temple, his lips lingering. “C’mon, Stevie,” he murmured. “Be nice to me.”

Steve stood up. Bucky grinned wide as he got up, too, Clint wolf-whistled as they made their way out of the living room.

“Use protection!” Sam shouted after them. Halfway up the stairs and out of sight, Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist and pulled him flush against his chest. Steve dropped his head onto his shoulder, finally baring his throat, and was rewarded by Bucky kissing the nape of his neck with an open mouth.

“You’re obscene,” Steve whispered to him, but he loved it.

“I can’t resist those baby blues, doll,” Bucky murmured against his skin.

Steve shivered and Bucky gave him a light push. Steve half-stumbled, half-darted up the stairs, Bucky on his heels, down the hallway towards the doors that weren’t the bathroom. He opened one room and found a bunk bed, then checked the other door to find the single queen size bed. He turned, wrapping his arms around Bucky’s neck, and pulled him into the room while walking backwards. Bucky shut the door with his foot, their lips connecting heatedly, and backed him up until his knees hit the bed and he fell backwards. Bucky just came down with him, his mouth going to the side of his neck and beginning to suck a mark into his skin. Steve made a half-strangled, needy sound, lifting a knee past Bucky’s waist, and Bucky’s hands gripped his hips to pull them firmly against his own.

Then:

“I don’t know what Wilson meant about protection,” Bucky mumbled into his neck. His lips closed on the lobe of his ear, tongue pulling at it as he sucked gently.
“He meant a condom,” Steve said, then whined as Bucky ground their hips together again. “Don’t worry about it, I can’t get pregnant.”

Bucky lifted his lips away from his ear. Steve blinked at him, confused, while Bucky’s eyebrows scrunched together and his lips drew downwards.

“What?” he said.

“I remember…” Bucky whispered, then lifted a hand to brush hair out of his eyes, his fingers coming to a stop to brush the pad of his thumb over Steve’s lower lip. “Talking about kids. Saying we’d have enough that the whole team could be godfathers.”

Steve swallowed and inhaled a short breath. He hadn’t thought Bucky would remember that, the times when the Howlies would sit and talk shit about what they were going to do after the war, as if all of them were going to make it out and everything would all be fine. “I can’t,” he said. “The serum, it makes everything faster, even my womb. Too fast. That was… that was just talk.”

“Oh,” Bucky said, and Steve would have gone back in time to strangle Dr. Erskine until he found a way to make a serum that didn’t make him infertile with how crushed his voice sounded, with how much he felt ashamed at disappointing Bucky with it a second time.

“I’m –”

Bucky leaned in and kissed him again, gentler. “Don’t apologize for it,” he murmured against his lips. “S’ probably for the better.”

Steve wrapped his arms around his neck and kissed him hard, wanting to drive the haunted wisp from his tone, fill his eyes back up with that light glint and make him smile again. Bucky had loved kids, he’d always loved them, and even after Steve confessed in hushed tones that he’d probably never be able to give him any, he had just smiled and said they could always adopt.

It was Dum Dum who had suggested they have enough kids that all the Howlies could be godfathers, after they’d had a night off and spent the whole thing drinking and talking about what they’d do after the war. Before either Bucky or Steve could say anything about their fantasy future, Pinky had shouted “White picket fence and little Barneses in the backyard!” and it had gone downhill from there. Falsworth, Dernier, Gabe, and Morita had all been arguing over who would get to be godfather first, Junior had protested that Dernier and Gabe should have to share a kid between
the pair of them, Dernier argued that it was discrimination to make them share, and Happy Sam kept reminding Steve that he had an iron stomach and no amount of baby vomit or poop could make him hurl.

“Hey, hey, now, they can just have one for all of us!” Dum Dum had called over the din, and that had been that. “Lord knows Sarge ain’t gonna complain about making ‘em!”

It had left Bucky laughing so hard he’d had to curl up with his head in Steve’s lap. The fact that Steve couldn’t have any and that the war’s end might not see them all was as distant as the Hollywood sign that night.

In the present, Steve twisted his fingers in Bucky’s hair long past military regulations and wrapped his legs around Bucky’s waist, wanting and needing more and more contact, wanting and needing to make Bucky smile, make him draw in sharp breaths and forget everything and everyone that had ever hurt him. God had made him to make Bucky smile, and Steve had seven decades of pain to brush away with his touch.

Bucky took the kiss hungrily, handsy and hot. Their kiss was with open mouths, their tongues tangled, lips pushing for more and more and more, like they would never stop even if time ended while they were there. Bucky’s metal fingers were cold when they pressed to Steve’s ribs but by the time the forefinger and thumb gripped at his nipple, Steve forgot all about the cold. He moaned into Bucky’s mouth, arched into his touch, was rewarded by Bucky twisting his thumb and finger and a jolt of pleasure flashing through his entire body.

Their lips disconnected, Bucky dragging his mouth across Steve’s jaw to kiss down his neck until he reached the scent gland at his clavicle; the surface of bite mark left by Bucky’s teeth a few days before was already healed, but bonding bites were more than just skin deep. He kissed it and then opened his mouth to suck on it and Steve let out another noise as the pleasure flashed through him once more. It wasn’t as sensitive as it would have been, had been when he was in heat, but it was Bucky sucking and licking at it, Steve’s mate, and if Bucky kept up with his ministrations, Steve might just come with his cock completely untouched.

He tightened his legs, locking his ankles and lifting his hips off the bed almost in seeking friction. Bucky’s flesh hand grabbed his hip, fingers just tight enough to leave gentle bruises, shoving him down just to grind their hips together again, slow and perfect, and draw another breath from Steve’s lips. His tongue swept over his scent gland, then his teeth scraped against the skin and Steve’s hips gave another involuntary jerk.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get over how amazing you taste, babydoll,” Bucky murmured and licked again. “God, I’m addicted to it, Stevie, you taste so good, so perfect; you’re delicious.”
“Bucky,” Steve could only whine. He’d never thought he could forget how much Bucky talked, how once he got going, he never stopped. The words spilled from his lips, slow dripping like honey, and Steve ate it up ravenously like a starving man.

“M gonna make you feel so good, ‘m gonna fill you up, make you squirm ‘n’ beg for more.”

“Do it already, then,” he complained.

Bucky laughed, a deep and dark sound that was as erotic as his mouth sucking marks into his skin. He ground their hips together again, pulling on Steve’s nipple and running his open mouth back up his neck to his pulse.

“If I wanna take my time, you gonna be mad, sugar?”

“So mad,” he promised, though he was bullshitting completely, “I don’t like teasing.”

Bucky laughed again, then curled his fingers into the waistband of Steve’s pants and tugged, only a little, enough to cause friction and send his spine tingling. “I think I like teasing you, Stevie,” Bucky said back. “You make the best noises when you’re mad ‘n’ needy, sound like a fucking kitten.”

“Buck,” he whined again.

“Steve,” Bucky rasped back. He nuzzled down his neck, rubbing his cheekbones and scratchy jaw over Steve’s sensitive skin and kissed his scent gland again. He had Steve breathing hard like he’d just run a marathon, achingly hard and he hadn’t even gotten his pants off. “Think I could get you off just like this, baby?”

“Oh, god, Buck,” Steve murmured and felt a flash of heat pooling low in his belly, Bucky lazily rolling his hips and kissing his neck like they had all the time in the world.

“Just like this, babydoll, get you nice and pliant, we can go a few rounds, this one, just like this.”
“I want you to fuck me,” Steve mumbled.

Bucky’s fingers tightened on his hips, the heat pooling doubled as he dug his fingers in and rolled his hips again, he said: “Don’t you worry your pretty head, sweetheart, I’m gonna fuck you good ‘n’ hard, but I want to bring you off just like this first, just once.”

And he closed his mouth over Steve’s scent gland again and sucked, rolling his hips, his teeth scraping the skin, and Steve felt like he was going to explode again, but in a much better way.

“Bucky,” he gasped out.

“C’mon, Stevie, you can do it.”

Bucky’s teeth dug into his scent gland, not hard enough to break the skin but almost. Steve gasped and felt the heat spike intensely, his vision going dull with pleasure. He made another strangled noise, Bucky’s teeth lifted to suck again, his tongue pressing hard and mouth tugging in obscenely delightful ways. Another roll of the hips and Steve could feel the orgasm coming, his breath ragged, Bucky keeping pace and sucking harder still.

“Come for me, babydoll, lemme see you come,” Bucky murmured into his neck, then his teeth pierced the thin skin over Steve’s scent gland.

Steve gasped and Bucky hummed into his neck, the vibration sending sparks shooting through his scent gland, and he came with a cry that was a mangled attempt at his Alpha’s name.

Bucky lifted his head to kiss his mouth. Steve felt boneless but kissed back eagerly. Bucky pulled back with a peck and brought his left hand down to Steve’s hip, nuzzling his nose down the other side of Steve’s neck.

“Told you you could do it, baby,” he breathed. “You’re so pretty when you come, ’m gonna make you do it again and again, Stevie, ’m gonna make you feel so good.”

“You gonna fuck me now?” Steve mumbled.
Bucky pulled back abruptly; Steve tried to chase after him but Bucky just shoved him back down and farther up the bed, then crawled up to him on his hands and knees, his pupils blown wide as he loomed over him, beautiful, his lips wet and red. Their scents were mixed, the sharp tang of Bucky and the sweet perfume of Steve making the air heady and spicy, Steve could drink it up and never get enough of the way that he couldn’t tell where one of them ended and the other began. That was what they were supposed to smell like, like they belonged heart and soul to one another, that was what God had made them for and by God, did he love it.

“I’m just gonna use my fingers first,” Bucky announced in a low growl that had Steve almost ready to go all over again right then. “Then, when you’re good an’ ready for round three, sugar, ’m gonna fuck you so hard you black out with how good it feels.”

“That what you’re gonna do?” Steve said, grinning up at him.

Bucky growled and attacked his lips in another kiss, dragging Steve’s shirt up as he went, breaking the kiss just long enough to tug it off and cast it aside. Steve knotted his fingers into Bucky’s hair as their lips met again, raising his knees to frame Bucky’s hips.

“You’re being difficult, Rogers,” Bucky grumbled against his lips.

“You’re being slow,” Steve countered breathily.

Bucky gripped his hips again and yanked his pants away, tossing them carelessly away. Steve took the opportunity to tug at Bucky’s shirt until Bucky lifted back to pull it off over his head and discard it, before immediately cupping his palms over Bucky’s pectoral muscles and smoothing his thumbs over the goosebumps that rose up under his fingers, finding rough scars and soft skin in equal measure. Bucky kissed him again, rough and delicious and addictive.

“Buck,” Steve murmured against his lips. He arched his back and clung to him, needy, hungry for more, and Bucky shh ed him gently.

“I got you,” he promised in a rasp. It was all Steve could do to remind himself that last time Bucky had said that, he’d meant it in a different way but he had meant it, and this time, there was no way he was going to let Bucky leave him again. Bucky’s flesh hand dug into his hip, then pulled at his inner thigh until Steve wrapped his leg around his waist.

“Hey, ’m tryna get to your ass, dumbass,” Bucky chuckled, then, in a lower voice, he rumbled:
“Spread your legs for me, sugar.”

Steve shivered again and dropped his legs to the bed. “There’s a good boy, baby,” Bucky murmured, and Steve shivered again, eyes falling shut. Bucky’s fingers brushed his thigh, he let out a moan as they drifted in, warm against his skin.

“Look at that. You’re all wet, not in heat and still wet for me,” Bucky murmured against his lips, Steve was trembling under him, vibrating with need, and Bucky was still going slow, gentle brushing of his fingers where Steve wanted more, wanted it now, needed to feel filled and he wasn’t getting it yet. “‘S fucking hot, Stevie.”

“All talk and no fun makes a pissed Omega outta me,” Steve answered.

“We got time, baby.”

Steve squirmed and Bucky gripped his hip with his metal hand to hold him still.

“Lookatchu, bein’ all impatient,” Bucky crooned. “I remember that.”

“C’mon, fuck me already,” Steve whined.

“I’m gonna fuck you, don’t worry.”

Steve gasped sharply and then moaned at the first finger. Bucky dragged his lips down to his pulse, laughing lightly against him as he held tight at Steve’s hip with one hand and gently probed with the other. Steve was more cognizant than he had been five days ago when he’d slipped into heat and Bucky had last touched him like this. He was much more aware it now, of the stretch over Bucky’s knuckles where they were broader than the rest of his already thick finger, the way it felt so perfect but like it wasn’t enough.

He ached like he’d been untouched for years rather than only a few days, like the last time had been the night before Bucky had fallen, like it had been all the years Steve had been in the ice and then some, so long ago that he felt the craving deep in his chest. His fingers knotted in Bucky’s hair, tight enough that he might have worried he was hurting him except Bucky had always liked Steve pulling on his hair a little. It was much longer than it had been years ago, it made it easier for him to get a hold in it.
“Think you’re ready for two, babydoll?” Bucky breathed in his ear.

“Think I’m ready for a whole lot more,” Steve retorted.

“I gotta be gentle with you, doll,” Bucky murmured with a little laugh, “think it’s been a few days.”

Steve bit his lip to cut back a sharp “And whose fault is that?”, then forgot it in another low noise at the second finger. Bucky mouthed at his scent gland again, languidly licking at the bruise and marks his mouth had left behind already, where his teeth had dug in and was already healing. Steve only needed more. He squirmed again, trying to push him in deeper, and Bucky caught at his hip with tight fingers.

“Patience is a virtue, baby,” he said.

“I gave up on virtue long ago,” Steve promised. “Bucky,” he breathed out, as if that would convey all that he needed.

It did. The third finger made him moan wantonly, then Bucky dragged his lips down from his neck, leaving kisses in his wake, down, tongue flicking at a nipple, dipping into his navel, and down. Steve dropped one hand to dig his fingers into the blankets, the other pulling at Bucky’s hair, and he arched up into Bucky’s mouth. Bucky gave a low hum, the vibrations searching down into his very core. Steve was far out of breath, his head spun and he threw it back to press into the mattress. He let out a breathy moan, Bucky hummed again, the heat coiling in his belly again, not enough to burst just yet. Bucky’s fingers pressed deep, his mouth pulling, tongue swirling, the heat rising like the flush to his neck and face. Bucky pulled back, kissed the crest of his hip, nuzzled him and licked a stripe up.

“Gonna taste like candy when you come, baby?” Bucky asked.

“Fuck,” Steve gasped. “Don’t stop!”

“‘S not an answer. I think I remember you tasting like lollipops.”

“Bucky,” Steve whined.
“Alright, alright, I’ll get back to it,” Bucky grumbled goodnaturedly. He kissed the line where his abdomen met his pelvis, pushed his fingers deeper, dropped his mouth down again. Steve tightened his fingers in Bucky’s hair, breathing erratically, each exhale almost a gasp. Bucky’s teeth scraped over his skin and Steve felt the heat coiled in his belly tighten and then burst again. He gasped again as Bucky hummed contentedly and drank it up. He pulled off and kissed at his navel, dragging up to reach his mouth again, though he never pulled his fingers all the way out.

“Just like lollipops,” he said decidedly.

“Mmm,” was all Steve could get out. Bucky kissed him hard, his mouth tasting like spunk, a salty tang where everywhere else Steve was sweet. He lifted his other hand to curl it around Bucky’s neck, plastering himself to whatever he could get, and kissed back as much as he could.

The fabric of Bucky’s jeans brushed at the inside of his thighs and he jerked a little, sensitive after the orgasm and having forgotten that Bucky hadn’t removed his own pants yet. He dropped both hands to the small of Bucky’s back, smooth and warm under his fingers, sliding them down to push past his waistband and cup his ass. Bucky pressed up against his hands, then used one of his to pull at the clasp of his belt. As soon as slack appeared in the waistband of his jeans, Steve pulled his hands back just enough to push them away, the sound of the buckle jangling echoing where before the only sound had been their voices, their breaths and their gasps. Bucky’s lips caught his chin, going down again, and Steve lifted his head to bare his throat to him.

For a second, Bucky pulled back. He looked down at him with wide eyes; amazed, not frightened. Steve kept his head tilted back, watching Bucky lick his lips through his lashes. When he swallowed, he watched Bucky’s eyes trace the movement down his throat.

“Fuck, Stevie, baby,” he breathed, his voice breaking. “I don’t know how I could forget this.”

Steve held still, his nose stinging as tears welled up in his eyes. “They worked real hard to take me from you,” he promised, “it wasn’t your fault.”

Bucky kissed his Adam’s apple and pulse and the underside of his chin. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispered. “I should’ve known. I should’ve –”

“Hey,” Steve said, catching Bucky’s face with both hands and pulling him up to look him in the eye. “We’ve had this conversation before.”
“I know –”

“No, we had this conversation a long time ago,” Steve insisted. “I don’t know what you remember about what happened to me after you had to go away, but when I told you, you said just that, that you should have been there, you should have done something, should’ve, should’ve, should’ve, but Buck?”

Bucky knocked their foreheads together gently, keeping his gaze level with Steve’s.

“There wasn’t anything you could do by saying should have then,” Steve murmured. “And there’s nothing you can do about it now. It wasn’t your fault. It’s not your fault ever. You’re here. You know. That’s enough.”

“I don’t know if I can believe that, Stevie,” Bucky whispered.

“I’ll believe it enough for both of us,” he answered.

Bucky kissed him again, gentler this time, then pecked at the tip of his nose and lifted his metal arm to rest it over Steve’s head, their foreheads touching, and for a second, they only breathed. Bucky’s heart was heavy, Steve knew, and he would do his damnedest to lift whatever weight Bucky would give him. Right then, the weight hung between them, until Bucky gently nuzzled his scratchy cheek against Steve’s own cheek and let the weight fall away for just that moment.

“What you can do now is fuck me,” Steve said then.

Bucky laughed and pressed his lips to Steve’s cheekbone. “One track mind, babydoll,” he said and kissed the side of his neck. Steve lifted his chin again to expose his throat to Bucky’s lips, a grin parting his own mouth.

“It’s hard not to think about it when you’ve got your fingers in my ass.”

“I didn’t say it was a bad thing,” Bucky chuckled. “You know what you want, it’s cute.”
“Dammit, Bucky, ’m tryin’ to be sexy here,” Steve tried to grumble, but he laughed halfway through and carded his fingers through Bucky’s hair again.

“The sexiest fucker I ever laid eyes on,” Bucky promised and pressed a lazy kiss to his Adam’s apple again. Then the fingers of his flesh hand wiggled and Steve let out a hum. “Sexiest fucker I ever fucked.”

“’M the only fucker you ever fucked,” Steve mumbled and squirmed on Bucky’s fingers. He hitched a breath when they hit a good spot and Bucky wiggled them again, making him moan.

“I certainly don’t remember doing anybody else,” Bucky went on, completely casual, as if he wasn’t taking Steve apart bit by bit with just three fucking fingers. “Did I?”

“No,” Steve said quickly before his throat could get too clogged by the guilt he still felt; Bucky had never gone after anyone else after he’d left, had never touched another Omega, hadn’t even looked for one. He’d told Steve they all felt wrong to him. And Steve had gone and sold himself for pittances; Bucky had forgiven him, sure, but it didn’t mean that Steve forgave himself completely. Maybe they had that in common. “It was only ever me.”

Bucky kissed his scent gland and withdrew his fingers; Steve made an unhappy noise.

“Can’t fuck you if I don’t pull my fingers out, moron,” Bucky said, grabbing his hips again with his now free right hand.

“Do it, already, then,” Steve gasped.

“I’m doin’ it, I’m doin’ it, quit your grippin’.”

Steve’s breath caught in his throat again. Bucky’s fingers tightened on his hips and he let out a quiet sound.

“Fuck, Stevie,” Bucky murmured, breathing out the words onto his clavicle, “you feel so fuckin’ good, you’re all hot ‘n’ tight for me, baby, babydoll, you’re so good, sugar, you’re too good for me.”
“Bucky,” was all Steve could exhale.

He was so much more aware of just how perfect it felt out of heat. How he felt like Bucky filled every part of him, how he felt whole in Bucky’s arms. Bucky started out slow, kissing him and rolling his hips carefully, but the longer he did, the harder Steve clung to him, the louder their breaths came, the faster his pace came until the pleasure swelled and coiled and tipped over.

Bucky collapsed onto his chest, Steve holding onto his shoulders tightly as Bucky nosed at the edge of his jaw. He hadn’t pulled out yet, his knot would take time to deflate, but Steve wasn’t going to remind him to. It felt nice, lying there, where their edges blurred together like they were supposed to do.

“You’re perfect, Stevie,” he mumbled. “I dunno what I did to deserve you even before.”

If Bucky thought he didn’t deserve him then, he didn’t say, but Steve heard.

“I’m not perfect,” he answered quietly.

“Close as it gets, then,” Bucky said.

Steve swallowed the guilt again. Bucky probably didn’t remember what Steve had told him, about the docks and the guys and getting sick. He should tell him, he knew, but he just wanted Bucky to hold him. Though Bucky had forgiven him once, and he’d probably forgive him again, Steve was afraid.

“I know I love you,” Bucky murmured. “I don’t remember much about what that means, but I know it means you. And I mean it.”

“I love you, too, Buck,” he promised, hoping his voice wouldn’t crack.

Bucky kissed the line of his jaw gently. “I don’t remember what I did before,” he whispered. “I’m sorry for it still.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Steve repeated.
“Don’t mean I’m not sorry for it. What was it?”

Steve swallowed while he tried to think of where to start. Bucky rubbed his nose at the edge of his jaw again, rubbed his scent into Steve again reassuringly. He had to tell him eventually.

“Your family made you move away after I presented, like I said,” he began. “Your ma told you that while you were rutting, you broke out, broke into my room. You never said exactly what she told you, just that she’d said you hurt me, but you believed her and thought that you were a danger to me.”

“Like now,” Bucky murmured.

“You weren’t a danger to me then and you aren’t now,” Steve said firmly. “But you stayed away from me. I didn’t know where you were, you knew where I was and you didn’t come looking for me. I thought you’d moved on.”

“No,” Bucky said. “I remember that much. Never loved nobody but you.”

“Me neither, Buck,” Steve murmured. His tongue felt heavy in his mouth, like if he just held it a little longer, it would choke him. “But I… I got desperate later on. My ma died and I was poor.”

“I know,” Bucky said. Steve’s stomach flipped. “‘S alright, doll. I remember that.”

Then he kissed his jaw again and wormed a hand under the back of his head, one thumb gently stroking his neck and Steve gathered that Bucky really did remember and still didn’t care. He hadn’t thought he could feel any more grateful than he’d been when Bucky first assured him he didn’t hold it against him, but he did.

“I didn’t go looking for you, though?”

“No,” Steve mumbled. “‘S not like you knew, you thought it was better for me, like…” He stopped, swallowing heavily.
“Guess I’ve always been bad for you,” Bucky muttered and Steve tightened his arms around him.

“You are the best thing to ever happen to me,” he said sharply. “God made me for loving you and you for loving me. Even when I had nothing, I had you in my heart. I loved you and it was enough for me.”

He buried his nose in Bucky’s hair, squeezing his eyes shut against fresh tears. “When you died – when I thought you died, I went with you, Buck,” he murmured. “I was just waiting for my body to catch up with my heart.”

Bucky lifted up and pressed their lips together, his hands cradling Steve’s head. The rough pads of his thumbs brushed gently under his eyes at the tears lying there and they parted only an inch with a sigh from both.

“I don’t know if I believed in God ever,” Bucky said against his lips, “but even if I didn’t, I’d believe that he made me to love you.”

Steve had nothing that he could say to that, so he only kissed him again and hoped that Bucky felt the love he poured into it.

After a little while, Bucky’s knot went down and he finally, carefully, pulled out of him and flopped down to lay at his side. He drew Steve into his arms, tucking him into the crook of his neck and kissing the top of his head. Steve let his eyes shut and wrapped an arm around Bucky’s waist, their legs tangling together, and fell asleep. He could only trust that Bucky would still be there when he woke up.

Chapter End Notes

soldier claus, ha, i’m hilarious. and who knew smut could be so sad? i gave myself feels writing that. leave a comment if you liked it, see you back here in two weeks with the next chapter!

oh, and while i’m here, let me clarify that like bucky didn’t know he bonded steve, steve didn’t know he’d been bonded until waking up in the hospital. so, yeah, there’s that.
Chapter Summary

_"o joy is me, for i have found home in your eyes"

Chapter Notes

[in the voice of the white rabbit] i'm late, i'm late, for a very important date!
sorry i'm late everyone, last week was midterms. i have an 8 page paper for my
personal psych class due on thursday and i haven't finished reading the book the first
half is on let alone started the paper. also, i'm moving away from home in the summer.
things have been v stressful. i hope you like this chapter and enjoy the occasional bright
spots, and you can find the playlist [here](#).
edit: you can find this chapter's cover art on my tumblr [here](#).
Help Captain America find his shield! Solve the puzzles to complete the maze! Hurry, don’t let the Red Skull get there first!
“So, is anyone else concerned that HYDRA’s greatest hitman is probably screwing Captain America right now?” Maria asked the group.

Sam kept his eyes fixed on the TV while Barton laughed. Natasha said nothing.

“Because, even if that’s not a major security risk, I’m pretty sure it’s a violation of all our childhood innocence. I watched Captain America and the Howling Commandos cartoons every Saturday morning until I was seventeen.”

“I had no childhood innocence,” Natasha threw in.

“You had some,” Clint offered.

“My point!” Maria interjected.

“Steve told me one of the first things Barnes asked him was if he had been a child once,” Sam announced suddenly.

Even Natasha lifted her head to look at him. Maria looked uncomfortable, as much as he could tell in her impassive expression.

“I know you read through the file,” Sam continued seriously, looking at Maria, then at Natasha. “I know you saw what they did to keep him subdued. Right now, I’m pretty sure he’s having trouble coming to grips with the fact that he’s a person. Normally, I wouldn’t recommend we leave the two of them alone, Steve’s too trusting and Barnes is unstable, but as far as I can tell, Barnes is most stable when he’s got a hand on Steve. Maybe it’s like muscle memory, I don’t know, but he goes all Robocop when he’s talking to us but smooth cityslicker talking to Steve.”

“Cap’s grounding him,” Barton said, laying a hand on Natasha’s knee.
Sam gave a nod. “Maybe the longer they stay attached at the hip, the better Barnes’ll get.”

“So what happens when they separate?” Maria asked. “They’re going to have to at some point.”

“Maybe not right away.” Sam argued gently. “Natasha, you said that Steve’s death certificate is still being redacted, right?”

Natasha nodded vaguely.

“Should take at least a couple weeks?”

“Three, tops.”

“Right. So, until then, we let them be,” Sam decided. “Let them do whatever they want, don’t bug Steve about missions or Congress or whatever until he’s no longer legally dead. We can deal with Congress on our own until then, right?”


“So maybe if we leave them on their own long enough, Barnes’ll recover faster,” he posited. “I mean, you heard him. When he first walked in this morning, he sounded like a robot, but once Steve came in, he started talking more like a person.”

“His accent got thicker,” Natasha agreed. She sat up. “So you think that Cap is not just grounding him, but making it easier for him to disregard the programming?”

Sam was a trained counselor, fortunately, otherwise, he would have missed the way Barton pressed his lips together in an almost flinch at Natasha’s casual tone when speaking of Barnes being programmed. He’d have to remember that. Maybe he was meant to help more than just Steve and his Alpha.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Sam said. “I’ve seen guys do something like this before, they retreat into themselves, make a shell out of themselves, stay in there except for one person.”
The only problem is getting Barnes to stay with him,” Natasha mused.

Sam nodded. He had explained to Natasha and Maria on their way to get the bagels that morning his theory of why Barnes had left Steve with him but stuck around to keep an eye out. “I think he might now, though, after talking with Steve about it.”

“I still think we should watch him,” Maria said. “Recovering or not, he’s a risk.”

“As long as you don’t treat him like you expect him to explode,” Sam warned. Maria frowned and exchanged a glance with Natasha, and he gave a sigh. “Y’all have the worst bedside manners.

“He’s got to be aware of the danger he poses to those around him,” Maria said.

“Of course he’s aware of it, why do you think he wanted to stay away from Steve?” Sam countered. “You can be wary of someone without making them think you’re ready to pounce at any second is my point.”

“Why?” Maria asked. “He’s going to know either way.”

“That’s just going to put him on edge,” Sam insisted. “You gotta take his feeling of trust and safety and all into consideration here! We want him to view us as allies, not enemies!”

Maria blinked at him, then looked away. “I hadn’t thought about that,” she muttered genuinely.

“You have to think about that,” he told her.

Maria frowned still. He let out a breath and let his head fall back onto the coffee table. “You spies probably could use just as much therapy as Mr. Rogers upstairs,” he grumbled.

“I refuse to unload the Red Room onto any kind of psychiatrist,” Natasha said flatly.
“That’s my job,” Barton added.

“Y’all both need therapy,” Sam said, waving a hand at them. “I need therapy after this. Again.”

“I don’t do therapy,” Maria argued.

“Funny enough, that’s what Steve said,” he sighed. Sort of. Steve did confession instead, apparently, but that wasn’t his story to tell. He wondered if Barnes would feel better in confession than in therapy.

“Wouldn’t it be Mr. Barnes, though?” Barton said abruptly. They all turned to look at him. “I mean, Barnes is the Alpha.”

“Just for that, you’re taking my name,” Natasha said dryly while Sam rolled his eyes.

“Clint Romanoff,” Barton mused, tapping his chin. “I actually like the sound of that.”

”Better than Natalia Barton,” Natasha grumbled to herself.

“What’s after this?” Maria asked as the credits of Beetlejuice began.

Barton pressed a button and opened the guide. Beetlejuice’s sequel was up next.

“The sequel sucks,” Sam grumbled.

“I know, right?” Maria huffed.

“Well, the History channel is probably playing Captain America documentaries,” Barton said sarcastically, pressing more buttons. The guide changed, showing what the History Channel was playing at that second. “Lookee there, The Star Spangled Man with a Plan ,” Barton drawled.
“Isn’t it too weird to watch documentaries about a guy we know?” Sam muttered.

“Especially since Cap’s upstairs getting the stars spangled out of him as we speak,” Maria added dryly.

“God,” Sam groaned, covering his face with his hands and trying to think of literally anything else.

“Star Spangled Man with a Plan it is!” Barton crowed.

A big band jazz rendition of the national anthem blared from the TV’s speakers. Sam hid his face in his hands and flopped sideways onto the floor with another groan. His mama would be rolling in her grave.

“Before we get into today’s Spotlight film, we at the History Channel would like to acknowledge the rumors circulating the media today that Captain America was secretly an Omega. We have had multiple military strategists and World War II experts give their thoughts and all have agreed that such ideas are completely preposterous. There was no way that Captain America could have done any of the things he did if he were an Omega.”

“Can it, bozo,” Sam told the TV. Barton muted it.

“Has Rogers even said what he wants to do about this?” Maria asked the room.

“He doesn’t know,” Sam answered, sitting up again. “I’m not going to push him on it. The man’s spent the last couple of years under a microscope wearing nothing but propaganda, he deserves a bit more privacy.”

“What has Congress said?” Barton asked, his question aimed at Natasha.

“They’ve said that it’s a major issue,” Natasha said, sighing. “But I’ve said that they can go suck my metaphorical dick, so I think it’s been tabled for the moment. At least until the mess with S.H.I.E.L.D. is taken care of.”

“Good answer,” Barton said, kissing her cheek.
“What even is the media saying?” Sam asked. “I’ve been too worried over Steve to even check.”

Barton changed the channel, switching it to CNN. “– who are we supposed to trust now? S.H.I.E.L.D. was the top of the food chain for homeland security –”

“Not talking about Cap.” he said, changing the channel again to NBC.

“– despite reports that HYDRA was dismantled after the death of Dr. Johann Schmidt in 1945 –”

“Not talking about Cap.” The channel flipped to ABCNews. “Weather,” Barton huffed at the blue map and cheerful blonde pointing out expected thunderstorms. The TV switched to Fox.

“It’s a disgrace, is what it is,” Fox Newscaster Whatever announced. “We’ve been raising our kids to look up to this man, the brave, honorable Captain America, and all along, the whole thing’s a lie, the man’s a fraud. Can we even say for sure he’s a man? Who knows what Project Rebirth did –”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Sam cut off the newscaster. Barton turned the TV off completely. “God.”

“This is fucked up,” Barton said.

“So fucked up,” Sam muttered.

“I don’t know how he did it,” Maria said. “Pretended to be something he wasn’t for so long. People were so shitty back then, I don’t know how he could have gone from being treated one kind of shitty to the exact opposite in just a day.”

Sam thought back to the story Steve had told him, of the first night he and Barnes had together after he’d rescued him from the Azzano. Steve had gone from a clerk to a prostitute to the face of the war, and kept his eyes level the entire time.

“Guess it was just practice,” he said quietly.
“I don’t think I’d be able to do it,” Maria admitted. He looked over at her, found her staring at the blank TV screen. “Hell, I don’t know how actual Alphas lived through the war and came out okay sometimes.”

“That’s the thing,” Sam told her softly, “they didn’t.”

There was quiet for a while. Sam wondered if he heard faint creaking of bedsprings or if his head was making it up. Barton turned the TV back on and switched it back to Beetlejuice 2 before the audio could catch up with Fox News.

“Still a shitty movie,” Maria sighed.

“Better than shitty reality,” Barton said. Maria only grunted in agreement.

Sam rubbed at his eyes and looked around the steadily darkening room after a while. He snatched a pillow and blanket off of Barnes and Steve’s chair, fluffed the pillow and dropped onto his side, curling his legs up and draping the blanket over his body. Maria glanced at him, then pulled the end of the blanket over his feet before looking away. He settled his head onto the pillow and shut his eyes.

“You good there, Wilson?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah,” he answered, punching the pillow into a better shape. “Somebody’s getting gross feet juice all over my bed, so the floor’ll have to do.”

Barton laughed. Sam felt something ping off the back of his head and elected to ignore it.

A while later, something nudged at his feet until Sam lifted his head groggily. He squinted, heard the faint jingling of metal dog tags, then a rough tongue swept over his face.

“Lucky, don’t wake up Wilson,” Barton’s voice called.

Sam sat up and found the golden retriever standing in front of him looking at him adorably, tongue lolling out and ears perked. “Hey, doggo,” he mumbled, scratching the dog’s head.
“Her name’s Lucky,” Barton told him.

Sam flopped down again and patted the ground in front of him. Lucky lay down, putting her head on her paws, and looked at him with big, brown eyes.

“You remind me of Steve,” Sam told her, tangling a hand in her fur, then fell asleep again.

“Hey, Wilson, time to get up.”

Sam lifted his head, Lucky licked his face and he grimaced. “I don’t know where your mouth has been,” he told her gruffly.

Natasha prodded him in the knee with her foot again. “Come on.”

“What time is it?” Sam asked, sitting up and propping himself up on an elbow. He hissed at the stiffness in his shoulders and cracked his neck.

“About one in the morning.”

“Why are you waking me up? Is it to tell me to move to the couch? Better be to tell me to move to the couch.”

Natasha chuckled, giving him a wry smile. “‘Fraid not. Schedule’s been pushed forward, we’re wheels up in twenty.”

“I can get my ass into the car in twenty, then,” Sam mumbled, flopping down again and shifting onto his back.

“I need you to go get Barnes and Rogers up.”

Sam cracked one eye open to look at her. “Why me?” he asked gravely.
“Because I’m not convinced Barnes won’t pull a gun on me again if I disturb his Omega’s sleep,” Natasha quipped, then kicked him lightly in the knee again. “Now, get up and give me back my dog.”

Lucky jumped up off the ground and started licking Natasha’s hand. Sam felt very cold without the dog pressed against his side, and huffed in displeasure as he sat up again, rubbing at his eyes.

“How do we know he’s not gonna pull a gun on me?” he asked her as he pushed himself to his feet.

“He trusted you enough to leave Steve with you,” Natasha said blithely. “Come on, go wake them up. Clint wants to make coffee but Barnes will want to check it for tampering first.”

“I’m too asleep to tell if you’re being considerate or mocking, but you’d better be doing the former!” Sam called over his shoulder as he made his way for the stairs. He rubbed at the back of his neck and rolled out his shoulders, then knocked gently on the only closed door in the second floor. “Hey, it’s Sam.”

He waited. After a second, the door cracked, and Barnes stuck his head out. His hair was mussed and his eyes looked heavily lidded, like he had actually been sleeping, which was a good sign. He was also shirtless, and given that only one shoulder and his head exited the room – on second thought, Sam decided not to consider that. Sam kept his eyes fixed on Barnes’s sleepy ones and smiled politely.

“Natasha sent me to wake you guys up, we’re leaving ahead of schedule.”

“Why?” Barnes asked.

He sounded robotic again, but at least he was questioning their actions.

“You’ll have to ask her,” Sam said, then covered a yawn. “They’re gonna make some coffee once we’re all downstairs.”

Barnes gave a stiff nod and shut the door. Sam turned around and let out his breath, looking at but not seeing the opposite wall.
“Fucking hell,” he muttered under his breath and walked away again. He found Natasha, Maria, and Barton gathered in the kitchen, looking at a package of coffee sat on the counter like it was going to magically make itself.

“Why do we have to wait for Barnes?” Maria asked tiredly.

“So he can check for tampering,” Natasha insisted.

“There’s no tampering, I already checked,” Maria sighed, rubbing her eyes.

“We’re assuring Barnes that he’s safe here,” Natasha told her. “That means letting him check food for tampering.”

“Fine,” Maria said, dropping her hands and returning to staring at the coffee.

“They’re coming, by the way,” Sam said.

“How did they look?” Natasha asked.

“I only saw Barnes,” he told her. “Looked like he’d been sleeping.”

“That’s good,” she said.

Sam figured she really was trying to be considerate. He touched her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze before withdrawing his hand. Barton’s gaze flicked to him before flicking away, a reflex, Sam assumed.

A minute later, Barnes appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, Steve behind him and rubbing at his eyes with his fists like a 6’1” and beefy toddler.

“Make us some coffee, Rogers,” Natasha said, breaking away from the group huddled around the
counter to open the fridge. Barton stepped away and Maria hopped onto the edge of the sink, as if they hadn’t been waiting for them to walk in. Sam stepped aside so Steve could approach, Barnes on his heel. Barnes sent his gaze searching the room, flicking over the forms of all those gathered, the windows, the back door, before picking up the package of coffee and looking over it. Steve pulled the pot from the machine and began filling it with water from the tap while Barnes turned the package over in his hands.

“Why are we up earlier than planned?” Steve asked, pouring the water into the machine.

“Stark said there’s press gathering around the tower,” Natasha answered from inside the fridge. “It dissipated not long after dusk, so as long as we get there before dawn, we should be able to get in without any hassle from paparazzi.”

“Okay,” Steve said around a yawn. He held his hand out and Barnes set the package of coffee in his palm; Steve ripped it open carefully and poured the grounds into the filter of the machine.

“Hill, you couldn’t have bought anything other than sandwich materials, could you?” Natasha asked.

“Like what?”

“Like Poptarts.”

Maria scowled at Natasha’s ass sticking out of the fridge. “Poptarts are all sugar.”

“I like Poptarts,” Natasha said, finally retreating from the fridge holding a slice of cheddar cheese.

“We’ll get Poptarts later,” Barton told her.

Natasha huffed, broke the cheese in half and tossed one onto the floor. Sam frowned at it, then she whistled and he heard claws scraping the ground as Lucky came barrelling into the kitchen. Barnes jerked around, arm flying out to cover Steve, but he stopped at the sight of the dog. Lucky licked at the cheese, then managed to lift it off the floor and gobbled it down.

“She’s gonna fart all the way to New York if you feed her much more of that,” Barton said
dispassionately.

“I’m only giving her a little,” Natasha argued.

Steve touched Barnes’ shoulder and gave him a smile. Barnes frowned at the dog, then slowly lowered his arm. Steve laced their fingers together before returning to the coffee maker and waving a finger over the buttons.

“Power button, size of pot dial, classic brew button,” Natasha told him.

“Right,” Steve said.

Barnes glanced at the coffee maker. “Why’s it got so many buttons?” he asked. He had a bit of a Brooklyn accent again, another good sign.

“Who knows,” Steve said, finally getting the coffee maker to turn on and shifting to push his arm around Barnes’s waist. Barnes reciprocated by wrapping his arm around Steve’s shoulders, unsmiling. Sam dropped his gaze to Lucky, who was sitting patiently in front of Natasha and watching her eat her half of the cheese bit by bit. Newly bonded couples were always touchy, let alone newly bonded couples who had been separated for 70 years while one was repeatedly tortured and memory-wiped and the other was frozen in the Arctic.

“It’s a Ninja,” Natasha answered Barnes’s question. “You already had your piece,” she added to the dog.

“It’s not a ninja,” Barnes said, frowning, “it’s a coffee maker.”

“No, that’s the brand,” Natasha explained. “It’s a fancy coffee maker.”

“Why do you need fancy coffee makers?”

Natasha shrugged. “Cause I can.”
Barnes did not look convinced. “What are we waiting on?”

“What’s wrong with ham and cheese?” Maria grumbled.

“Everything,” Natasha said.

Sam turned to face the coffee maker, hoping that if he stared at it hard enough, it would brew faster.

“I like ham and cheese,” Barton said.

“You have poor taste,” Natasha assured him. She reached into the fridge and pulled out a bottle of Powerade, unscrewing the cap and drinking from it. Lucky wagged her tail. “No,” she repeated.

“If you’d stop feeding her out of the fridge, she’d stop begging,” Barton said with a roll of his eyes.

“Shut up,” Natasha grumbled.

“Brew,” Sam whispered to the coffee machine.

“I think Wilson is going mad.”

“How do we know he wasn’t like this before Cap picked him up?”

Sam wiggled his fingers at the coffee machine in hopes of making it go faster. He heard laughter and looked around, finding them all chuckling and smiling at him.

Even Barnes had crinkled the corners of his eyes, though he wasn’t smiling.
“If you go off the handle, just let us know,” he said evenly.

Sam screwed up his face disapprovingly and Barton and Maria laughed harder, Steve grinning at Barnes like he’d just cured cancer, Natasha rolling her eyes and handing Lucky another slice of cheese. He turned back to the coffee maker and wiggled the fingers of both hands at it.

It beeped and shut off.

Sam threw up his hands in victory as Maria and Barton cheered sarcastically, Natasha clapping slowly. Barnes tensed and the noise quietened, Sam grinned at Barnes in what he hoped was at least a little placating.

“Coffee,” he said happily.

“Definitely going nuts,” Steve said, smiling despite the way Barnes was still tense. He gave Barnes’s waist a squeeze and turned his smile on him. “People are just the same before coffee no matter where they are.”

“From D.C. to dinky beaches in Virginia,” Sam added their current location, catching Steve’s drift, lowering his arms slowly. He was still smiling at Barnes.

“This beach is the star of the state,” Natasha argued, calmly, though. “No one ever comes here, not even in summer months. Always deserted.”

“Yeah, because it’s not Virginia Beach,” Sam countered. Natasha rolled her eyes.

“Pass out cups, Barton,” she said, feeding Lucky more cheese. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Barton produced styrofoam cups that Barnes squinted suspiciously at for a second before accepting. They filled all six cups and there was one cup’s worth left over, which Natasha poured down the drain. A flicker went over Barnes’s face, but he said nothing. Sam went looking for some kind of cream and sugar, but apparently, spies all drank their coffee black because the closest he found to half-and-half in the fridge was mayonnaise. Natasha went around the house, unplugging every electronic while Barton loaded the remaining food in the fridge into a cooler before she unplugged
even the fridge. Sam’s bag was still in the van, he hadn’t brushed his teeth, now that he thought about it, and Barton’s stuff was in his truck already. Sam didn’t know how he hadn’t noticed the truck when they first arrived, then figured Barton had just moved it to right beside Maria’s minivan rather than he was completely blind.

“Barnes, Rogers, Wilson, you’re with Hill,” Natasha announced as they left the dark beach house. “Barton and I will be following from a moderate distance.”

Then she pulled from the back of Barton’s truck a sleek, metal case and held it out to Barnes. “I’ve got two,” she said.

Barnes propped the case on the hood of Maria’s van to open it up. He plucked from the molded packing material a wicked looking rifle, a fully automatic M4 carbine from the look of it. He checked over it, seemed to be satisfied because he grunted, and set it back in its case. Sam turned and found Natasha looking at him expectantly. He looked down and found her holding the butt of a Steyr TMP towards him.

“Right,” he said, taking it from her. “Are we expecting to get shot at?”

“Always expect to be shot at,” Natasha said blandly, handing two more pistols, twin Walther PP’s, to Barnes and a Glock to Steve. She didn’t give one to Maria, but Sam supposed Maria was already armed to the teeth. Sam tucked the gun into the back of his jeans, lifting his shirt to hide it.

“Let’s just hope we don’t get pulled over,” Sam sighed, “I don’t fancy being the next Michael Brown.”

Barnes frowned at him. “Never mind,” he said, getting into the car and adjusting the gun in his jeans. “Society updates later.”

“Meaning unclear,” he heard Barnes to Steve say as he shut his door. Sam let his head fall back against the back of his seat and blew his breath out heavily. Maria got into the car next to him, then Barnes and Rogers crawled into the back of the van. All the way in the back, but Sam supposed it was so they could continue constant touch without a gap between their seats. Barnes then pushed forward the seats in front of both him and Steve and laid the rifle case on the floor where they had been. Steve tucked his shield between the case and the middle seat, propping it up within reach.

Maria set her phone in a clip attached to an air vent and touched the BlueTooth in her ear. “All set,
Widow,” she said.

Sam couldn’t hear Natasha’s reply, but Maria turned the ignition and put the van in reverse.

“Can I turn on the radio?” Sam asked as they pulled onto asphalt again.

“In a bit,” she said distractedly.

“Radio would cause interference,” Barnes announced from the back. Sam couldn’t help but wince at his Robo-voice.

“In a bit,” Maria repeated, her tone level. Sam glanced in the rearview mirror and found Barnes expressionless, Steve tucked against his side. Steve was wearing the middle belt and turned sideways on the bench, his head on Barnes’s shoulder. He was also asleep. Already.

Barnes had his pistol sat on his thigh. His finger wasn’t on the trigger, and the safety was on, at least. Sam looked away.

The road was deserted, Maria’s headlights the only lights visible for miles as they left town. Eventually, they reached the highway and other cars and lights began to pick up in frequency. Sam felt a little better seeing other cars on the road; he’d been raised in the city, empty roads from horizon to horizon set his teeth on edge.

Maria lifted her phone off its stand, woke the screen and pressed her thumb to the home button without looking at it. Then she held it out to Sam.

“I don’t know any stations outside D.C.,” she said. “Play some music.”

Sam took the phone and found music. “Uh,” he said, looking at the pages of playlists, “what do you want to hear?”

“Just play the last thing,” Maria threw towards him, changing lanes.
The last thing played was Foreigner, in a playlist called – and he suppressed a snort – *bitch i will cut you*. He started the song from the beginning and set the phone back on its stand. He found an aux cable and plugged the phone into the car, the music playing over its speakers. He glanced at Barnes, but the Alpha was just looking out the window. Sam figured that as long as they didn’t disturb Steve, Barnes would probably remain in sentry mode or whatever he was doing. So he turned the volume down a little and adjusted the speakers so it wasn’t playing in the back.

Sam set his eyes back on the road and let the pre-dawn continuous scroll of dashed white lines and gray asphalt mesmerize him into a light daze.

“Who wants breakfast?”

Sam jolted up and shut his mouth with a snap. Maria raised her eyebrows at the road, though he assumed she meant to point them in his direction. He shook his head and rubbed at his eyes, looking around. The sun had risen by then; the sky was a pale blue and a periwinkle haze was cast over the highway.

“I could eat,” he decided. He wanted bagels.

“Barnes?” Maria called. “Cap?”

“Steve’s asleep still,” Barnes answered.

“You hungry?”

“Status, functional.”

Sam winced. Maria looked disturbed, too; she glanced at him and raised her eyebrows again. “I’ll get back to you in a minute, Widow,” she said, then looked at him expectantly. Sam sighed, then twisted around in his seat to face Barnes, who was expressionless and watching him.

“Let’s think of a couple more levels of status, okay?” he suggested gently. “Functional, that one’s gonna be level one. Uh, you are in no pain and can operate normally.”
Barnes blinked.

“Now, level two, that’s better,” Sam went on. “Level two’s gonna be, um, good. Status, good, that means that you are in no pain, no emotional distress, and all your physical needs are met.”

Barnes blinked again.

“Physical needs?” Sam prompted. “Hunger, thirst, hygiene, piss and shit?”

“Define hunger,” Barnes asked.

“Fucking hell,” Maria whispered.

“Oh, boy,” Sam exhaled. “Okay, so hunger is a physical sensation, right? Happens when you need to eat. Usually, it starts as like a mild rumbling sensation in your gut, in your stomach?”

Barnes nodded, frowning. At least he was making an expression.

“That’s kinda hungry,” Sam continued, “then sometimes it’ll feel like your stomach hurts, like a cramp. That’s pretty hungry. Usually, you eat before it gets any worse, it can take an hour or more depending on your metabolism. Then sometimes you’ll get nauseous, that’s usually because you’re really hungry.”

“Other symptoms?”

“Uh, sometimes dizziness?” Sam said. “Shakiness? ‘Cause it means you’ve got low blood sugar.”

“Define thirst.”

“Fucking hell,” Maria hissed again.
“It means you need to drink more water,” Sam explained, “your mouth will get dry, sometimes your throat if you go too long.”

Barnes frowned more. “How much water is required to remain functional?”

“Okay, wait a second, buddy,” Sam sighed. Barnes blinked while Sam downed the last of his long-cold coffee.

“The average adult needs to drink about seventy ounces of water every day to remain at optimum functioning,” Maria spoke before he could. “From what I’ve seen of Steve’s nutritional charts, he has to drink about a hundred and twenty a day, but he’s fine with just seventy. You’re probably about the same.”

“Importance?” Barnes asked.

“Water is one of the things vital to life, bud,” Sam said. “Literally up in there with the five requirements to life according to scientists.”

Barnes’s eyes flashed, but before Sam turned around he was calm again. “You okay there, pal?”

Barnes opened his mouth, then shut it and nodded. “Fine,” he said.

Sam let out a breath through his nose. “Okay. So, we got functional, that’s level one, we got good, that’s level two. Then there’s gonna be status happy, that’s level three. All your physical needs are met or exceeded, you are physically and emotionally comfortable, you feel safe, and you feel… happy.”

He waited for Barnes to say Define happy, but all he did was look at Steve.

“Level three is where you wanna be whenever possible,” Sam prompted.

“Status, good,” Barnes decided, still looking at Steve. Then he glanced back at Sam. “A little hungry?”
“There,” Sam said, smiling warmly at him. “That’s good, you’re making progress.”

“Progress?” Barnes repeated.

Sam tried not to wince; he shouldn’t have said that. “Uh, yeah. Progress to level three,” he said.

“You want me to tell Natasha we can stop to eat?” Maria asked.

“Where?” Barnes countered immediately.

“Don’t know yet, but we’re just eating the food from the safe house.”

Barnes relaxed a little. “Someplace with cover,” he said.

“Obviously,” Maria answered, then touched her BlueTooth. “Widow? Yeah, now’s good for food.”

They ended up at a rest stop, which Sam knew without having to look that Barnes wouldn’t feel safe in, but Barton brought the cooler to the van and started taking out food within its walls rather than leading them to a picnic table in the distance. Natasha got in the other side of the van, sitting down on the rifle case and looking to Barnes and Steve. For a second, Sam thought she was going to reach out and jostle Steve awake, but she kept her hands to herself.

“Wake him up so we can eat,” she said, pointing to Steve. A good call, Sam thought. Barnes was probably too much on edge for anyone to touch Steve in front of him uninvited.

Barnes looked at Steve, then at her, and frowned. “He needs sleep?” he said, his voice a little confused.

“It’s fine,” Natasha told him, “he can go back to sleep after he’s eaten if he wants to.”

Barnes looked like he didn’t quite believe her, but he set his hand on Steve’s shoulder and shook it
gently. Steve shifted, but only to press his face into the crook of Barnes’s shoulder. It was his left
one, the one made of metal, and Sam had to wonder if that was comfortable. It was also damn cute.
Barnes looked positively snuggly with Steve curled into his side, despite the fact that he still had his
Walther PP on his lap and was, well, the most dangerous assassin in the history of assassins. At least,
Sam understood then why Bucky Bears had become so popular during World War II.

“Wake up, Stevie,” Barnes murmured.

Sam flicked his eyes to Barnes’s face. His voice was abruptly very tender, very different from the
Robo-voice they’d been dealing with since Steve had fallen asleep.

Steve lifted his head and blinked a few times. He glanced at Barnes, then at the ground with a
furrowed brow and the slightest of frowns curling the corners of his lips. Barnes lifted a hand and
knocked a finger against the underside of Steve’s chin; Steve looked back up at him with big eyes
and lips slightly parted. Sam suppressed the urge to aww at the way Barnes was suddenly smiling at
him and how much Steve resembled his three-year-old niece post-nap. He did smile, though. It was
cute, dammit.

“Morning, dollface,” Barnes said. He had the accent back and everything, half dropping the g of
morning and softening the vowels; Sam’s theory was looking to be true; dealing with Steve was like
muscle memory to Barnes. He didn’t need to think about what to say or how to say it, he just did it.

“Hi,” Steve mumbled back, a slow smile taking over his face. He looked around, then, seemingly
realizing that everyone in the van was looking at them. He turned pink.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” Natasha said cheerily. “We have breakfast.”

Barton popped the lid of the cooler. “Still just ham and cheese and beef jerky. With Powerade or kale
juice.”

“You don’t even like kale,” Natasha sighed at him.

“I’ll admit, I bought it by accident,” Barton said, then handed her a Powerade. “What can I get the
super soldiers?”

Sam flicked his eyes back to Barnes, watching to see if the word soldier triggered anything like the
word scientist did. Barnes made no reaction, though, as Steve sat up more, with Barnes’s arm still wrapped securely around his massive shoulders, and Barton pulled out a bottle of thick, green sludge. He shook it experimentally. Particulates clung to the inside of the bottle as the liquid sloshed.

“I can pitch it,” he said thoughtfully.

“How did you buy kale juice by accident when you only got beef jerky and Powerade with it?” Maria asked incredulously.

“I thought it was a different juice!” Barton defended himself. “The same brand makes this stuff called Green Machine, but it’s more like apple-orange-kiwi juice with a hint of spinach and alfalfa. This stuff is just kale.”

“Both of those sound terrible,” Maria said.

“Green Machine is actually good,” Barton said as Natasha dug bread, cheese, and mustard out of the cooler.

“Come make a sandwich,” she told the collective car. “We have to get back on the road in less than twenty minutes.”

Sam carefully squirmed his way towards the middle of the van to dig through the cooler himself. His choices were ham with cheddar or ham with swiss. He didn’t like ham, cheddar, or swiss, so he pulled out a pack of beef jerky. He should have actually gone into the store with Maria instead of staying in the van to watch for suspicious activity, just to prevent her from buying only ham, swiss, and cheddar.

“My man,” Barton said happily, ripping into his own beef jerky.

Steve pulled out a third bag of jerky and opened it before wrinkling his nose. “Smells like C-Rations,” he grumbled.

“C-Rations weren’t that bad,” Barnes said, reaching into the bag and pulling out a strip of jerky to begin gnawing on it. “Not if you covered ‘em in Tabasco.”
“I hate Tabasco,” Steve countered, muttering.

Barnes flicked a finger under Steve’s chin again, the corners of his eyes crinkling. Steve rolled his eyes, but he was smiling widely and gave him the jerky to make a sandwich. Sam looked at his own jerky and realized that MREs, which used to be called C-Rations, had probably decreased in quality since World War II if a splash of Tabasco could improve them. Then he bit off a piece and started chewing intently. Natasha handed the sandwich she’d been making over to Maria, before starting on another. He dug in the cooler again before pulling out a bottle of Powerade and opening it to wash down the jerky.

Barton opened his mouth to stick a strip of jerky in it and Natasha said darkly: “I’m not going near your mouth for a week if you eat that.”

Barton scowled and shoved the jerky into its bag. “I hate you,” he said blandly.

Barnes whispered something to Steve, who chuckled and shook his head. Natasha only plucked the bag of jerky from Barton’s hands and tossed into Sam’s lap.

“I hate beef jerky,” she said happily, and handed him a sandwich.

“I changed my mind, I hate ham,” Barton mumbled unhappily and bit into it.

Barnes looked confused. Sam shrugged and continued to chew on his jerky. He had no clue what Barnes was confused by or how to explain it. Steve was awake, too, so he could explain things to his confused super assassin. That’s what bondmates were for, or so Sam had been told.

“Hey, Hill, you got something a little more upbeat than Fall Out Boy?” Barton asked.

“Fuck you,” Maria said with her mouth full.

Sam reached back and skipped the song. Maria made a distressed noise and slapped his wrist with mustardy fingers.

“Hey!” he protested, then had to lick the mustard off because he didn’t have a napkin.
“Don’t change my music!” Maria snapped.

“It’s depressing Fall Out Boy!”

“It’s From Under the Cork Tree!”

“It’s depressed-era Fall Out Boy,” Barton repeated.

“Alone out in Saint-Tropez, Lookin’ as fine as a damn Monet, Tryna hydrate on Perrier, Everybody thirsty, drinks on me,” the new song… sang. Sam had to work on his narrative thoughts.

“What the hell is this?” Barton asked incredulously.

“It’s a song,” Maria said, reaching for her phone. Sam snatched it away and jammed it under her seat. “Hey!”

“I don’t give a damn what you say to me, There ain't no time for games with me.”

“I’m pretty sure this is pop,” Natasha said.

“She’s got poetic lyrics,” Maria said defensively. She yanked her phone out from under the seat, getting mustard on the floor, and skipped the rest of the song. David Bowie replaced it, and Maria shoved the phone under her thigh, giving Sam a dirty look. “Last time I let you pick the music.”

Sam rolled his eyes. Maria shoved the last of her sandwich into her mouth and turned to face the front of the car, scowling. He returned to his jerky, contemplating it. There were probably vending machines inside the rest center. He could go for some Poptarts.

“I’ll be back,” he said, dropping the jerky back into the cooler.

“Where are you going?”
The question, surprisingly, came from Barnes, who was expressionless as Sam opened his door.

“Vending machines,” he said, looking at him in the mirror.

Barnes said nothing more, and Sam slid out of the minivan occupied by spies and super soldiers. He let out his breath, and started for the visitor center.

After using the mens’ room, he found the vending machines, but there were no Poptarts. Natasha would probably be disappointed, or not, now that he thought about it. He did find bottles of Starbucks, and got six. There were also granola bars, which he knew would probably do nothing for Barnes or Steve, but might be a nice addition to the ham and cheese sandwiches and beef jerky. He got all of the granola bars, which was a grand total of nine.

Returning to the car, he found that Barton had put away the cooler and Natasha had vanished, as had Lucky. Maria was just getting back in the van, as were Barnes and Rogers, from using the bathrooms, he assumed. Sam made a vague gesture with his loaded arms to Barton, who walked closer and pulled three of the bottles from his arms.

“Thanks,” Barton said.

“No problem, man,” Sam answered as they approached the van again. Sam dumped the granola bars and coffee bottles onto the carpet in front of the M4 carbine case. It was a good thing that it was barely five, otherwise passers-by would definitely be suspicious of the long, thin case.

“Take your pick,” Sam announced.

Maria stuck her hand out. He set a coffee in it while Barnes picked up a bottle and squinted at it distrustingly.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Coffee,” Sam told him.
Barnes shook it, then flipped it over to squint more at the bottom, flipped it again to squint at the seal. “Where did you get it?”

“Vending machine,” he repeated.

“From the same slots?”

“Nah,” Sam answered, “there were three, I got three from one, two from another, one from the third.”

This seemed to please Barnes, or at least not displease him, because he opened the seal, screwed off the lid, and took a cautious sip. He wrinkled his nose.

“Wait, is it –”

“This isn’t coffee,” Barnes interrupted before Sam could properly panic that he had, in fact, bought poisoned Starbucks. “This is…? I don’t even know?”

Steve plucked the bottle from his hands. “Don’t be picky with your caffeine,” he said, sipping from it as well.

“I’ll be picky if I want, pal,” Barnes grumbled, snatching up a granola bar and repeating the inspection. Sam opened a bottle himself and took a large swig. Ah, sweet sugar, he thought, smacking his lips satisfactorily.

Barton snagged two bars and bottles, clapped Sam on the back, and returned to his truck. Sam glanced over his shoulder and spotted Natasha approaching with Lucky walking at her side, leash held in her mouth. The dog was walking herself, and obediently keeping close to Natasha’s side. The dog didn’t even turn when another dog, some kind of Pomeranian, barked from down the sidewalk. Natasha opened the passenger door and snapped her fingers, then Lucky jumped up into the car and climbed into the back, followed by the woman herself. Sam turned back and shut the sliding door of the van before getting back into the passenger seat and buckling his seat belt.

“All set?” Maria asked her BlueTooth. Then she gave a nod and turned the ignition. Sam settled back in his seat, eyes on the road, while they pulled out of the rest stop and back onto the highway.
“So, where are we right now?” he asked.

“A half hour to the New York border,” Maria answered. “So you can go back to sleep, Rogers.”

“Ha,” Steve said dryly from the back.

Sam glanced back at them, then asked Barnes: “Wanna give me a status update, bud?”

“Good,” Barnes answered immediately, flatly, but at least he was using the new status comfortably. Sam thought. Steve glanced at him, then at Sam, a small smile curling his lips.

“Good,” Steve said happily. He leaned in and kissed Barnes’s cheek.

Slowly, and all the while maintaining a neutral expression with just a hint of murderous intent, Barnes turned pink. Sam smiled and turned back around quickly to cover his mouth to keep himself from laughing.


**[Genesis 1:26-28, King James Version]**

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; Alpha and Omega created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth…”


**[Genesis 1:26-28, English Standard Version]**

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; Alpha and Omega he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over
And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth." And God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; Alpha and Omega He created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth."


"Where every copy of Genesis, or Bereishit in the Torah, does not even mention Betas let alone male Omegas and female Alphas, the Dead Sea Bible says in chapter one of Genesis: “Let us make humans in our image... Alphas, male and female, Betas, male and female, Omegas, male and female, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea…”"

(Article banned in Christian private schools, Texas public schools, and denounced by Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. No official comment from the Vatican.)

Hill eventually gave Wilson back her phone so he could skip the songs she didn’t want to hear. Steve curled up on the bench again, his back pressed to Bucky’s side, but remained alert. Bucky was staring at the rearview mirror, intent and his hand clenched around the gun Natasha had given him. Then Steve lifted Bucky’s left hand off the bench and laced it with the fingers of his right, pressing a gentle kiss to the inside of his wrist. Bucky glanced at him, then away, a corner of his mouth lifting a little. His hand remained tight on the gun, but the stiffness in his chest dropped.

Wilson kept the music quiet. Hill said their eta was around seven, and the next two hours slipped by evenly, leaving the highway and entering Manhattan at 6:48. Bucky watched the road, watching the nearby drivers, his attention caught by every jaywalker and shouting food vendor. For a brief second, he saw the exact same street, or maybe a slightly different one, cars that looked much older, people dressed different but still the same. The image was made of maybe ten memories or maybe fifteen or maybe only two, because he saw a teenager in a newsboy cap hurting around a corner carrying a
bag full of newspapers next to an adult with dreadlocks and holding a massive stereo on his shoulders. He couldn’t pick it apart, because it was gone just as soon as it came.

Hill kept the car to backstreets, fortunately. Barton’s truck followed a little closer by then, as they took turns and slowed for red lights. As they neared Stark Tower, the bustle grew, but before it could really reach the streets themselves, Hill was pulling into the parking garage of Stark Tower.

They stopped at a gate and Hill rolled down her window to speak with the guard. She flashed a badge and he gave her a keycard, then the gate lifted and they rolled forward. Bucky kept his eye on Barton’s truck in the rearview mirror, until the guard gave a similar keycard to Barton and the gate lifted again. Hill drove the car in gentle turns up the levels of the garage, up several floors until they reached a solid, steel wall blocking the next turn. Hill inserted the keycard into a machine, which ate it, and the wall parted in the middle and opened. When the door shut behind Barton’s truck, some of the tension began to bleed out of Bucky’s back and shoulders with the solid door keeping out outsiders.

Hill parked the van and killed the engine, getting out and pocketing her keys. Wilson released his seatbelt and got out while Steve swung his legs off the bench and shifted to face forward. He reached forward and opened the sliding door, shuffling forward with his spine bent in half to get out. Bucky shifted forward, then to the side as his lips curled on their own, in what he remembered was called a smirk, at the excellent view he was getting of Steve’s ass. You could bounce a quarter off that ass. Perhaps he’d tried it before. He’d definitely have to try it again, if the occasion arose.

“Mi amigos!” a voice called, echoing through the garage, and Steve looked up. Bucky tilted his head to the side, abruptly remembering bending Steve over a desk and fucking him through six or seven orgasms. He had no clue when he’d done it or even if it had happened more than once, but thinking about it, he’d like to try it again. If Steve wanted. If he didn’t hurt him again. The pleasant memory faded.

He didn’t like the numb feeling that was taking over him. Steve had said non-physical pain was consequential, though he had been speaking of panic, something told him that this sensation was included. Another time, he might have tapped Steve on the ass, just to get him to blush. Such actions would be nonsensical.

But his hand lifted on its own volition and smacked Steve’s beautiful ass anyway. Steve jerked and glanced over his shoulders, that gorgeous blush rising to his cheeks and Bucky’s lips curved into a wide smile. The numb feeling was going away.

“Who’s bein’ slow now?” he asked smugly.
Steve’s blush deepened – he saw it a thousand times, flashing before his eyes, a thousand trains of thought rambled over why and half were just giddy delight that he’d caused such a beautiful thing – and Steve raised a scolding finger in his direction. “Behave,” he said, though he didn’t mean it. Bucky wasn’t sure if he knew that Steve didn’t mean it through the bond or just because somewhere in his brain, he knew Steve that well.

“Aw, but Stevie,” Bucky faux-whined. That was familiar. He’d said that a thousand times before. Steve rolled his eyes right back and turned around again. Bucky smirked and slapped him lightly on the ass again.

Steve shot him a look that he still didn’t mean and clambered out, immediately raising his arms over his head to stretch. Bucky crawled out behind him as Steve grimaced and his spine popped, and he set a hand at the small of his back, his light demeanor dropping quickly as he scanned the garage. The massive doors were shut firmly, but a single elevator and stair entrance occupied the far wall. He took a cautious sniff and scowled.

“Stinks like exhaust,” Bucky grumbled to himself. It didn’t really stink, but it was enough that he couldn’t smell Barton or, and his eyes jerked to the new man, the person he guessed was Tony Stark. He stood near them, with three meters between them. He was dressed in grime-covered clothes that allowed no protection from weaponry of any kind, his feet were bare, sunglasses covered his eyes and a welding mask covered his hair. He knew it was a welding mask because he had used them; before the war and before being drafted, he’d worked in as a welder in a factory making cars, trucks, and later tanks for the Allied Forces overseas. He had only just remembered that.

Looking at Stark, though, somehow his mustache was familiar. Bucky disliked not remembering where he’d seen the mustache before. He was pretty sure he’d never been assigned to do anything to Stark, otherwise he would be dead. The mustache was annoying him.

“Who are these guys again?” Stark asked, pointing to Wilson and then Bucky.

“Sam Wilson, ex-pararescue out of the 58th,” Steve answered. “And Bucky.”

Bucky glared firmly at Stark as he walked closer, then bent at the waist and squinted behind his sunglasses at Bucky’s metal hand sticking out of his sleeve. His fingers itched to level his gun at Stark’s nose, but Stark was supposed to be an ally. Shooting him would be counterproductive, he needed Stark alive to make sure Steve was secure.

Bucky stepped between Stark and Steve, tucking his hand behind his back and scowling at him hard. Shooting would be detrimental to his goals, he reminded himself.

“Okay, kid’s shy,” Stark went on. “We’ll play some icebreaker games and then I’d love to have a look at that arm, robotics are, like, my specialty.”

Bucky felt the urge to bare his teeth and tell Stark to fuck off, then Steve set a hand on his shoulder.

“Stark’s just trying to be friendly,” he said softly. “In his own way.”

Bucky realized he had flicked the safety off on his pistol. He flicked it back on and stuck it into the back of his jeans with the other pistol, still scowling at Stark. He said to Stark, firmly, “No.”

“Eh, fine,” Stark said with a shrug. He turned to Romanoff, Barton, and Hill and held up his arms. “Hugs?”

Hill and Romanoff both raised their left eyebrows.

“Clint?” Stark offered, tilting his head.

Barton rolled his eyes, but took the hug from Stark. “Good to see you,” he said.

“Good to see you, too, glad you’re not dead,” Stark said, clapping him on the shoulder. He glanced back over the rest of them, then pushed his sunglasses up to join the welding mask. “Right, let’s get this show on the road.”

“Show?” Steve repeated.

“Grand tour,” Stark answered, stepping back and spreading his arms again. “Starting with my private garage. Glory of all glories. Well, one of many glories of all glories. I have a lot of glories. Those keycards you used to get in were one use only, they got shredded once the machine read them and the doors opened.”
Bucky glanced back at the doors, examining them, then back at Stark, still calculating a risk assessment. Steve didn’t like Stark, he knew that, and if Stark’s security wasn’t satisfactory, he’d have to find someplace else for Steve to stay until HYDRA was taken care of.

“They’re ten inches thick, steel reinforced concrete, not even a tank could get through ‘em. Maybe the Hulk. I installed them prior to adopting Bruce.”

Hulk, real name Banner, Robert Bruce, Beta, victim of failed attempt to replicate Project Rebirth through use of Gamma radiation. The Hulk was a massive beast of incredible strength and little thought. He would be difficult to take down, but Bucky would do it if Steve was threatened.

Thinking, Bucky realized he didn’t know how he knew any of that.

Then Stark tapped his chin, as though considering something. “I’ll have to check that,” he muttered.

“What would Pepper say?” Hill asked dryly. Bucky didn’t know who Pepper was. He had been informed of the presence of Iron Man, also called Stark, Anthony Edward, Thor, alien being from Norse Mythology, the Hulk, Hawkeye, also called Barton, Clint, middle name unknown, and Black Widow, Romanoff, Natalia Alianovna. He needed to identify this Pepper.

“Probably no,” Stark answered, still tapping his chin. “Which means I definitely should check that.”

Hill sighed and covered her eyes with a hand.

“Anyway, personal garage, you guys will get real access cards later that aren’t one-use, don’t touch my baby,” Stark added as he turned around, pointing to a cherry red Mustang parked nearby. “Rogers, your baby is right there,” he added a second time, pointing to a motorcycle parked on the other side.

Bucky raised his eyebrows at Steve, who turned a little pink again.

“Private floors are seventy-three through ninety-one,” Stark was saying as he neared the elevator, the others were walking as well, and Steve took his arm and gave it a light tug to get him moving. “We’re around floor forty right now.”
“Are there floors above ninety-one?” Bucky asked.

“He speaks!” Stark said instead of answering him.

Bucky crossed his arms over his chest. Steve wormed his hand through the crook of his elbow anyway.

“No, there aren’t,” Stark answered finally, tapping the call button three times in five seconds. Potential OCD, given the fine layer of grime over his person, it was non-germ or mess related. Or childishness. “Would you like a floorplan of the building?”

His tone was sarcastic, but Bucky said yes anyway. Stark raised an eyebrow. The elevator opened and Stark entered it, saying as he did: “Floor eighty-two, JARVIS, and please have someone print out a floor plan for Roger’s pet assassin.”

Bucky wasn’t sure if he should be offended or amused. He didn’t actually remember what amused meant. He settled for glaring at Stark, who ignored him.

“Don’t call him that,” Steve snapped.

“Pet cyborg,” Stark answered.

“He’s not my pet,” Steve insisted. “He’s my Alpha.”

Stark blinked at him twice. “Cyborg boyfriend,” he said finally.

Steve sighed and covered his face with a hand. Bucky still wasn’t sure if he should be offended or amused, and on top of that, he wasn’t sure if Steve should have said that Bucky was his Alpha in front of Stark so casually. He remembered having to keep his mouth shut and a fake smile on his lips instead of a deep scowl while pretending to just be Steve’s brother-in-arms, but he wasn’t positive why. He opened his mouth to ask Steve, then glanced at Stark and shut it again. Stark was an outsider still, he couldn’t expose the gaps in his understanding of… whatever he was, whatever, in front of Stark.
“Oh, and JARVIS, introduce yourself to the new guys.”

A soft chime came from above them; Bucky jerked his head up and looked for speakers, a camera, finding just the speakers.

“Good morning,” the speakers said. “I am JARVIS, an artificially intelligent system tasked with the running of Stark Tower and assistance to its inhabitants.”

“Do you do surveillance?” Bucky asked automatically. He was still looking for cameras.

“Yes, sir.”

Bucky blinked. He was positive he had never been sincerely addressed as sir ever, even with the memory gaps.

“He’s got cameras on the public floors, but on private floors, surveillance is done through heat signatures,” Stark told him. “The vents have pressure detectors in them on every floor, and the camera is right here.”

Stark pointed to a small, raised glass dome by the doors where a control panel ought to have been, but only an emergency brake and call button were located. Bucky should have seen it there earlier.

“All the elevators and stairs have cameras, no blind spots,” he added, then looked at him with a flat expression. “So make sure you keep it in your pants until you’re someplace without a camera.”

Steve glared alongside Bucky at that.

“What do you do with the footage?” Bucky asked instead of addressing his comment.

“It’s deleted after 72 hours if it’s unimportant,” Stark answered blithely. “JARVIS, being an AI instead of a person, can monitor every nook and cranny of the Tower at every second, can catch a fruit fly out of place in less than a millisecond.”
Bucky wasn’t sure if he was bragging or being serious.

The elevator doors opened and Stark stepped out. “This is the common floor,” he announced, spreading his arms again and turning around to face them as they all exited the elevator. Bucky scanned the room, empty of persons visible and by scent, there were doors leading elsewhere from the room but all were closed. In the corner, there was the entrance to the stairs with no window.

“Kitchen, massive formal and semi-formal dining room, game room, movie room that for some reason we never use, gym with literally all equipment that can possible be fitted into a gym including an arm wrestling machine, indoor pool and hot tub, some more stuff I’m sure I’m forgetting.”

“I like the sound of that,” Wilson murmured.

“This is the kitchen and living room,” Tony said, waving around the room. “There’s a separate theater and game room, like I said, but there’s TV and all the consoles worth having in here, as well.”

He frowned after that. “I think there’s a library, too?”

“You’ll like that,” Bucky said softly to Steve, who smiled at him and threaded his hand through the crook of Bucky’s crossed arms again. Bucky dropped the stance and let Steve curl around his arm.

“Anyway, my lab is right above here, so if you hear muffled explosions at any given time of day, ignore them, and then it’s mine and Pepper’s apartment above that, oh, and the helipad is above our heads, so the floors get cut in half or whatever by square footage from eighty-three to ninety-one. Below floor eighty-two is other apartments and stuff, for Stark employees, eighty-one is medical, though. There’s eight half floor apartments above me and Pep, Thor has one, Bruce has another, Wilson, you’ll be Bruce’s neighbor. Then, above them, there are three full apartments, Clint and Natasha have the first, Rogers, you and your cyborg boyfriend have the top floor.”

Stark clapped his hands together. “That’s the rundown, basically.”

“Wait, are there just a bunch of empty apartments?” Wilson asked.
“Sorta,” Stark answered, “one’s my buddy Rhodey’s, but he lives over in DC, one of them is just like a guest apartment, which Miss Hill here has appropriated –”

“Pepper offered it to me,” Hill said, rolling her eyes.

“– other than that,” Stark continued, ignoring Hill apparently, “there’s three half floors and one full floor, the one between the Rogers and the Master Assassin duo.”

He made a vague gesture to Barton and Romanoff. “Though, now we have an additional master assassin.”

“Stark,” Steve sighed heavily, “quit calling him that –”

“It’s fine,” Bucky said gruffly. Steve looked at him, brow furrowed.

“Anyway, shall I show you guys the tennis courts or do you want to see your apartments?”

Bucky had little desire to see tennis courts or swimming pools or libraries. He needed to scope out the area, do a bug sweep, look for evidence that Stark might actually be planning to assassinate Steve himself, and a dozen other things before his checklist would even be half completed and he could deem Stark Tower safe. But Steve was following the group following Tony, so he’d have to search for HYDRA or S.H.I.E.L.D. emblems and listening devices later. Once Steve fell asleep, probably. He’d have to sweep their apartment first, take it top-down.

There was, in fact, a library through the door Stark began with. When they walked in, they entered on the second floor of the library, on the east wall, there were massive floor to ceiling windows that provided excellent sightlines to half of both levels. Bucky glared at them. He hated windows.

“Now, those beauties are five inches thick, bulletproof, and they’ve got these tiny little lasers across every inch that set off JARVIS’s alarms if they’re disturbed,” Stark announced.

Bucky glared a little less. He approached a window and peered at the bottom hem of it. There were dozens of pinpricks of light lining all the edges.
“Every window in this tower is designed like that,” Stark went on, not even looking at Bucky, “because I am paranoid and unashamed to admit it.”

“You have had multiple attempts on your life,” Wilson agreed.

Stark pointed to him. “I like you. I’m keeping you.”

Wilson spluttered vaguely and Bucky stepped away from the window, putting himself between it and Steve. It may have been bulletproof, but it was still a window, people could see through it. Stark waved a hand at them and walked back into the room they’d just left, continuing his speech.

“The first level of the library connects to the medical floor, the private medical floor, mind, there’s a free clinic on floors twenty to twenty-five that’s open to the public and employees, PR and all, Pepper’s idea.”

“What keeps anyone from just coming up here?” Bucky interrupted, looking back at the first level of the library.

“This tower has security like the Pentagon’s wet dreams,” Stark answered blithely. Bucky flicked his narrowed eyes to him. “Every floor is connected by elevators and stairs, sure, but the stair entrances and elevators are all locked by biometric scanners, all the stairwells are sealed floor-by-floor, and past floor sixty, there’s only one elevator shaft. The public floors require just facial clearance and fingerprints, which visitors have to give at reception, and general visitor’s clearance is revoked routinely after twenty-four hours, but above floor thirty-five, the floors require facial, fingerprint, and retinal scans to get into them.”

Stark snapped his fingers and pointed at him abruptly. “And, JARVIS knows if the eyeball being scanned is a real physical eyeball and in the head it’s supposed to be in. If it is not, in fact, both physically there and in the correct head, alarms go off, JARVIS detains the creep by locking down the elevator or stairwell.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow. “That’s good,” he muttered. It seemed a very specific detail to ensure was taken care of and that meant it was probably from experience, but at least Stark didn’t cut corners.

“Like I said, JARVIS can pick out a fruit fly in the wrong room and I’m paranoid. I tolerate no shit in my house.”
“It’s a skyscraper, not a house,” Wilson muttered.

“Whatever,” Stark said with another wave of his hand.

“What about staff?” Bucky pressed. “Who has clearance to these floors?”

“Good question,” Stark said, “at this very moment, eight people have clearance to get into floor eighty-one and above.”

Bucky frowned heavily, then did a quick head count. Including Stark, there were seven of them standing in the room, and with the others reported to live above eighty-one, it made eleven.

“Wait, what?” Steve said, understanding the same thing.

“You, Birdman number two, and your cyborg boyfriend don’t actually have clearance yet,” Stark said, ticking them off on his fingers. “I overrode the protocol to let you up here on facial clearance alone, but after twenty-four hours, that clearance will be revoked. So, I’m gonna need you to let me scan your palms and eyeballs soon.”

“What about medical?” Wilson asked.

“In case of emergency, JARVIS brings in whatever doctors or nurses needed based on a pre-vetted list and grants them the same temporary clearance.”

“There’s no staff?” Bucky tried to clarify.

“No carbon-based organic staff,” Stark said.

Bucky glanced at Steve. Was this another thing that people did that he did not understand?

“Robots,” Romanoff said abruptly.
“You have robot staff,” Wilson echoed, with a touch of awe. Bucky thought it was awe. It could have been a yawn.

“Duh,” said Stark. Then he whistled. “Shitcan! Report for duty!”

Bucky heard a faint mechanical whirring and jerked around, trying to find the source. When he didn’t see it, he looked up, then down. A small, mechanical object, perhaps two feet tall, on track wheels was slowly maneuvering its way around a kitchen counter towards them. It resembled a child’s stick figure attempt at a robot, with two-pronged claws for hands, thin aluminum piping for arms, and a mess of gears and wires for a torso. It had a face, which was a slightly unsettlingly attempt at human features.

“This is Shitcan,” Stark continued as it neared them, “one of my earlier robots, named Shitcan because he’s a shitcan. Never had the heart to throw him out.”

Shitcan collided with Stark’s leg and the man hopped onto the other foot with a squeak of pain. “Case in point,” he grumbled.

“Your skyscraper is staffed by shitty robots,” Wilson muttered.

“Most of them are not shitty,” Stark clarified, jabbing a finger in Wilson’s direction. “Shitcan is shitty.”

“No maids?” Bucky asked. “Housekeepers, butlers, cooks?”

“I have robots,” Stark answered, as if that explained everything. “And JARVIS.”

The ceiling chimed. “I am always happy to be of service,” the polite, British computer program announced.

“Robots don’t do the cooking, right?” Wilson asked abruptly.

“Delivery boys do the cooking.” Stark said. “My diet is exclusively takeout.”
“Which some of us are trying to amend,” a woman’s voice announced.

Bucky snapped to attention to find the woman; she was walking in from another room they hadn’t toured yet. Female, Omega, approximately 5’9”, slender physique, upright and stiff posture indicated potential back or neck pain, muscular or joint, slight creases at the corners of her eyes indicated her age to be approximately 45, faint, horizontal, white lines in her fingernails indicated the possibility of iron deficiency –

“I’m fine, Buck, quit your fussing –”

“Steve, your ma said you gotta take it easy, iron deficiency can lead to anemia –”

“I’m just dizzy!”

“And your heart’s not beating funny, right?”

“How’d you know?”

“Just let me carry your books, alright? Until you can walk straight again, at least.”

“I said I’m fine, Buck – Hey! Give ‘em back!”

“When you’re not dizzy, sweetheart.”

“I’m fine, and don’t call me that!”

“Relax, would ya, Rogers?”

“Bucky?” Steve murmured in his ear. “You okay?”
“Functional,” he answered automatically.

Steve gave a light tug on his arm, then pulled it around his waist and curled his own arm around Bucky, who had, and only realized after the stiffness in his shoulders and spine began to bleed away, gone tense.

“This is Pepper, my Omega,” Stark was saying. “Probably the only reason I haven’t accidentally died of sleep deprivation or malnutrition.”

“It’s lovely to meet you, Mr. Barnes, Mr. Wilson,” Pepper said, nodding to them and thankfully not extending her hand to shake. She smiled politely, no trace of nervousness in her posture or smile, her weight primarily on her left foot, possible injury past or present to her right side.

Bucky forced himself to stop evaluating her like a target. She was meant to be an ally. Steve squeezed his hip gently.

“Anyway, takeout food is a perfectly good diet.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Takeout is not an acceptable exclusive diet.”

“Says you, you drink your breakfast.”

“And it’s a healthy blend of proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins and sugars.”

“You still drink it, and it’s still green.”

“It has spinach in it, Tony.”

“It’s green.”

“Spinach is high in iron,” Bucky said without thinking. “She’s iron deficient.”
Pepper tilted her head at him, while Stark frowned and Steve looked at him with an expression Bucky didn’t remember the meaning of.

“How did you know?” Pepper asked.

He pointed to her nails. “The lines.”

“Was identifying iron deficiency part of HYDRA’s programming?” Stark asked.

“Stark,” Steve snapped.

“Steve was iron deficient,” Bucky answered. “Same nails.”

“You were iron deficient?” Stark asked at the same time as Steve lit up with a smile and said: “You remember that?”

Bucky gave a short nod. “You got dizzy walking to school. I carried your books, ‘cause you wouldn’t let me carry you.”

“Wait, since when were you iron deficient?” Stark pressed while Steve rolled his eyes.

“I didn’t need to be carried,” he insisted.

“You could barely walk straight,” Bucky said. He remembered more of it then. “Got worse in the summer. Then, winter had your joints hurting after the rheumatic fever. Why didn’t I carry you everywhere?”

It was a genuine question. It made no sense that he had let Steve walk when he could have carried him with ease and relieved any kind of discomfort or pain in his Omega.

“I didn’t need to be carried,” Steve repeated, “I wasn’t helpless.”
“I still could have carried you,” Bucky said. “I do not understand. We take care of each other?”

Steve glanced out of the corner of his eye to those standing around them and Bucky abruptly realized that this was not a conversation they should be having in front of others. He dropped his gaze to the floor, frowning still.

“Never mind,” he said.


“Back to the iron deficiency,” Stark said. “What?”

“It was pretty common,” Steve answered finally. “Made a lot more sense after I presented, sure, but it was still common among the Irish kids.”

“What else are the history books neglecting to say?” Stark asked, half scoffing.

Steve smiled tightly. Bucky didn’t know what the history books said. He’d have to look it up later.

“There are a lot of things that weren’t mentioned,” Steve said instead of whatever he actually wanted to say.

“Right,” Stark said with a shake of his head. Then he frowned again. “Wait, how does your cyborg boyfriend even know that? You didn’t meet until after the serum.”

“No, we didn’t,” Bucky said, frowning even more heavily then. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t actually remember meeting him,” Steve added.

“You couldn’t even crawl,” Bucky remembered. Steve had been tiny, and sure, he had been miniscule, too, but Steve had been half his size. But his eyes had been the exact crystalline blue, big and innocent. He barely remembered it.
“You were two,” Steve said, looking at him then. “I wasn’t even a year old.”

“What?! ”

“Do people remember being two?” Bucky asked. He hardly remembered much other than Steve’s big doe-eyes and how little he had been.

“Very little,” Steve assured him. Then his memory gaps from that age were normal, and not the fault of HYDRA. That reassured him.

“They grew up together, actually,” Wilson was saying to Stark.

“Why wasn’t that in the history books?” Stark demanded.

Wilson gestured to Steve plastered to Bucky’s side and the fond expression on his face, Bucky clinging practically to Steve like his life depended on it. Bucky frowned a little again; potentially, his life did depend on clinging to Steve, from what Steve said about their bond.

“Think that happened before or after the serum?” Wilson asked dryly.

Stark’s mouth fell open. Bucky wasn’t sure if this was a good thing or a bad thing; he knew they had to be quiet about loving each other before, but the idea that half of their relationship, and the platonic half, seriously, had been erased just for propaganda definitely pissed him off.

Platonic-ish. He vaguely remembered wanting to kiss Steve’s collarbones with a vigorous passion as a pre-teen.

“Right, so, my childhood love of the comics has been ruined,” Stark announced. “Shall we check out the gym?”

“You have a meeting at eight o’clock,” Pepper told Stark as he turned around, making him pivot around again to look at her with raised eyebrows. “It’s seven forty-five,” she added.
“Can I skip it?” Stark asked as if that was the question the raised eyebrows implied.

“You skipped it yesterday,” Pepper said kindly, though her raised eyebrows and pursed lips implied more scolding than amusement.

“Can I skip it again today?” Stark amended.

“No,” Pepper said firmly. Stark sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes.

“Do I have to change?” Stark asked her tiredly.

“You were wearing those clothes when I went to Philadelphia on Tuesday.”

“Well, what day is today?” Stark added, exasperated.

“Friday,” Pepper informed him, and leaned in to kiss his cheek before wrinkling her nose. “I’ll tell them you’ll be late so you can shower.”

“Fine,” Stark whined. He looked back at them, rolling his eyes pointedly. “I’ll continue the tour later, I guess. You can check out your apartments while I go talk to whatever freak has decided to meet at eight on a Friday.”

“If you had gone yesterday, it would have been a lunch meeting,” Pepper said.

Stark waved a dismissive hand and pointed them back to the elevator. “JARVIS, take everyone to their respective apartments, please.”

“Yes, sir,” the ceiling acknowledged pleasantly.

The elevator doors slid open and they gathered inside once again. Bucky took the corner, crossing his arms over his chest and wishing they could have taken the stairs. Elevators were cramped,
provided little room for maneuverability in a fight. Then again, the people around him were meant to be *allies*, he reminded himself.

Steve nudged his shoulder. He uncrossed his arms and pulled his Omega into his side, letting his temple rest on the top of Steve’s head when he dropped it onto his shoulder.

Steve at his side was familiar. It was comforting, though Bucky still didn’t fully understand the reason or function of comfort. He knew that Steve wanted him to feel comforted, though, and when Steve wanted comfort, he sought it in Bucky’s arms. That was familiar. He could understand that much, at least.

Pepper and Tony left two floors up, then Hill on the floor after, and the elevator stopped at the next floor and the speakers in the ceiling chimed.

“This is your stop, Master Sergeant Wilson,” JARVIS announced.

“See you guys, I guess,” Wilson said, stepping out. He waved as the elevator doors began to shut again, turning away as they closed behind him.

That left Bucky and Steve alone with Romanoff and Barton. Both were dangerous, but both were *allies*, so he didn’t need to watch them as if expecting them to attack the second the doors closed.

He watched, anyway. They didn’t turn away from the doors to face the corner where Bucky held Steve to his side. Two floors up, the elevator stopped and they got off, Barton giving them a wave but otherwise never acknowledging them.

The second they were alone, Bucky exhaled and then tensed again. Steve kissed his shoulder immediately, gentle, as if by habit automatically seeking to bring him comfort. Something in the back of his mind insisted that this was right and something else demanded that Bucky was too dangerous to deserve Steve’s love.

The elevator doors opened.

“Welcome to your new home,” JARVIS told them. “Once the elevator closes, I will no longer be able to interact with you as I have been disabled within your apartment.”
“What for?” Steve asked just as Bucky felt relief. No blatant surveillance, then, and a ceiling that wouldn’t talk back when he asked rhetorical questions. Did he ask rhetorical questions often?

“Sir deemed the reason Old Man Proofing. In order to seek my assistance, simply use your mobile to text or call the number posted on the fridge.”

Bucky stepped out of the elevator while Steve chuckled. There was a short but wide hallway with a door to his immediate right before opening into a larger room, more doors going down the left wall. He glanced at Steve, then gestured for him to wait there while drawing the pistol from his jeans.

He cracked the door on the right, peering inside. There were laundry machines and shelves inside, then a second door on the far wall with a green EXIT sign over it. There were the stairs, then. The door was lockable from the outside, so Bucky locked it before shutting it. He moved further in, finding a kitchen and a living room taking up the rest of the open space. There were four doors on the left wall, which spanned the length of the apartment, a second closed off area level with the laundry and storage room he had already cleared with two doors. A window spanned the farthest wall, the same sort as the one in the library. He glanced over the island counter in the kitchen, then stepped down to the slightly lowered living room to examine the windows. Stark had claimed every window in the building was bulletproof and lined with alarms, but he still had to check it. Examining the glass revealed that it was the same thickness and lined with lasers as the library window.

The two right-hand doors lead into bedrooms, neither of which had windows. Romanoff had said there would be two guest bedrooms in the apartment. There was a bathroom connected to both, and after clearing both rooms, Bucky locked the doors from the outside. The doors, so far, he had noticed, appeared to be made of wood, but were too heavy and thick to be wood. There were also three heavy looking deadbolts in the doors, with no switch to lock any of them. Moving back in, he checked the left-hand doors. The farthest one opened into another bedroom, no windows again, larger than the first two, with a wide bed that looked like it would easily accommodate him and Steve with room to spare, enough room that, for example, a kid could crawl into bed with their parents when they wanted a cuddle.

At the doorway, Bucky paused to stare at the bed. He saw himself and Steve, laying back and laughing, with a child bouncing on the bed, up and down, then collapsing to hug his side, Bucky’s side.

It wasn’t a memory, he knew. It wasn’t a prediction of the future, Steve had said he wasn’t able to get pregnant and Bucky wouldn’t… Bucky would probably never be safe around kids. Staring at the bed, he did not comprehend, then, why he thought he could see one in their future. Was that imagination?
“Bucky?” Steve called out. Bucky took a step back, looking to find Steve still standing by the elevator, waiting with his hands pushed into the back pockets of his jeans. “Everything okay?”

“Fine,” he answered. He had never had use for imagination. He did not understand why, then, he was using it then to think of something that would never happen.

“You okay?”

He opened his mouth to say functional, and hesitated.

“Just give me a second,” he called back. He stepped back into the room, ignoring the bed now, to check the standing wardrobe, then the other door that revealed a bathroom, larger than necessary, with a separate standing shower and a wide claw-foot tub, a long counter and high, gilded mirror. He glanced into it, then avoided his reflection and left the bathroom and bedroom. The next door revealed a study, the next an empty room with a third bathroom. The fourth door revealed a gym, and then Bucky was standing in front of Steve again.

“Clear,” he said, then added: “I have to sweep for bugs, still.”

Steve stepped forward and leaned in to kiss his lips lightly; his gut untwisted a little at the contact. “Would you like me to wait here or could I use the bathroom?”

“Fine,” Bucky muttered gruffly, Steve squeezed his bicep and stepped past him. He turned, watching him step inside and look around at everything.

“It’s a hell of a lot bigger than any other place I’ve lived in,” he said.

“There’s three bathrooms,” Bucky said. Steve turned back to him, eyebrows high on his forehead. “One in those two bedrooms, one in the big bedroom, one in that empty room.” He pointed them out. Steve turned and approached the bigger bedroom, and after a second, Bucky realized that his feet were carrying him to follow. Steve stepped into the room, Bucky right behind him, and gave a low whistle.

“This is nice,” he said, glancing back at Bucky with a smile.
Bucky lingered in the doorway while Steve looked over the room. “I can take one of the other rooms if you want this one,” he said.

Steve glanced at him, then frowned, his brows scrunching up the space between them and putting a crease in the bridge of his nose. “We’ll share,” he said softly. “Unless you’d rather not.”

He sounded disappointed. Bucky didn’t like that.

“We can share,” he said quickly. “I just…” When he trailed off, Steve stepped closer to him and held out his hands. Bucky blinked for a second, until Steve closed the gap between them and linked his arms around Bucky’s waist.

“It’s okay,” Steve murmured.

“I might wake up and not remember where I am,” Bucky muttered. He couldn’t look Steve in the eye.

“All the better to have me right there,” Steve said gently.

“I might not remember who you are.”

Steve kissed him softly again, then leaned their foreheads together and reached up to brush his thumb over the crest of Bucky’s cheek. “You’ll know,” he promised.

“You say that, but you can’t guarantee that I will,” Bucky insisted. “It would be safer for you if I slept in a different room.”

The way Steve clenched his jaw and dropped his gaze told Bucky that he didn’t agree, but he still nodded stiffly and dropped his hand back to Bucky’s waist. Bucky automatically raised a finger and tapped the underside of Steve’s chin to make him look up again.

“I’ll just be across the way,” he said, “you can call me if you need me.”
“I need you all the time,” Steve said with a light and sad laugh.

Bucky cupped his palm against Steve’s cheek, who shut his eyes and pressed into his hand. He didn’t know what to say, he didn’t remember anything like this.

“Will you come if you need me?” Steve murmured.

He did not know the parameters of need. He did not know how to identify when he would need Steve, or, if like his Omega had said, he would just always need him.

“Sure,” he said softly.

Steve gave another stiff nod, that told Bucky he still didn’t like it, then reached up to touch Bucky’s hand on his cheek, opening his eyes and smiling again. “I do really have to use the bathroom,” he said.

“I have to sweep for bugs,” Bucky remembered.

Steve gave him another kiss and stepped back out of his arms. “I’ll be out in the living room in a minute,” he said. “We can watch a movie when you’re done, if you’d like.”

“We can?” Bucky said. “Here?” He hadn’t seen a projector.

“There’s this new thing called televisions,” Steve said cheekily. “That was that flat, black glass thing on the wall.”

Bucky stepped out of the bedroom as Steve stepped into the bathroom to examine the walls. There was a sleek, black object mounted on the wall just past their bedroom door over what appeared to be a false fireplace. Bucky squinted suspiciously at it, then started his search for bugs in the living room.

But, just for a second, his attention was caught by, strangely, the armchair in the room. It didn’t match any of the other furniture, it was made of a worn and cracked brown leather, it looked old where everything else looked new. The seat was wide and there was an off-center impression, making it look lilted to the left. He tilted his head, looking at it, and tried to find why it looked...
“Hey, Buck, don’t sit there, that’s my dad’s chair.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“No, no, it’s alright, Bucky. You can sit there. It’s been a while since anyone… I’m sure it could use the use.”

He barely recognized the woman’s voice, until he did, and there was a cacophony of memory on Sarah Rogers while he looked at the chair that had been Joseph Rogers’ and then had become his, one late June afternoon when he stayed the night for the first time. He lifted the cushions with careful fingers to check it for listening devices, then stepped back, still staring at it for a second. A warmth he associated with Steve was blossoming in his chest looking at it, before he moved on to check the rest of the room.

He’d cleared the living room by the time Steve came back out, taking a seat on one of the sofas and lifting his legs onto it. He’d taken off his shoes. Bucky paused before going into the first of the guest bedrooms, then tugged off his sneakers and set them by an armchair. He pulled back, then—

“James Buchanan Barnes, for the last time, stop leaving your shoes in the middle of the walkway! You’re going to make me fall and break a hip!” “JAMES! PUT YOUR SHOES AWAY PROPERLY!” “Bucky, quit leaving your shoes where your ma can trip over them.” “James, I swear to God, if you leave your shoes in the living room one more time, I’m never buying you another pair in your life, you can go around barefoot!”

Bucky picked them back up and carried them into the first guest bedroom, shoving them under the edge of the bed. He had had parents, and a sister, once. And left his shoes all over the house. His mother had called him James, his father had called him Bucky. His sister’s name was Becca, he’d called her Becks, she’d hated it but he did it anyway and she called him Bugsy in return—

Bugs. He was checking for bugs.

The two guest rooms, the first one his, really, and the bathroom were clear. He glanced at Steve, still laying on the sofa, and checked the kitchen. The fridge was full of food, and he scowled. He’d have to check those for tampering next. He found plenty of appliances in the kitchen, but they all looked familiar and no listening devices or explosives were hidden in their wiring. The study was mostly
empty, and like the unused room next door, easy to clear. The gym had lots of complicated looking machines, and he had to struggle to get their access panels open to clear them. The weights and the punching bags, he understood. The machine that looked like an attempt at a stationary bicycle? Why didn’t people just bike outside?

The laundry and storage room were clean, too, which just left the door to the stairs. He stared at it for a second, then cautiously lifted the handle and stepped outside, letting it swing shut and click behind him. The stairwell was clear and there was a second door other than the one he’d exited marked roof access. He saw the scanners on the side, but tried the door anyway.

The ceiling chimed above him and he jumped, flicking off the safety on his gun before remembering that the ceiling was occupied by a computer that could talk and think.

“Good morning, again, Sergeant Barnes,” JARVIS announced. “I have been directed to allow you entrance to any secured doors necessary within the next twenty-three hours, however, I shall make you aware that past that period, you will not have the clearance necessary to open this door.”

“Right,” Bucky grumbled. “If someone tries to open this door, or any door, without clearance, what do you do?”

“I notify the occupants of the room in question, Sir, and the chief of security.”

“Who’s chief of security? And who’s Sir?”

“The chief of security is Mr. Happy Hogan, and Sir is Mr. Stark.”

Bucky frowned. “Happy?”

“Harold Joseph Hogan, preferred name Happy,” JARVIS clarified.

“Right,” he repeated, now scowling at the door as he made security plans and checklists, “say someone tries to get this door open. You’re not active inside.”

“This is correct. In that case, I would notify Captain Rogers via his mobile phone.”
“What about me?”

“You do not have a mobile phone.”

Bucky huffed. He’d have to get one, then. Burner cell, probably, but he didn’t like the idea of giving the number of any phone he owned to a ceiling computer man.

“Say someone with clearance wants to get in there, can they just walk in?”

“No, Sergeant, my directions are not to allow anyone but yourself and Captain Rogers inside automatically. Any other person would require permission from Captain Rogers first.”

“Or me,” Bucky said.

“Just Captain Rogers, Sergeant.”

“Okay, then add me,” Bucky snapped.

“I am afraid that you do not have the clearance to do that.”

“Who does?”

“Just Captain Rogers.”

Bucky scowled. “Fine, I’ll tell him to add me.”

He grabbed the handle of the door and yanked it open. “Steve!”

“Everything okay?” Steve’s voice drifted through to him.
“Come tell the ceiling that it needs my permission to let people in, too!”

After a second, Steve appeared in the doorway of the storage/laundry room. “Come do what?”

Bucky jabbed a finger at the ceiling. “Tell the ceiling that I can give people permission to get into our apartment.”

“Uh, Bucky can let people into the apartment,” Steve announced.

“I shall amend my protocols, Captain,” JARVIS answered.

“Was that all?” Steve added, raising an eyebrow as he stepped closer.

“Yeah,” Bucky grumbled and walked back into the apartment, shutting the door to the stairs behind him firmly. “Wait.” He opened the door and turned his gaze on the ceiling. “JARVIS. Computer. Ceiling, thing, text Steve the words I’m about to say.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

He shut the door. “Fuck you, JARVIS.”

Bucky looked back at Steve, who raised his eyebrow again. After ten seconds, Bucky opened the door again.

“Did you text him?”

“I am afraid I was not able to hear what you said, Sergeant.”

“Are you lying ‘cause Stark told you to make us think that you’re turned off in the apartment or could you actually not hear?”
“I assure you that I was not able to hear what you said. I am legitimately disabled inside the apartment but for emergency protocols and services.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “What emergency services?”

“I am able to detect fire, dangerous gaseous compounds such as carbon monoxide or gas leaks from the stove, invasion via the air filtration system, windows, elevator shaft or stairwell, and persons attacking Captain Rogers.”

“Wait, what?” Steve said.

“How do you detect those?” Bucky asked, ignoring Steve.

“The air filtration system detects and identifies gaseous compounds that are not meant to be there and the vents themselves have pressure sensors to detect unauthorized persons using them for transport. The windows are armed with laser sensors to alert me of breakage. I am fully enabled in the elevator and stairwell. The thermostat detects spikes in temperature that indicate fire, as do smoke detectors linked to the filtration system, as well as tracking the heat signatures of the occupants inside to ensure optimum temperature, and Sir has added to its programming to identify which heat signature belongs to Captain Rogers and if any heat signatures attack him.”

“Turn that off,” Steve snapped.

“Don’t turn that off,” Bucky shot back.

“Neither of you have the clearance to turn this function off,” JARVIS informed them politely.

“Tell Stark to turn it off,” Steve added.

“Don’t turn it off!” Bucky commanded.

“Bucky –”
“Yes, Stark clearly doesn’t trust me with you,” Bucky cut him off, “but I don’t trust me, either. This way, if I attack you, you can get backup right away.”

“That’s unnecessary,” Steve argued.

“That’s real fucking necessary, Steve,” Bucky retorted.

“I trust you, Buck—”

“I don’t trust me!” Bucky repeated sharply. “Now, I’m going to step out there and shut the door, let me know if you can hear through it.”

He shut the door on Steve’s glare.

“I’m saying words,” he declared.

There was silence on the other side of the door.

“Words that are inconsequential,” Bucky added.

After another second, Bucky jerked open the door.

“– is one thing –”

Steve stopped talking hastily, looking red in the face. Bucky raised an eyebrow at him.

“I couldn’t hear you,” Steve said stiffly.

“I couldn’t hear you, either, apparently,” Bucky said. He stepped back inside and shut the door,
stepping past Steve to go and check the food in the fridge for tampering.

“Bucky, you know I’m serious when I say I trust you not to hurt me,” said Steve. Bucky heard him following, but didn’t answer him. “I trust you, Buck.”

“I don’t trust me,” Bucky said for the third time. He opened the fridge and started pulling out the food. Steve sighed behind him, and he heard the scrape of a stool on the tile floor and Steve settling onto said stool.

“The whole point of this week is so that you can trust yourself, okay?” Steve said quietly.

Bucky turned around and set his hands on the counter, looking at the granite with a heavy frown. Steve reached out and took one of his hands, lacing their fingers together. Bucky inhaled, deep, and looked up at him.

“Even if I can trust myself, I’d leave that on anyway,” he said. “In case something happens when I’m not here.”

At Steve’s clenching jaw, he added: “If I’m not here. Or if I’m just out, or in the bathroom while you’re in here, at any point that I’m not right behind you.”

He made eye contact with him, then. Steve’s gaze was hard, but after a second, it softened and he gave a nod. He dropped Bucky’s hand, who missed the contact immediately but pulled away. He had to inspect all the food.

The fridge was fully stocked, but so were all the pantries. It took over an hour to clear everything, and when he was done, he was still buzzing faintly and on edge with general a sense of unease. Perhaps it was because the whole place smelled too sterile; he checked the rooms again and marked the doorways with his wrists, while Steve sat on the couch and watched him, checked Steve’s room a third time for anything he might have missed, but couldn’t make the unease in his chest go away. He came to a stop in front of the couch, frowning at nothing, trying to figure out what he was missing.

“Bucky,” Steve said quietly. He flicked his gaze to him, and Steve held up his arms. “C’mere.”

“There’s something wrong,” Bucky insisted.
Steve flicked his fingers at him beckoningly. “Just, come here.”

Bucky hesitated, then approached the sofa and sat down next to him, their shoulders brushing. Steve pulled at his arm, then pushed a leg behind him and tugged Bucky against his chest, wrapping his arms around him securely.

The unease faded almost instantly. Bucky slumped against Steve’s chest, suddenly exhausted and forcing his eyes to remain open.

“That’s what I meant by needing me,” Steve murmured in his ear. “Just, come get me when you feel like that, okay? Come and hug me, let me hold you or hold me, just come touch me and it’ll go away. Wake me up if I’m asleep.”

Bucky gave a jerky nod. Steve pressed his lips to his temple and tucked his chin on Bucky’s shoulder.

“You can fall asleep here,” Steve promised. “You’re safe here.”

“You’re not,” Bucky grunted. His eyes strained to close.

“I got you,” Steve whispered, gently kissing his cheek. “I’m the safest I’ll ever be.”

“You got me,” Bucky mumbled faintly. Steve hummed happily and lightly squeezed his arms around him. Bucky let his head rest in the crook of Steve’s neck, closing his eyes. Just for a minute, he reasoned.

“I love you, Buck.”

“Love you, too, Stevie,” Bucky murmured back.

Just for a minute or two. Steve’s chest was warm and he smelled like home. At least with Steve’s arms wrapped around him, his hands were pinned to his sides and he wouldn’t be able to attack. It
should have made him feel more on edge, but he truly felt safe there. Steve’s breathing and heartbeat were rhythmic as his Omega began to hum softly, the strands of an old song stirring in the back of his head.

He saw a fire pit, men gathered around it. They were all filthy, dirty and soaked in sweat, but huddled close to the fire against the cold. He was there, and Steve was there. These men were his brothers. Literally? Figuratively? He couldn’t know for sure. There was music playing, and then he was turning to Steve and smiling, taking his hands and pulling him to his feet. Steve’s cheeks were pink and he pulled him into a close embrace, one hand at the small of his back and the other holding Steve’s hand. They swayed from side to side, a slow rotation. Steve was beautiful, bashful like he didn’t know just how much he loved him. Their foreheads touched and he whispered the words of the song. When he opened his eyes, Steve’s hands were linked behind his neck and he was looking up then, much shorter, smaller, but he was still blushing like he didn’t know that he had the most gorgeous pink lips, or the most beautiful blue eyes, or the most perfect collarbones, or how much Bucky loved him. He held his waist with just his hands but wanted to lock his arms around him, he teased and brought the blush back to Steve’s hollow cheeks, wanted to lean in and kiss him gently but didn’t.

This was dreaming, a vague thought said. People dreamed. Weapons didn’t dream, but people did. This was unnecessary to functionality. But Bucky wasn’t a weapon, he was a person, and so he could dream. He did dream. He had always dreamed, though what he remembered of those dreams were mostly horrible and heartbreaking in their tragedy or their bittersweetness. The wind in his ears, Steve’s screams. Every target he’d ever eliminated begging for their lives, and every target having the same face. He used to dream about being warm, about lying in the sun with his Omega safe in his arms. No handler could take those dreams from him, even when they put him back in the chair, they always came back. Did that mean he had always been a person?

His throat was dry and bladder uncomfortable. He knew that he needed to urinate, but what had Wilson, Samuel Thomas said dry throat meant? Was it hunger or thirst? One of the two. They were not vital to functionality – Override, they were vital to status: good and status: happy. Wilson, Samuel Thomas had said there was more than just functionality. He was functional, but he could still drink water or eat if he needed to. He shifted, though, and found that he wanted to stay where he was. He was warm where he was, a firm chest beneath him gently rising and falling with a steady heartbeat. His nose was pressed close to the crook of a neck, which smelled heavenly. Not heat-heavenly, heavenly like ma’s apple pie and gingerbread cookies and Steve.

Fingers gently slipped into his hair. He hummed softly, it felt nice, the fingers softly combing through his hair, stroking his scalp, the touch loving and tender. He did not require such touch; he stopped humming, if they knew how much he liked it, they might stop, he didn’t want it to stop.
“You awake, Buck?” Steve’s voice whispered.

Was he dreaming still? He lifted his head, opening his eyes and then blinking. He saw first a white column of neck, barely visible bruises shaped like a mouth – like *his* mouth – scattering the skin, then lifted his eyes up the neck, tracing the muscles to the pulse beating steadily under the jaw, the line of the jaw and the faint golden scruff to soft, pink lips, a crooked nose, crystalline blue eyes.

Bucky smiled at Steve. “Hey, doll,” he murmured, and kissed him gently, just because he could. Steve’s hand in his hair cupped the back of his neck, the other hand pressed to his waist. Bucky squirmed around to get his arms around Steve’s back, wanting as much contact between their bodies as possible. He slid his fingers up the back of Steve’s shirt, pressing them to the small of his back; Steve gave a faint jerk and he tugged his hands back, leaning back and frowning, but Steve just laughed and grabbed him again.

“Your hand’s cold,” Steve said. “Come back here, I wasn’t done.”

“I have to pee,” Bucky remembered.

Steve pouted. Bucky leaned in and nipped at the lower lip he’d stuck out, then clambered off the couch and stretched his arms over his head.

“You gonna come back when you’re done?” Steve asked cheekily.

“Where else would I go?” Bucky answered, reaching out and ruffling Steve’s hair with a hand without thinking about it. “There’s this dumb schmuck with the prettiest pink lips around on my couch.”

Steve laughed as Bucky grinned at his own easy words, that was familiar, still. “Sounds like a lucky schmuck to me,” Steve said.

“You kidding me?” Bucky said as he took a step back, not wanting to take his eyes off of Steve. “I’m the lucky one.”

Steve blushed. Bucky grinned wider. He remembered loving to make him blush. He loved making Steve blush, now.
He also really had to pee. He finally turned his back and stepped into Steve’s bedroom to seek out the bathroom. While he did his business, he looked around, a little blearily, he still felt sleepy. There was a rack of shelves over the toilet, several boxes of baby wipes lining them. Bucky frowned at them, flushed, washed his hands, then walked back out to Steve.

“Why’re there baby wipes in the bathroom?” he asked. “We don’t have a baby.”

Steve raised his eyebrows, then laughed a little. “I think they’re for us,” he said.

“We’re not babies,” Bucky insisted.

“They’re for cleaning up,” Steve added, the corners of his mouth turning up.

“Cleaning – Oh!”

Bucky felt his cheeks go red. “Oh,” he repeated. He felt like an idiot. Making a vague hand gesture like wiping out a narrow crevice, he said it a third time.

Steve laughed at him and waved him over. Bucky went, crawling up to sprawl over Steve and tuck his face back into the crook of his neck. His mouth still felt dry, but he was sleepy and Steve was warm.


Bucky sat up, blinking a lot. “Hungry?” he repeated. “S that dry mouth or stomach whatever?”

“Stomach,” Steve said, his smile fading. “Dry mouth is thirst.”

“Oh,” Bucky said a fourth time, then lightly kissed Steve on the lips. “I’ll get you food.”

“I can get food,” Steve said as Bucky got up.
“No, no, I can get it, I’m thirsty, anyway.”

Steve got up, though, and followed Bucky into the kitchen. “Are you hungry?”

Bucky thought about that while he looked into the fridge. His stomach hurt, not much, but some. “I think,” he decided eventually.

Steve appeared at his shoulder, peering into the fridge. “Grilled cheese and tomato soup,” he declared.

Bucky waited for a memory of grilled cheese and tomato soup to appear in his head, but it didn’t.

“Is there a significance to that meal?” he asked.

“Nah,” Steve said, then threaded his arms around Bucky’s waist and dropped his forehead against Bucky’s neck. “’S just easy to make. Slap some bread and cheese in a pan, open a can of Campbell’s, heat it up. 1, 2, 3, you got dinner.”

Bucky remembered that there was a clock in the kitchen, so he shut the fridge to look for it. “Lunch,” he corrected. “It’s 11:34.”

Steve shrugged. “Still easy.”

Bucky opened the fridge a second time and looked for the components of grilled cheese and tomato soup. Bread, cheese, and Campbell’s, Steve had said. What was Campbell’s?

“Bread doesn’t go in the fridge,” Steve mumbled.

“There’s no bread in the fridge,” Bucky told him.

“Exactly,” Steve sighed, and let go of Bucky to open a cabinet. Bucky watched him go, then went
back to looking for cheese. He found, in the bottom drawer, several items labelled as different kinds of cheese.

“What kind of cheese?” Bucky asked.

“Cheddar.”

“In slices or shredded?” Bucky added, picking up two packages, then spotting another labeled cheddar. “Who needs this much cheese?”

“It’s for sandwiches, Buck, slices.”

“Alright,” Bucky muttered, putting back the two other kinds of cheddar and placing the bag of sliced cheddar onto the counter. “What else?”

“Butter, actually.”

He turned back to the fridge. “Uh… I found margarine?”

“That’ll do,” Steve answered. Bucky set the tub of margarine on the counter and shut the fridge, then went looking for a glass to get some water. Steve had set a small pot on the stove as well as a wide pan. He was opening cans with pop tabs, pouring them into the pot. Bucky filled the glass with water from the sink, sniffed it, took a cautious taste, then gulped it down when it tasted clean.

“Have you had enough water?” Bucky asked abruptly. “Hill said you need one hundred twenty ounces a day.”

Steve laughed lightly, making Bucky frown. “I probably should have more water, but it’s okay if you don’t meet the exact optimum goal of water every day, most people don’t.”

“Why?”

“Oh, well, first, you have to drink water for, uh…” Steve set down the now empty can of soup to
frown quizzically at Bucky. “You know what, I don’t know why. It only becomes a problem if you drink maybe only half the necessary amount of water on a regular basis, or if you don’t get any at all for too long.”

Bucky filled the glass again and held it out to Steve. “Here.”

Steve gave him a smile – appropriate adjective fond? – and sipped from the glass. Bucky watched, then his gaze caught on his throat as he swallowed and he became distracted. There were still faint marks on his neck from Bucky’s mouth, hickeys, he thought they were called, and looking at them sent a faint rush through his stomach like riding the Cyclone at Coney Island.

He’d taken Steve once, and he’d thrown up. Why had he taken Steve on the Cyclone if it would have made him vomit? That didn’t make sense. While he was thinking about it, he recalled asking earlier why he hadn’t carried Steve everywhere before, Steve had said later, but Bucky wasn’t aware of the time frame of later.

“When is later?” he asked.

“Depends on when it’s said,” Steve answered, now spreading the margarine on slices of bread.

“So, later said this morning, when would that be?”

Steve looked over at him. “You want to ask why you didn’t carry me places when we were kids?”

“It was not logical,” Bucky said, a firm frown tugging at his mouth as he watched Steve spread margarine. “You were frail. I should have carried you.”

“I wasn’t frail, Buck.”

“You were always dizzy, could hardly breathe half the time, and your joints hurt. I should have carried you.”

“Well, if my joints start hurting again, you can carry me,” Steve told him.
“That does not explain why I did not carry you before,” Bucky insisted. Steve glanced up at him and he faltered for a second. “I take care of you,” he added hesitantly. “I should have been carrying you.”

Steve sighed quietly and set down the butter knife and bread in his hands to look at Bucky with a sad expression. “You did want to, sometimes, but I didn’t let you because of a couple of things. One, I didn’t like feeling helpless. I thought that if I let you carry me, it would be obvious that I was frail, and I hated that.”

Bucky frowned at that. He didn’t want Steve to feel helpless, but shouldn’t he have done it anyway? Otherwise, Steve would have been in pain, had been in pain. Why had he just stood by?

“Two, we’re both men. Were both boys. Things were different then.”

“Different how?”

“Well... Used to be, people were real strict and judgmental about who loved who. Guys were only supposed to love girls, and girls were only supposed to love guys. Omegas went for Alphas, Alphas went for Omegas, and Betas went together.”

“We are both male,” Bucky echoed and Steve gave a nod. “But we’re not both Alphas? Or both Omegas, either. If Alphas go with Omegas, why couldn’t we be together?”

It took Steve a moment to answer, to the point that Bucky worried he had upset him, but eventually he just shrugged and answered: “Omegas aren’t normally guys. They’re hardly ever guys. Back then, male Omegas weren’t... We weren’t acceptable.”

Bucky frowned while Steve didn’t look at him. “Anything different than normal, they called it queer. Though, I think that might be a slur, so don’t repeat that. Anyway, if it was different, like male Omegas or female Alphas, people didn’t like it. Either we had to devote to a life of celibacy or go with a female Alpha, and there weren’t many of those either. They made big fusses over it a lot, some places, in sometimes, it was illegal, even.”

“It is not illegal now?” Bucky asked. He was suddenly standing in a crowded room, wearing a shirt collar that was so starched it could have been a neck brace, holding a wine glass in his hands, speaking to a small group of men and women and sneaking glances over their shoulders to Steve on the other side of the room, talking with a woman who kept touching his arm. Steve kept drawing
back, and she kept going for him. He wanted to walk up to her and tell her to piss off, that Steve wasn’t interested, she should have taken the fucking hint already, but his feet stayed firmly planted and a fake smile stayed firmly rooted in place.

“It’s illegal in a couple of places,” Steve’s voice drifted over him.

He was walking to school, or home from, or anywhere really, his arm slung over Steve’s shoulders, they were laughing, then someone was shouting and Steve was tugging Bucky’s arm off of him but shouting back.

“Bucky? You okay?”

He was kneeling on a couch in front of Steve, burying his nose in Steve’s neck and drinking in the delicious scent of heat and panicking that he shouldn’t be doing this with a boy.

“Bucky, Buck, look at me, hey, you’re okay, you’re with Steve at home, we’re in the kitchen, it’s September 26th, 2014, you’re okay.”

Bucky blinked. Steve was standing in front of him, his hands pressed to Bucky’s cheeks, a worried lilt to his eyes. Bucky just leaned in and kissed him, because Steve had said he could, he could touch him if he needed to, then tugged Steve into his chest and locked his arms around him.

“’S okay,” he murmured, “’m okay, not bad stuff.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Steve mumbled into his clavicle.

“I’m fine,” Bucky insisted softly. He felt… shaken? Perhaps that was the correct term? But with Steve there, it wasn’t so bad. Perhaps that was also what Steve meant about needing him. “I got you, right?”

Steve laughed softly and squeezed his waist before pulling back to look him in the eye. “You got me,” he echoed in a whisper, leaning in to catch another slow kiss.

“You need to eat,” Bucky mumbled against his mouth.
“It can wait a minute,” Steve answered. His hands pushed into the back of Bucky’s shirt and spread over the small of his back. His tongue pushed into Bucky’s mouth and he pressed tight against his front.

Bucky tried to say that Steve needed to eat again, but found it was difficult with Steve’s tongue in his mouth, so he pulled back; Steve leaned farther in to chase his lips.

“You gotta eat, doll,” he reminded Steve, the pet name, as it always did, slipping out of his mouth without him intending to. It always seemed to make Steve smile, so he guessed it was something he should repeat, and often.

“In a minute,” Steve repeated as he tried to lean in again, but Bucky shook his head.

“After you’ve had some food,” he said.

Steve flicked an eyebrow up. “What if I’m hungry for something other than grilled cheese now?”

Bucky frowned at that. “We could make a different food if you don’t want grilled cheese.”

Steve laughed and stole a quick kiss again. “That’s not what I meant, Buck.”

Bucky frowned still. “Meaning unclear,” he said.

Steve gave him a pained–maybe?–smile and shrugged, saying: “Never mind. We’ll eat.”

Steve withdrew his arms and Bucky obediently took a step back when he ended the contact, returning to buttering the bread. Bucky stood at standby, waiting to be directed as of what to do next, but Steve did not give him anything to do, just set the bread in the pan to fry them, turned the fire on under the soup pot, and flipped the bread after a minute.

“Did Sam give you new statuses?” Steve asked. “Like, status good?”
“Yes,” Bucky answered, “good and happy.”

“That’s good,” Steve said with a smile. “You okay with that?”

Bucky frowned again and tried to understand what he meant, finally saying: “Meaning unclear.”

“Are you okay with having statuses?” Steve elaborated.

“Meaning unclear,” Bucky repeated.

Steve bit at his lower lip, worrying it between his teeth, looking at Bucky with furrowed brows. “What part of it is unclear?” he said after a minute.

Bucky had never been asked that question. He opened his mouth, shut it, then frowned deeply at the floor. “I do not understand why I would not have status updates of such a manner.”

The corners of Steve’s eyes drooped as did the edges of his mouth. “You only had two statuses before, right?”

“Functional and nonfunctional,” Bucky answered.

“Well, that was part of HYDRA taking away your identity,” Steve said quietly, “part of your programming, I guess. There’s more than just functional and not.”

“Good and happy?”

“More than that, even.”

“Such as?” Bucky asked.

“There’s a whole range of emotions,” Steve said, placing cheese between the slices of bread now. “There’s positive and negative ones, and some that are in between. Good and happy are positive, then there’s negative things like sad and angry, and things in between.”
“Define sad,” Bucky said, since he wasn’t sure what sad entailed. He knew anger, was very familiar with it. HYDRA had encouraged anger.

“Um,” Steve said, as if he wasn’t sure what sad entailed either. “Sad is a broad feeling, it’s when you feel like you’re missing something, or you’ve lost something, when you feel like crying. Emotions are complicated.”

“Examples of sad,” he clarified.

Steve looked away then. “Losing someone, that makes you sad. It’s called grief, and sometimes there’s depression, too.”

A sudden thought occurred to Bucky, who still was unused to sudden thoughts occurring to him and he blurted it out. “Do I make you sad?”

“No,” Steve said quickly, “no, Bucky, what happened to you makes me sad. Losing you made me sad. You make me happy, because you’re alive now, you being not-okay makes me sad. But you being here doesn’t make me sad.”

“How do I become okay?” Bucky asked immediately. He didn’t want Steve to be sad.

Steve bit his lip again, then held out a hand towards him. Bucky stepped forward and took it with his flesh hand, and Steve raised it to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of his hand.

“I don’t know how,” he murmured.

Steve sounded sad. Bucky hated the broken tone of his voice, the way his eyes were dull and the way his lips turned downward. He didn’t want Steve to be sad. He would have to discover how to repair his damages in order to ensure Steve was happy, whatever happy truly meant.

“I’ll fix it,” Bucky said, squeezing Steve’s hand. “I want you to be happy.”
“Hey,” Steve said softly, “you have to do that for you, okay? You can’t just do it to make me happy, ’cause you’re your own person and you get to fix yourself at your own pace.”

“But it makes you sad.”

“Don’t worry about me, Bucky, I’m happy that you’re just here.”

“What would be the point of not worrying about you?” Bucky asked with genuine confusion. “I have to take care of you.”

“Bucky, you gotta take care of yourself, too,” Steve said.

Bucky did not understand. What was there to take care of other than Steve? His own needs were not to be put before Steve’s, mission: Protect Gingerbread took all priority. He said so, and Steve shook his head.

“I don’t want you to sacrifice your own wellbeing to take care of me, okay?”

“Error,” Bucky said, “logic unsound.”

“It’s not logic, Buck,” Steve insisted gently. “You matter, your feelings and needs matter, too.”

“I do not require –”

“Bucky, your needs matter,” Steve repeated. “You can’t put my needs before yours, okay?”

“Why?” Bucky asked. “You are my priority.”

“Well, you’re my priority,” Steve countered.

“Your needs –”
“Don’t come before yours,” Steve said again.

Bucky smelled smoke and at the same time, he and Steve looked to the pan with the sandwiches. Steve flipped them, revealing that the underside had been burned.

“Sorry,” Steve said, “it’ll still taste good.”

“Taste is not a priority,” Bucky said.

“It can be,” Steve told him, looking up again. “Anything can be a priority if you want it to, Buck.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“You are the priority, then.”

Steve let out a deep breath, and gave his hand another squeeze. “That’s not quite what I meant.”

“Too bad,” Bucky decided. He recalled arguing like this, not angry or upset, but insistent all the same. It was familiar. Steve had said he could touch, so he dropped Steve’s hand to slide his arm around his waist and press a kiss to his cheek. “You’re my priority, sweetheart.”

“Then you’re my priority,” Steve replied stubbornly – Bucky assumed this was stubbornness, although part of his brain was attempting to label Steve’s behavior as being a little shit, “your needs matter to me, so if you’re putting mine before yours, then I’m putting yours before mine.”

“You’re a little shit,” Bucky said automatically.

Steve grinned at that, at least. “You’re a bigger shit.”
“You’re stubborn,” he added.

“Yep,” Steve said, popping the p. “And I love you, so you’ll just have to put up with it.”

“Duh,” Bucky answered. Then searched his head for the meaning of duh. An expression meaning obviousness. It fit. He also liked it.

Steve gave him a kiss, so Bucky resolved to use duh whenever possible. He filed being a little shit as an appropriate description of Steve being stubborn, as well.

“Would you get some plates and bowls, please?” Steve asked as he turned off the fire under the pan. “And find me a spoon to serve the soup with?”

Bucky let go of Steve, reluctantly, he thought was the correct adjective, and checked the drawers and cabinets for the items requested. He found a ladle, which he handed to Steve, then the plates and bowls. Steve set the sandwiches on the plates, four on each, then began to scoop tomato soup into the bowls. Bucky looked at the sandwiches, frowned, and wondered why they looked odd.

“Did you cut them into triangles, Bugsy?”

“Of course I cut them into triangles, Becks, what kinda heathen do you take me for?”

“They must be cut into triangles,” he blurted out. He was Bugsy, though why he did not recall. Becks was his little sister. She was also a little shit.

Steve glanced at him, then at the triangles, then nodded and checked the drawers for a knife. Bucky withdrew one from his jeans, but Steve said: “Not with that,” before he could cut them himself.

“Why not?”

“It’s not clean, I’ll bet,” Steve said, finally finding a knife that satisfied him. Bucky scowled at his knife, which he had cleaned recently, while Steve carefully cut the sandwiches into triangles. “And we’ll need spoons.”
“I gave you a spoon,” Bucky said.

“To eat with,” Steve added. “Little spoons.”

Bucky opened the drawer that he’d taken the ladle from, but Steve shook his head again and opened a different drawer, taking out two spoons that would serve approximately half a tablespoon at a time. At Bucky’s frown, Steve dipped a single spoon into one of the bowls and stuck it in his mouth, raising his eyebrows as he did. It took a second for his brain to begin screaming at the sight, a second for the echoing, overlapping memories to fade, a second for him to process that since being taken by HYDRA, all food he’d eaten had been given through a feeding tube. He hadn’t used a spoon in seventy years. After that, Bucky took the other spoon with his left hand, because the right one was shaking, and copied Steve’s action.

“Good?” Steve asked.

“What is?” Bucky asked in reply.

“The soup.”

“It is good?” Bucky said questioningly. “It is not poisoned.”

“No, does it taste good?” Steve prompted.

Bucky wasn’t sure what the significance of the soup’s taste was, but he took another spoonful to his mouth and swished it over his tongue briefly before swallowing. It tasted like tomato soup. When he had last had tomato soup, he couldn’t remember. He nodded, still frowning.

“Do you like it?” Steve asked.

Bucky thought about it for a second. “Yeah,” he said, “I think? It is not repulsive.”

“That’s good enough,” Steve decided, and took his own bowl and one of the two plates over to the
counter, crossing to the other side and sitting down. Steve patted a stool next to him, and Bucky took
the remaining bowl and plate to join him. Steve ate spoonfuls, then lifted a triangle of grilled cheese
and dipped it into his soup before taking a bite. Bucky copied him again, then involuntarily made a
pleased noise.

“Good?” Steve asked again, smiling lightly at him.

“Yes,” Bucky decided. “Grilled cheese and tomato soup is a good meal.”

Steve nudged their shoulders together gently, still smiling, and continued to eat. Bucky consumed his
bowlful and three of his grilled cheese triangles within minutes, then Steve stood up. Bucky made to
get up as well, but Steve said: “No, I’m coming back, just stay there.”

Bucky frowned, but waited. Steve lifted the pot off the stove and refilled Bucky’s bowl. “Was one
bowl not sufficient?” Bucky asked.

“Probably not,” Steve said, refilling his own. “At least, I’ll have to have three or four servings, and
I’m assuming your metabolism is probably the same.”

“Define metabolism.”

“In this context, it’s how fast your body processes food, turns it into energy, and then uses that
energy.”

“There are other contexts?”

“I’m assuming,” Steve repeated with a laugh. He set the pot back on the stove and switched off the
fire beneath it, then walked back to his seat and joined Bucky again. Bucky bumped their shoulders
together, and Steve gave him another smile. Physical contact seemed to please him as well as comfort
him, Bucky noted.

They continued to eat in silence, both of them consuming the sandwich triangles and three helpings
of the soup indeed, before Steve seemed to be satisfied with the amount of food they’d eaten and he
took the dishes away. Bucky followed him to the sink, then just stood there when he realized he
wasn’t sure what Steve was doing.
“You want to dry?” Steve asked as he turned on the water.

“Dry?” Bucky repeated.

“The dishes, and put them away,” Steve answered. He squirted soap onto one of the plates and grabbed a dishcloth, beginning to wash, Bucky figured. He blinked, a thousand scenes flashed before his eyes, voices overlapped each other, the loudest ones calling out “Rebecca Ann, come wash these dishes now!”

Dish washing was added to his list of abilities. He found a drying towel and took the now clean plate from Steve.

Once they had washed and put away the dishes, Steve took Bucky’s hand and lead him back to the living room and the sofa. Steve sat, pulled his legs onto the couch, and opened his arms to Bucky, who resumed his sprawl over Steve’s lap. He tucked his head into the crook of Steve’s neck, breathed in, and felt his lips curl in a smile.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” Steve asked. “I have a list of movies highly relevant to pop culture in the past seventy years.

“This is entertainment?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah, they’re just for fun. Some, at least, there’s a couple of documentaries I’ve been told to watch. That I should watch, I mean, if I want.”

Bucky considered it. He hadn’t checked the perimeter since he woke up last, he realized abruptly. “Wait here,” he said, sitting up.

“Where are you going?” Steve asked as he crossed to check the two guest rooms.

“Securing the area,” he answered over his shoulder, and drew out his pistol again. He looked under the bed and into the wardrobe before moving on to the bathroom. He swiped his wrist over the doorway to the bathroom as he went.
When he had finished with the check, Steve was still on the couch, and Bucky let out a long breath, a sigh, it was called, at seeing him still there and safe. Steve beckoned to him, and he resumed his place in Steve’s arms.

“Everything okay?”

Bucky gave a nod.

“What about you?” Steve asked softly.

Bucky assessed himself. He was not hungry, thirsty, or in need of the toilet. He was not injured at all, and felt no panic or anger. There was a light buzz in his chest, but it was a nice buzz.

“Status, good,” he said after a minute. “Happy? Define happy?”

Steve kissed the top of his head. “When you feel like smiling all the time. Or like everything is good in your life.”

Perhaps everything wasn’t good in his life, which he did not know the exact parameters of, but Steve did make him want to smile.

“Status, happy,” Bucky affirmed. He felt Steve grinning into his hair and kissed his neck once before settling closer again. He pushed his hands behind Steve’s back, where his weight would pin them in place, and let his eyes shut. He felt tired again, but he’d already slept for two hours that day.

“Would you like to sleep?” Steve asked.

“I do not require more sleep.”

“Would you like to, though?”
Like to? In spite of not requiring to? “Meaning unclear.”

“Are you tired?”

“Yes,” Bucky said hesitantly.

“Then you can sleep,” Steve said.

“I slept for two hours. And yesterday. I do not require more.”

“How much sleep do you think you require?” Steve asked softly.

“I – An hour? When I am no longer functional?”

“How often is that?”

Bucky opened his eyes to look at Steve. He wasn’t sure, he had never spent more than a week outside of cryostasis. In fact, the past week and a half was the longest he could remember being outside cryostasis. They took him out when they needed him, then put him back in.

“I don’t know.”

Steve brushed at the hair on his forehead, sweeping it aside and tucking it behind his ear. “How often do you sleep normally?”

“I do not sleep,” Bucky said. “Upon finishing a mission, I am put into cryostasis.”

Steve’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re not going back into cryostasis, Buck,” he said slowly.

Bucky hadn’t considered that, but Steve had a point. Mission: Protect Gingerbread had undefined time requirements. In fact, mission: Protect Gingerbread had no real end, it would just continue, until
Bucky died. Or Steve died. Steve was not allowed to die, though. He’d probably die if Steve died. He wasn’t sure how that worked. He didn’t want to think about it, either, the idea of Steve’s future death sent his heart speeding up and his breath catching in his throat. Steve gripped him tighter, cupping a palm against his cheek, saying: “Hey, you’re okay, Bucky, you’re safe—”

Bucky kissed him, since that was what Steve did when he was upset. “You are not allowed to die,” he said when he pulled back.

“I – Okay, I’m not going to die, Buck, I’m fine, I promise.”

“Failure of mission: Protect Gingerbread is unacceptable,” Bucky insisted.

“It’s okay, Bucky, I’m perfectly healthy, we’re not in any danger right now –”

“Ever,” Bucky added.

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Well, we’re not really immortal, Buck. We might die of old age, one day.”

People died of old age? People died of old age, his grandfather had died of old age, so it was conceivable that Steve could, one day, as he’d said, die of old age. He still didn’t like it.

“I go first,” Bucky decided. He didn’t want a situation where he was alive and Steve wasn’t, no matter what had taken Steve from him.

“Um, well, I don’t think either of us can control that, but I’d rather us go at the same time.”

Bucky frowned a little, having not considered that.

“Very, very far in the future,” Steve added. “Decades from now.”

“That would be acceptable,” Bucky said carefully. “Very far in the future.”
Steve gave a light nod. “Okay,” he said, “uh, what brought this on?”

“Mission: Protect Gingerbread has no time frame,” he said. “If I am not going back into cryostasis, and I cannot until mission: Protect Gingerbread is concluded, then the mission has no end but your eventual death.”

“Oh,” Steve murmured. “I promise, that’s a long time from now. Probably.”

Bucky scowled. “Probably?”

“I’m still Captain America,” Steve admitted. “There’s still HYDRA to defeat. There’s still people who will attempt to destroy the world, or corners of it. It’s my job to fight them.”

“I don’t like that,” Bucky said, still scowling.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, though he didn’t sound like it, “I’m not going to quit.”

“I’m going with you, then.”

“We can talk about it la–”

“I’m going with you,” Bucky repeated, cutting Steve off. “Whether you want me to or not. I have to protect you.”

“I can protect myself,” Steve said, and not for even the tenth time.

“I’m still going,” Bucky insisted.

“Oh, says you,” Steve said with a sigh. “Alright. But, not until you’re sure you won’t relapse.”
Bucky was not sure of the meaning of relapse, but gathered that it referred to his programming. In any case, he answered unthinkingly. “Then don’t go saving the world until then, moron.”

Steve laughed before Bucky could reprimand himself for insulting his Omega, but then, he always smiled when Bucky called him names, so perhaps it was okay to do so lightly. “I can’t guarantee that the world won’t need saving before that.”

“Then I’m going with you.”

Steve gave another sigh and a shake of his head, but he didn’t try to refuse again and Bucky settled his head into the crook of his neck again. He yawned abruptly, and blinked several times.

“You should sleep,” Steve said. “And sleep every day.”

“I do not require that much sleep.”

“You can sleep whenever you feel tired,” Steve said, kissing the top of his head.

“Is it possible to be tired of doing something rather than just physical exhaustion?” Bucky mumbled.

“Yeah, you can get tired of stuff.”

“Then I’m tired of arguing with you,” he said.

Steve slipped a hand into his hair, then, combing through it with gentle fingers. “I didn’t mean to press, I’m sorry.”

“You’re okay,” Bucky said. He yawned again.

“I think I’m going to take a nap,” Steve murmured.
Bucky started to sit up and Steve locked his arms around him. “No, I need my teddy bear,” Steve said, grinning.

“I’m not a teddy bear,” Bucky said, confused. “What’s a teddy bear?”

“You are my teddy bear, and it’s a stuffed animal, a toy, kids sleep with them.”

“I am neither of those things.”

“Metaphorically,” Steve amended. “You help me sleep.”

“If you’re sleeping, I need to keep watch,” Bucky tried to insist.

“It’s safe here,” Steve said. “No one can get in. You don’t need to keep watch.”

“I need to keep watch,” Bucky repeated.

Steve looked at him for a while, his expression a mix of things. Then he nodded, but didn’t let go of Bucky.

“Stay with me,” he said quietly.

Bucky gave a jerky nod as he realized abruptly that Steve was worried that Bucky wouldn’t be there when he woke up. Steve still didn’t trust him. “I promise,” he said hastily, since Steve had every right not to trust him, “I’ll be right here, I can be your teddy bear.”

Steve gave him a tight smile, then squirmed down the couch until he was laying flat on the cushions. Bucky tucked himself between the upright cushions and Steve, pulling his Omega into his arms protectively, kissing the top of his head like Steve did to him and holding him close. He nuzzled the top of his head and rubbed his wrists down the curve of Steve’s spine, making Steve give a little sigh and tuck in closer. “I’ll be here when you wake up,” Bucky promised quietly.

“You can sleep, too, if you’d like,” Steve murmured into his neck. His breathing evened and heart
rate slowed, as he fell asleep. Bucky felt the haze of exhaustion creeping over his mind, but forced himself to stay awake while Steve slept.

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[Boys’ Life, yearly July contest]

*Captain America wants YOU! Send us photos of all the merit badges you earned at camp this year to enter for a grand prize drawing!*

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[September 26th, an abandoned safe house in the Appalachian Mountains]

“God, this place reeks.”

“I didn’t think the Soldier had it in it to know what heat smelled like.”

“Can’t you smell it? Even after a couple of days, that guy smells good. Fuck, never thought I’d say Captain America smelled good.”

“I can’t smell shit ‘cept the Soldier’s rut.”

“Guess what they say about going off suppressants after too long on ‘em is true.”

“Both of you, shut up.”

The asset had driven to this safe house. Had brought the Captain inside. Had kept him, probably fucked him, too. But where had it gone when it was done?

“Sorry, boss.”

There were no leads inside the safe house. Captain America was supposedly dead, but where was
the asset?
out, damned spot

Chapter Summary

"out, damned spot, out i say! o, will these hands ne'er be clean?"

Chapter Notes

hello! i'm back! with feels! you can find this chapter's playlist here. i hope you enjoy!
edit: you can find this chapter's cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Article I:

“WE AFFIRM that God has designed marriage to be a covenantal, sexual, procreative, lifelong
union of one Alpha man and one Omega woman, or one Beta man and one Beta woman, as bondmates, as husband and wife…

WE DENY that God has designed marriage to be a homosexual, polygamous, or polyamorous…”

Article XV:

“WE AFFIRM that God intended for Alphas to be born male and Omegas to be born female…

“WE DENY that Alphas born female or Omegas born male follow God’s original intentions…”

[Pope Francis on CBMW’s Nashville Statement]

“To be quite frank, I have never believed that Omegas born male or Alphas born female are doomed from the start. The Devil has no reach within a mother’s womb, a child has no concept of sin until after birth and time even then. If an Omega is to be born male or an Alpha to be born female, then it is no fault on the child or mother’s part, it is no sign from above that the child is evil, the child is not malformed or deviant. It is God’s will.”

[september 26th, stark tower]

Sam received a text from an unknown number around noon. All it said was: 

Avengers, minus Cap, assemble in the kitchen!

He was not the only number the text was sent to, and none of the other numbers were ones he recognized. After a minute, the original sender named the group chat Avengers minus Cap.

Sam had to assume that this was one of the Avengers texting him. Then had to assume that by being included in a group chat that specified minus Cap but not plus Sam Wilson, that he really was included in the Avengers at that point. It was a lot to process.

He’d already explored his apartment and unpacked all the things he’d brought with him, what few he’d had time to grab the day before, when the text came, so he simply got into the elevator and looked for buttons.

There were no buttons. He hadn’t noticed that before.
“Uh, I need to go to the kitchen,” he said to the ceiling. “The one on the communal floor, I think?”


“You can just call me Sam,” Sam told him as the elevator began to move. It. The computer. “I’m retired.”

“Very well, Sam, I shall update my protocols.”

“Or I was,” Sam added to himself in a mutter. He hadn’t quite anticipated becoming an Avenger post-retirement.

The elevator opened again, after that, and Maria stepped into it.

“You got the text, too?” Sam asked her.

“I wasn’t aware that I was an Avenger, but, yeah,” Maria huffed, leaning against a wall and crossing her arms.

“Who sent it?”

“Tony,” Maria said without looking. Sam tugged out his phone and saved the original number as Tony Fucking Stark.

“Uh, which number is yours?” Sam asked. “Just, out of curiosity.”

Maria recited her phone number and Sam saved that one as Maria. Then he went back and added her surname, because he wasn’t sure if she counted as a friend or a colleague or just someone who could kick the shit out of him and he felt a little awkward about having her number.

The elevator opened again and the two of them exited onto the communal floor. Tony and Bruce
Banner were already there, Tony eating a muffin and talking with his mouth full about something to do with chemistry or physics that went over Sam’s head.

“Hey,” Maria announced.

“– then, if we add – Oh, you’re here.” Tony set down his muffin and clapped his hands together. “Excellent, now we just need the two master assassins.”

The door to the stairs opened and Natasha and Clint walked out. Sam figured he and Clint were on first-name basis by then, at least. He’d briefly stolen the man’s dog, after all.

“What’s the deal?” Natasha asked as she walked up.

Clint nudged her. She added: “He took his hearing aids out, so look at him when you talk to him.”

“You have hearing aids?” Sam asked without thinking.

“What?” Clint said, frowning at him.

“Never mind, I’m just gonna shut up.”

Clint gave a shrug and looked away.

“Deal,” Natasha repeated to Tony.

“Cyborg super assassin,” Tony declared.

“You mean Barnes,” Sam prompted.

“How many cyborg super assassins are in this tower?” Tony asked incredulously.
“How many people in this tower have been treated like inanimate objects with no thoughts or feelings of their own and were, in fact, brutally punished when they did, on occasion, have them for the past seventy years?” Sam countered, crossing his arms over his chest and raising his eyebrows at Tony, who blinked a couple of times.

“One,” he said slowly.

“So, can we treat him like a person with a name and not just a cyborg super assassin?” Sam asked.

“Uh,” Tony said. “No one has ever had that complaint before.”

Sam slowly covered his face with a hand. “I thought these guys were bad,” he muttered.

“What?” Clint repeated.

“We’re talking about Cap’s cyborg boyfriend,” Tony said loudly and clearly. “And Sam wants us to call him by his name.”

“It’s common decency,” Sam said, intentionally uncovering his face so Clint could see his mouth. “And Barnes hasn’t had any of that for a long time, it’s kind of an issue.”

“My issue is he’s a cyborg super assassin who may or may not wake up one day and murder Stevie-boy in his sleep,” Tony added.

“That is an issue,” Maria agreed.

“And it is the issue I summoned you to discuss,” Tony said, with the air of a maestro about to begin conducting.

“Have you got safeguards on his floor to call us if Barnes attacks?” Natasha asked.
“Yep, JARVIS’s voice responses and all is turned off so he doesn’t get antsy about surveillance, but their heat signatures are still tracked, if he attacks Cap, we’ll know immediately.”

“Is there surveillance in our apartments?” Sam asked, kind of horrified by what seemed like a major breach of privacy.

“No cameras or mics, but JARVIS knows what you’re doing,” Tony answered with too blithe an air.

“How?” Sam demanded.

“Heat signatures,” Tony said, as if it were obvious. “I’m paranoid, that is established. It’s in case someone breaks in, so I can go kick the shit out of them immediately. Also to tell if Brucey Hulks out, so JARVIS can send us into lockdown. Or if a cyborg super assassin decides to go on a murder spree.”

“Right,” Sam muttered. JARVIS was a computer program, but it was still a bit… much.

“Does JARVIS know the difference between Barnes attacking Cap and Barnes fucking him?” Natasha asked before anything else could be said.

“Duh,” Tony said, spreading his hands and looking at her with eyebrows high on his forehead.

“Then we’re good,” Natasha decided. “Who does JARVIS notify if Barnes flips out?”

“All of us,” Tony answered with a gesture.

“And we can get in without Steve’s authorization in that case?” she added.

“Yep, now –”

“Then we’re good,” Natasha repeated. “What else?”
Tony gave her a look of minor disbelief. “The fact that there is now a cyborg super assassin in my tower?”

“He’s got a name,” Sam insisted.

“Right, whatever –”

“Wilson has a point,” Natasha interrupted.

Tony scowled at that, crossing his arms over his chest in a mimic of half the other people in the room. “Can we discuss Barnes’s feelings after we discuss his presence in my tower? There’s a snake in my boot and I would like to address it!”

“You okayed it,” Natasha said, “what’s the problem?”

“How do we know he’s not gonna try and murder all of us in our sleep?” Tony said with over-enunciation to stress his point.

“We don’t,” Natasha said shortly. “JARVIS can tell if he attempts it, shut him in wherever he is and notify everyone. Cap can come and talk him down.”

“Okay, how do we know he isn’t already planning that and he’s only playing Cap for a fool?” Tony snapped. “Cap’s pretty trusting, I think you’ll remember, and apparently this is his childhood sweetheart—” he made finger quotes over childhood sweetheart, as if he didn’t yet believe that the entirety of Captain America fiction was actually fiction “– come back to life. I’m pretty sure that counts as emotional compromise, or whatever you super spies call it.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s only interested in keeping Steve safe,” Sam threw in.

“Yeah, he wasn’t planning on moving in with Steve in the first place, Steve had to convince him to do it,” Natasha said. “Barnes is very aware of the threat he poses to Steve.”

“Can we be sure of that?” Tony asked. “Any of us?”
“I believe it,” Sam said. “I’ve seen this before, it’s just the same as any other PTSD ridden vet come home after too long over there. Barnes is interested only in Steve’s safety.”

“New guy doesn’t count,” Tony said quickly.

“I also have a name,” Sam prompted.

“I trust it,” Natasha said.

“I trust it,” Natasha said.

“When too,” agreed Maria.

Clint gave Natasha a nudge, who signed something to him, and he signed back. “Clint’s in,” she said.

Tony looked at Dr. Banner, who had so far said nothing. “Buddy, come on?”

“I think I’m with them,” Dr. Banner said carefully. “I wouldn’t say we should give him free reign, but at the very least, the benefit of the doubt. I mean, how different is he from me?”

“You won’t murder anyone in their sleep,” Tony said immediately. “You’d wake everyone up before you got out of your room Hulked out.”

Dr. Banner rolled his eyes. “We’re still both toeing the line, right? As long as we don’t provoke him, I’d say he’s somewhat safe.” At Tony’s scoff, he added: “Come on, you looked at his file, you saw how often HYDRA stuck him in that chair to keep him docile, and Steve’s his Omega, apparently, what more do we need to say he’s on Steve’s side?”

“The fact that he tried and almost succeeded in murdering Steve?” Tony said. “Duh?”

“He then saved Steve’s life, kept him for a few days, and then brought him to Wilson,” Natasha pointed out. “Because he was aware of the threat he posed to Steve and thought Steve would be safer away from him.”
“Okay, then why did he keep him for three days first?” Tony asked, giving Natasha a didja think about that? expression.

“Because Steve went into heat,” Natasha said plainly. The didja think about that? expression turned into a didn’t think about that expression. “He went off his suppressants, his Alpha was suddenly not dead, I’m sure both of them were highly emotional, it happens.”

Tony looked very taken aback. He blinked a couple of times, then shook himself and blinked some more. “Okay,” he said. “Well.”

“Obviously he wasn’t going to leave Steve at that point,” Sam added.

“I mean,” Tony started, “I guess –”

“Why are we even discussing this?” Natasha demanded. “It’s Steve’s decision, and he already made it. You already okayed Barnes coming here. Unless you’re planning on revoking that?”

“No,” Tony grumbled. “I don’t know. I just don’t know what to think of it.”

“Then let’s talk about that,” Sam said, drawing all eyes to him. “First thing. I’m figuring everyone’s seen Barnes’s file at this point. We all know what he went through, even if we can’t comprehend the amount of pain and suffering he endured. I’m not even close to the professional psychiatrist that Barnes probably needs to adjust, but I know that we can’t go around treating Barnes like a homicidal maniac, it’s just going to reinforce HYDRA’s conditioning. We have to treat him like a normal guy, we can let JARVIS keep him on threat watch, but to us, he’s a normal guy with triggers, just like Dr. Banner here.”

“Fine,” Tony started, but Sam held up a finger.

“I’m serious,” Sam insisted. “For one, don’t touch him unless he gives you permission. Two, don’t say the word scientist around him. I think soldier is okay, but if he reacts badly to a certain word, just don’t repeat it, ever. Definitely, do not order him to do things, offer him choices, make sure he knows that he has complete control over what he does and he can say no or yes to anything. And if he does space out, has a panic attack, go assassin mode, whatever, we call Steve, we let him coax him back, but if he’s hostile, we don’t leave them alone.”
“Fine,” Tony repeated, sounding exasperated, and Sam fixed him with a look.

“This isn’t a thing to kid around with,” Sam said pointedly. “It’s in everyone’s best interest that we help Barnes recover, alright?”

Tony dropped his gaze and crossed his arms over his chest, but appeared satisfactorily mollified, and with words of understanding from everyone else, Sam gave a nod. “Alright. Now that we’ve cleared that up, let’s talk about our concerns.”

“I have no concerns,” Natasha answered.

“I obviously have concerns,” Tony added.

“I’m concerned about his arm,” Dr. Banner said thoughtfully.

“What?” Clint said for a third time. Natasha signed something at him, and he muttered an oh. “I don’t have concerns.”

Sam looked at Maria, who shrugged. “I still want him to testify at Congress, but that’s been discussed already.”

“Alright, Tony is worried Barnes is going to kill everyone in their sleep –”

“Which is completely valid,” Tony butted in.

“Yes, thank you, Tony,” Sam said, with as much patience as he could muster. “Dr. Banner?”

“Hmm?” Dr. Banners said. “Uh, call me Bruce, please.”

“Right, Bruce?” Sam corrected. “You’re concerned about his arm?”
“Yeah,” Bruce said musingly, “how is it mounted?”

Sam gave a blink, pausing. He hadn’t been expecting that.

“And how is his body reinforced? That thing’s got to weigh at least thirty, fifty pounds!”

“I have no clue,” Sam said slowly.

“He said I couldn’t examine it,” Tony added.

“Do you think if Steve asked, he’d let me take a look? Some X-rays, at least?” Bruce asked.
“’Cause, I looked through his entire file, and there is no mention of what they did to install the arm, only maintenance logs on the arm itself, not a word about his actual body. There’s no way to guarantee it isn’t causing him pain or outright destroying his body.”

“Ooh, I could make him a lighter arm,” Tony gasped. “A hollow one! With, like snack compartments!”

“That’s not exactly the kinds of concerns I was talking about,” Sam muttered.

“I’m willing to bet money his bones aren’t reinforced to make up the weight,” Bruce added.

“And, like, interchangeable finger attachments!”

“It’s made of pure vibranium!”

“I can make a hollow vibranium one!”

“Guys,” Natasha snapped. Tony and Bruce looked at her with raised eyebrows. “Sam’s trying to get us to discuss our feelings.”
Both of them blinked at her cluelessly. “I feel that Barnes should have his skeletal structure reinforced with titanium to hold up that arm,” Bruce said.

“I feel that a hollow arm with interchangeable finger attachments would be fucking awesome,” added Tony. “Walking Swiss army knife. Never need to find a corkscrew ever again. Boom.”

Sam covered his face with a hand again. This was progress, he insisted to himself. They weren’t freaking out over the cyborg super assassin anymore.

“Wait, do you think I could add a flamethrower?” Tony said.

“I think we should hold off on making his arm more weaponized,” Bruce said with a shake of his head.

“Okay, so, like, eventually, I could add a flamethrower?”

“If Barnes wants one,” Sam sighed. “And long after he’s stable.”

“You’re taking all the fun out of everything,” Tony complained.

“You were the one worried that he’s going to murder us in our sleep.”

“Yeah, but who else has a prosthetic arm that I can turn into a flamethrower?” Tony demanded. “Unless someone wants to sacrifice an arm to the good of science?”

Sam threw his hands into the air in surrender. “I’m out,” he said. “I got work to deal with. Tony, by the way, for the next few weeks, I’m gonna need chopper rides to and from DC for VA meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays while I phase in a new guy.”

“Fine, fine,” Tony said, as Sam was already walking away. “I have, I don’t know, about fifteen helicopters? And some quinjets. You can have a quinjet!”
Sam waved from the elevator. Tony resumed his conversation with Bruce about Barnes’s arm as the
doors shut and the ceiling chimed.

“Your apartment, Sam?”

“Please,” he sighed. Then, to himself, he muttered: “I think I just became the Avenger’s babysitter.
Fuck me.”

“That is not within my abilities,” JARVIS said pleasantly.

“Talking to myself,” he announced.

“Of course. I shall disregard your requests of ‘fuck me’ in the future.”


“...The rejection of male Omegas as something invalid is a trend that can be traced to Greco-
Roman societies, and easily seen as a trend of Western culture alone. In China prior to Western
influence, the emperor was said to have been graced by the gods to have a male Omega in his
harem. In India, Brahma was said to have conceived, carried, and birthed the universe on his own,
clearly stating the position of male Omegas in Hinduism. Historically, Christian and Hebrew
cultures have regarded male Omegas as deformed or mistakes of nature, but archaeological
evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls have indicated that this was, again, a Greco-Roman influence
on them past the birth of Christ and not truly Hebrew in origin...

“... The term girl-boy has its origins in Rome past the rule of Constantine and the rise of the Roman
Catholic Church. The earliest found usage of it was by a military general in speaking of the slaves
he had won in Gaul (though the language used implies that the term was not invented there), quote:
‘... these barbarians have strange customs regarding male Omegas; rather than sequestering them as
we do, they allow them full range of movement and any freedoms and privileges we would give to
female Omegas. Stranger still, the men of these barbarian tribes mate and breed with these girl-
boys…’ ”

[september 26th, stark tower]
Steve slept fitfully, rising from his doze what felt like every few minutes, but each time he shifted, Bucky’s arms still held him pressed to his chest, his heartbeat still sounded in his ear, and his comforting scent still filled his hazy mind, proving that he was still there. He kept hoping that Bucky might choose to join him in sleep, but he never did.

Finally, he could doze no longer. He adjusted his position in Bucky’s arms, blinking his eyes open and yawning. A finger tapped his chin and he smiled, looking up at Bucky.

“Sleep well, sweetheart?” Bucky murmured. A little thrill at the name and the soft tone of his voice slipped through Steve and his smile widened.

“Yeah,” he said, and he had, even if it had been barely a doze, he felt rested and calm. He settled his head back on Bucky’s shoulder, letting his eyes fall shut, and Bucky tapped his chin again. Steve’s lips curled in a smile, and while he lifted his face, he left his eyes closed. “You remember doing that?” he asked in a mumble. “You used to do it all the time.”

A second passed and Steve looked up again. “No,” Bucky said quietly. “I just do it.”

Steve kissed him gently. “You can keep doing it,” he offered.

“Good, ‘cause I’m gonna.”

Steve gave a chuckle and lifted up to be on eye level with him, squeezing his arms about Bucky’s waist for a second. “What d’you wanna do now?” he asked.

Bucky gave a shrug. “Whatever,” he said.

Steve lifted a hand and pushed it into Bucky’s hair, before Bucky leaned in and caught his mouth in another kiss. Steve gave a little shiver at Bucky’s teeth closing on his lower lip, then lifted a knee and curled it over Bucky’s hip. Bucky’s hands pushed into the back of his shirt, the metal cold against his skin, but Steve held back the less-pleasant shiver his body wanted to give at the sensation to arc into his touch. He was never this horny this often before, but then again, he hadn’t had Bucky all to himself this much since they were kids and grossed out by the idea of kissing or too nervous to make a move. He felt like his entire body was buzzing –

His back pocket, with his phone, specifically. Steve reluctantly pulled away from kissing Bucky to
reach into his pocket and answer his phone. He scowled at the caller ID.

“Stark,” he greeted dully.

“Capsicle. I didn’t interrupt anything, did I?”

“Actually –”

“Excellent, listen, I actually need you to ask your cyborg boyfriend if he’ll let Bruce take a look at his arm. We have some concerns on how it’s mounted.”

“No,” Bucky called into the phone. Steve leaned away from his loud voice and Bucky apologetically kissed his cheek.

“What concerns?” Steve asked instead of answering either of them.

“Okay, so his medical records don’t extend to the actual installation and there’s no other records in his file but for maintenance logs on the arm itself, but Bruce is concerned that they didn’t bother with reinforcing his bones or anything, you know, ‘cause they’re dickheads.”

Steve glanced at Bucky, a frown growing on his lips. “How heavy is your arm?”

“It’s fine –”

“Bucky,” Steve pleaded.

Bucky scowled a little. “It’s not a problem.”

“Is it hurting you?”

“It –” Bucky stopped. Then he let out a huff and started over. “It can cause pain, but –”
“Can I make him a new arm?”

“Stark, shut up for a second,” Steve said, and dropped the phone onto the floor. He slid his hand up Bucky’s left arm, gently cupping the shoulder. “Can you let Bruce look at it? If it’s causing you pain, then we can fix it.”

“It only becomes painful after extended periods of time outside cryostasis –”

“But you’re not going back into cryostasis,” Steve reminded him. “Please?”

“It is not a priority,” Bucky said stiffly. “The arm is efficient.”

“I can make a flamethrower arm!” Stark’s tinny voice came from the floor. “After you’re stable, though. Sam won’t let me make you a flamethrower now.”

“Would you do it for me?” Steve asked carefully. He didn’t like the idea of having to manipulate Bucky into doing something for his own good, but he figured that there was no way Bucky would do it on his own, and Bruce had a point. If HYDRA hadn’t reinforced his skeletal system and the arm was as heavy as they assumed, then there was no telling the kind of damage it was doing to him. “Please, Buck? It’s up to you, but I don’t want to see you hurting.”

Bucky was quiet while he thought, and after a moment, he huffed again and nodded. “Fine.”

Steve gave him a quick kiss and twisted around to pick up the phone again. “Stark, can you bring whatever Bruce needs to take a look him up here?”

“Can’t he just come to my lab?”

“Just bring it up here,” Steve said. Bucky had hated medical examinations, ever since Zola, and he didn’t want to find out the hard way if they triggered bad memories still.

“You’re lucky I’ve been working on a portable X-ray machine,” Stark said, and hung up. Steve set
the phone back on the floor and turned to kiss Bucky again.

“Just your arm,” he promised. “And they won’t do anything you don’t want them to.”

For a second, Bucky leaned their foreheads together and they breathed the same air, Steve’s fingers still tangled in his hair, Bucky’s hands pressing against the small of his back.

“The arm serves its purpose,” Bucky said quietly. “It is a weapon.”

“It can be more than just a weapon,” Steve promised. “It can be an arm.”

“I don’t want a new arm,” Bucky added after a moment. “But, if you want me to, I will let them reinforce my bones.”

Steve was torn between telling Bucky that he needed to do it if he wanted to, not because Steve wanted it, and relief that if Bucky did need it, he’d allow it. He’d felt the power and the weight behind his Alpha’s prosthetic, and thinking back, he saw how Bucky held himself, slanted down to the left, as if compensating. He hated the thought that Bucky could have been in pain this entire time, and had never said so because he had been conditioned to think that pain only became a problem when it prevented him from moving.

“Hey,” Bucky whispered, and knocked a finger against his chin. “Don’t make that face, babydoll, it might stick that way.” Steve gave a snort and rolled his eyes, while Bucky smirked and pinched his cheek. “You’re not the one that has to live with that face for the rest of their life,” he added.

“Nah, I gotta deal with your ugly mug, what could be worse?”

“Dealing with your ugly mug,” Bucky countered with a grin.

“I love you, you jerk,” Steve said happily.

“Love you, too, punk,” Bucky answered, and leaned in for another kiss.
“Member, Bruce and Stark are coming upstairs soon,” Steve mumbled against his lips.

“Meh,” Bucky said decisively, and rolled over to pin him to the sofa cushions. He kissed him with a fervor, hungry like a starving man, to which Steve happily obliged. He lifted his knees to frame Bucky’s hips, tangled both hands into his hair, let out breathy moans as Bucky rolled their hips together and fiddled with his nipples with both hands. They necked like teenagers for a while, grinding against each other and swallowing each other’s gasps and breaths, such that Steve didn’t notice his phone buzzing on the floor until it had been doing so for a while. The elevator let out a loud ding and Bucky sat up instantly, gun in hand and aiming at the elevator doors, which remained shut.

“Hey, hey, it’s just Bruce and Stark,” Steve said quickly despite his surprise, “they’re waiting for us to let them in.”

Bucky glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, then lifted off the sofa and stalked to the elevator doors. When Steve made to get up, Bucky shot a look over his shoulder and made a gesture of wait there. It was then that he heard his phone vibrating, and snatched it up off the floor to answer it.

“Hey, let us in,” Stark snapped.

“It’s just Stark and Bruce,” Steve repeated to Bucky, clambering off the couch despite Bucky telling him to wait. “You can put that away, Buck.”

“Put what away?” Stark demanded, then Bucky answered the elevator with his gun still drawn. The doors parted to reveal Stark, Dr. Banner, and a rolling cart of equipment; a computer monitor, several wires, some other things. Stark let out an undignified squeak and dropped his phone to stick his hands in the air. Bruce slowly lifted his own hands, his face a mixture of startled confusion and concern.

“It’s okay, Bucky,” Steve insisted, reaching out to take the gun from him. “It’s just Stark and Bruce.”

After a second, Bucky relented. Steve stuffed the gun into the back of his own jeans, curling his arm around Bucky’s waist, who set to glaring at the floor before saying gruffly, “Sorry,” to Bruce and Stark.

“Is this going to be a regular occurrence?” Stark asked. “Cause I would prefer it not to be.”
“It’s okay,” Steve said, ignoring Stark completely.

“I’m going to set up a camera feed outside your doors,” Stark declared, “so I don’t get held at gunpoint trying to get upstairs again.”

“Which you won’t be doing regularly,” Bucky snapped back.

“Hey, Stevie-boy here is my friend, too,” Stark said, and Bucky fixed him with a deep glare.

“Don’t call him that,” Bucky growled emphatically.

Steve shouldn’t have found that as hot as he did, but he couldn’t help the shiver down his spine.

“Fine, fine, Stevie’s your thing, got it,” Stark sighed. “Can we come in?”

Steve looked at Bucky again, raising his eyebrows. After a second, Bucky gave a jerky nod and stepped back. Stark raised his own eyebrows, muttering something under his breath that sounded like *too many super assassins on hair triggers* and grabbed the rolling cart to pull it inside the apartment. Bruce looked at Steve with wide eyes, asking a silent question that, unfortunately, Steve wasn’t able to interpret.

“Alright, Barnes, we’re gonna do an X-ray of your arm,” Stark called over his shoulder. “So, if I could have you stand against one of these walls and just look pretty while I wave my magic wand, this should be over before you know it.”

“Do what?” Bucky snapped.

“Brucey, if you would be my lovely assistant and help me demonstrate,” Stark announced.

Bruce sighed, but stood against the hallway wall with his hands at his sides. Stark fiddled with his equipment for a second, then withdrew a long tool, rectangular and shaped a bit like one of those blacklight lamps Steve had seen on cop shows.
“This thing is a prototype portable X-ray,” Stark said. “I wave it over your body, it sends a reading to my computer here. We’re developing them for disaster relief services and EMT’s, that kinda thing.”

“Lead apron,” Bruce said when Stark walked over to him.

“Oh, right.” Stark grabbed a thick, rubbery looking apron from the car and handed it to Bruce, who held it over his lap protectively. Both Steve and Bucky raised an eyebrow each. “Radiation and genitals don’t mix,” Stark told them.

“Right,” Steve sighed.

Stark hit a switch on his wand, then held it over Bruce’s clavicle and slowly began to pull it down. “Look at the computer, it should be receiving the image already.”

Steve stepped over to the cart and computer, leaning in to watch as the image did, in fact, begin to appear. Stark completed his scan of Bruce’s torso and switched the wand off, the computer showing a complete X-ray picture from the base of Bruce’s neck to his waist.

“Awesome, right?” Stark said.

“It’s pretty cool,” Steve admitted.

“Now, this is just a prototype, hopefully, the actual thing will be smaller and faster, and it won’t require the white backdrop like this one does. Anyway,” Stark handed the wand to Bruce, who lifted the lead apron to drape it over his arm, and clapped his hands together. “Barnes, you ready to give it a try?”

Bucky shot a look at Steve, who nodded encouragingly, then cautiously stepped against the white wall. Bruce handed him the leather apron, and he held it over his crotch with both hands.

“Actually, Cap, can you hold it for him, I’m gonna need him to hold his arm up,” Stark called.

Steve stepped in and raised his eyebrows to Bucky, asking for permission. Bucky nodded, frowning, and Steve took the lead apron, holding it against his body carefully.
“Can I have you hold your arm out straight?” Bruce asked him gently.

Bucky held up his arm, fingers curled into a fist.

“Relax your hand, please,” Bruce said, and Bucky uncurled his fist. “Thanks,” Bruce added with a pleasant smile, “you ready?”

“Just do it,” Bucky muttered.

“Now, I promise, you won’t feel a thing,” Bruce said, switching on the wand and holding it up to Bucky’s shoulder. “See, we’re already halfway done.”

“I don’t need you to coddle me,” Bucky grumbled. Bruce laughed lightly, slowly running the wand over Bucky’s arm until it passed his fingers. He switched it off, then glanced back at Stark.

“Let’s get another one, do the chest this time,” Stark said. “Go ahead.”

“Ready?” Bruce asked Bucky, who nodded again. He switched the wand back on and ran it over Bucky’s chest, from the neck to the waist.

“One more,” Stark called. “Barnes, can you turn around so we can get your back?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, and Steve pulled the lead apron away so Bucky could turn. He hesitated before placing it over Bucky’s ass, then Bruce waved a hand at him.

“It’s only needed over the front,” he said, and Steve pulled it back again. Bucky reached out and snatched his hand, curling their fingers together, and Steve gave it a squeeze. Bruce lifted the wand again, switched it back on and ran it over the back of Bucky’s shoulders, from his right scapula to his elbow.

“That’s enough for now,” Stark called. Bruce stepped away, setting the wand on the car, and Bucky turned back around while the two of them peered over the computer.
“You were right,” Stark said after a minute.

“Oh, god,” Bruce whispered.

“What is it?” Steve asked, unsure he wanted to hear the answer.

“Do you want to see?” Stark asked, looking up at Bucky. “It’s not pretty.”

“Nothing about me is,” Bucky said quietly.

“Your face is pretty,” Steve said quickly, giving it a kiss.

Bucky’s expression didn’t change, but he blushed faintly. He gave Steve’s hand a light tug and pulled him over to the cart to look at the computer. Stark had up the image of the back of Bucky’s shoulders; the metal was overlapping the skin, as Steve had seen, but in the X-ray, there were heavy metal pins now visible anchoring the arm to the clavicle, upper ribs, and shoulder blade.

There were no other anchors, just the pins.

“This is barbaric,” Bruce said, “I didn’t think even HYDRA could be so cruel, I would have thought that at least they would have taken the supports down the back and anchored it to the spine so you didn’t accidentally rip your own arm off in the middle of a fight, but this?”

“How are you even standing?” Stark asked of Bucky. “Any other guy would be incapacitated from the pain of holding that thing up, I don’t even think Cap could cope with that weight and so little reinforcement.”

“I am required to function,” Bucky said in a dead tone.

“How much pain are you in right now?” Stark asked. “Do you want me to take it off until we can fix this? I can make you a hollow arm –”
“No,” Bucky snapped, “I need to be able to function.”

“Bucky, this can cause serious damage,” Steve said.

“I’m amazed that your spinal column isn’t bowed from the weight,” Bruce added.

“It never got to a point where it caused serious malfunctions,” Bucky tried to say, “I was always put back into cryostasis before it got too bad –”

“You’re not going to go back into cryostasis,” Steve reminded him firmly. “We need to do something about this.”

Bucky looked at him, then at his feet and let out a breath. “I need to be ready at any time,” he said gruffly. “I can’t be one-armed.”

“Then I’ll make you a new one right away,” Stark started.

“I don’t want a new one, this one is an effective weapon –”

“It’s an arm,” Stark insisted.

“You don’t have to get a new one,” Bruce interrupted. “But I would recommend that you allow us to add better anchoring, plate your clavicle, scapula, ribs, and spinal column in titanium or something similar, you might even have to get your clavicle replaced completely with a titanium one, this looks like you’ve got badly healed hairline fractures along the pins.”

“No drugs,” Bucky said.

All three, Stark, Bruce, and Steve looked at him with high raised eyebrows. Steve’s mouth was slightly open.

“This is major surgery, Barnes,” Bruce said carefully.
“Local anesthetic, then,” Bucky amended, “but I don’t want to be unconscious.”

Stark and Bruce gave a glance to Steve, but he shook his head. “It’s his choice,” he said, even though it pained him.

Bruce looked like he wanted to argue, too, but said nothing. Stark blew out a breath and shook his head, accepting it and moving on, apparently. “Alright, then if you’re willing to let us do that, I’m going to need to look into the arm itself to see how it’s integrated with your nervous system.”

“Is that not in the file either?” Steve asked.

“It’s not,” Stark said sourly. “And anything you know will be helpful, Barnes.”

“They never saw fit to tell me,” Bucky grumbled. “All I needed to know was that I had enough fine motor control to operate the arm.”

“Can you feel things with it?” Stark asked. “Like, if Cap runs his fingers up the arm, can you feel that?”

Bucky looked down, then shrugged. “I register there is a presence if the pressure is enough.”

“Go ahead and try it, Steve,” Stark said, looking at the arm with the eyes of a fascinated mechanic. He waved a hand, and Steve glanced at Bucky to make sure he was okay with it before he reached out and brushed his fingers over the metal plating. “Felt that?”

“No,” Bucky answered, voice soft, almost shameful. Steve hurt for him.

Stark gave a vague nod, working his jaw as he thought. “I should be able to fix that, if you want. Pep’s been suggesting I work on prosthetics for a while now, anyway. Here’s the deal, Barnes, you let me tinker with the arm, I can make improvements, and then I can start building them from scratch for other guys. You don’t have to let me replace it, and I’m more than happy to plagiarize HYDRA’s tech and improve it.”
“Why?” Bucky asked, frowning.

“For other people who’ve lost limbs,” Stark answered, “other vets and such.”

Bucky looked at his arm for a long time. “It is a weapon,” he repeated hesitantly.

“Yeah, but it can also just be an arm. I mean, I’d love to turn you into a walking Swiss army knife, and eventually, I’d love to mount a flamethrower in that thing, but it’s still an arm first.”

Bucky looked at Stark with narrowed eyes, then at Steve. “It’s an arm,” Steve echoed with a shrug. “Like you’re a person.”

“It was built to be a weapon,” Bucky tried to insist.

“Hey, if you want to be a walking Swiss army knife, I’m in your corner,” Stark said with a gesture of his hands. “Whatever you want, buddy.”

Bucky’s eyes drifted back down to the fingers of his metal hand. He curled them into a fist, then uncurled them and flexed each. The mechanisms inside whirred quietly as the plates adjusted and Bucky moved his fingers cautiously. Then, he reached out with his flesh hand and took Steve’s hand, placing it into his metal palm and lining up their fingers. Steve laced them together, stroking his thumb across the cold metal plates.

“Ooh! I could install a vibrator in one of your fingers!” Stark gasped.

Bucky and Steve jerked their gazes to him; he looked too excited at the prospect. “Betcha Steve here’d be on board with that,” Stark said with a wink.

“I mean,” Steve started, looking at Bucky with raised eyebrows and a shy smile, “I wouldn’t complain. It’d be up to you.”

“Can we start with being able to feel?” Bucky mumbled. His cheeks were pink again.
“Yeah, yeah, of course,” Stark said happily, clapping his hands together with a mad scientist grin. “When do you want to start?”

“And, please, if you’re in pain, let us move quickly,” Bruce added.

“When would later be?” Bucky asked Steve.

“Later’s pretty subjective,” Steve said with a small smile.

“Tonight?” Stark asked hopefully. “Now, even? I’ll get in an actual surgeon, Dr. Cho, she’s great, you can meet her first, obviously, but I can open up that arm whenever you’re ready.”

Bucky stiffened at the word doctor, but only for a brief second. He looked at Steve, then at their hands laced together and at Steve’s thumb, still stroking the metal of his hand even though he couldn’t feel it.

“You can look at the arm today,” he said after a second. “But… Not yet on… doctors.”

“Works for me,” Stark said. “Can we work in my lab?”

Steve shot him a worried glance, but Stark wasn’t looking at him. “All my tools are in there,” Stark continued.

“Fine,” Bucky said shortly.

“I’m coming, too,” Steve said quickly.

“Great, I can get your prints and retinal scans at the same time. Let’s go downstairs, then.”

Would the equipment in Stark’s lab trigger anything in Bucky? With Stark wheeling the cart back to the elevator and Bruce walking away, Steve had no choice but to follow Bucky. They’d find out, one way or another.
JARVIS let them off eight floors down and Steve was already bracing himself for Bucky’s reaction to the lab. Stark rolled the cart on then gave it a shove, shouting as he did: “Dummy! Come get this!”

A singular three-jointed claw whirred to life in the midst of the room, then moved of its own accord through tables to the cart before clamping onto it and dragging it out of the way. Steve looked at Bucky, but Bucky was watching the robot with, thankfully, nothing more than mild confusion.

“That’s Dummy,” Stark said over his shoulder, “Damn Useless Machine model E.”

“DUM-E?” Bucky echoed.

“Yeah, can you tell I came up with the name and worked backwards for the acronym?”

“A bit,” Steve murmured, watching DUM-E bump into a table on its way to putting away the prototype portable X-ray.

“Right, Barnes, if I could have you over here, JARVIS, let’s get some music playing.”

Stark began clearing off a table, continuing to talk as he did. “Something that grandpa and granddad won’t take offense to, so no AC/DC, unfortunately. Like, some Frank Sinatra or Bing Crosby.”

Steve wasn’t listening. Bucky was staring at the table Stark was clearing off. It was steel, broad and high off the ground, it really was just a table, the examination table in Zola’s lab had been lower, the edges had been raised and restraints had been added. Bucky was just staring at the table.

“Right, Barnes, if I could have you sit here,” Stark said, dragging a stool out of nowhere, “Bruce, do you think you could find that tiny baby laser cutter you keep losing?”

“Bucky?” Steve asked in a whisper.

Bucky’s face was slack and his eyes had lost their luster. He moved abruptly, taking a seat on the stool, then held out his arm with the same dead-eyed expression. Steve moved quickly to his side, grabbing his right hand and pulling it around his waist before locking his hands around the back of
Bucky’s neck, gently scenting him with his wrists. Bucky jerked, then looked around with widening eyes until they landed on Steve.

“You’re okay, you’re safe, you’re free,” Steve whispered.

Bucky dropped his head onto Steve’s chest and lowered his prosthetic arm. His breathing turned ragged for a second, then he seemed to take a deep gulp of air and calmed.

“JARVIS! Frank Sinatra!” Stark called out. If he had noticed Bucky spacing out, he didn’t mention it, but Steve honestly didn’t think Stark had.

“I shall play the greatest hits of the 1940’s, Sir,” JARVIS announced.

“1920’s,” Steve said quickly. Bucky kept his face buried in the front of his shirt. They didn’t listen to much music during the 40’s, and Bucky had moved away before the 30’s really started, but the 20’s, that Steve and Bucky had shared.

“Roaring Twenties, I like it,” Stark said. He was setting up the table again, spreading out fine tools and kits while Bruce went on a hunt for the tiny baby laser cutter he apparently kept losing. “Al Capone, speakeasies, the Prohibition.”

Faint, bluesy jazz drifted from the speakers. Bucky took a shuddering breath, his arm clenching about Steve’s waist.

“I know nothing else about the 20’s,” Stark added. “Did you go to speakeasies, boys?”

“We were kids,” Steve said, “I turned ten in 1928.”

“Fair enough,” Stark replied. He lifted what looked like a penlight and gave it a flick. “Alright, Barnes, can I have you put your arm on the table so we can get started?”

Bucky lifted his left arm and laid it over the flat surface of the table. The steel was dull compared to the vibranium, but Steve was reminded of those optical illusionary artworks made of black and white lines, where only the curves in the lines showed the presence of a hand. He kissed the top of Bucky’s head, then raised a hand to begin combing through his hair.
“Let’s get this open,” Stark said to himself. Steve watched as Stark began to examine the arm, running the penlight over it, but as he did, a projected image appeared on the glass screen over the table. He ran the penlight over the whole thing, then grabbed the holographic image and zoomed in on it. He hummed lightly, then grabbed a second tool and turned Bucky’s arm out to get access to the inside of his metallic bicep. He inserted the tip of the tool into a seam and with a light hiss, a panel popped open. Beneath it was a mess of wires, beneath that, gears were vaguely visible.

“Steve,” Bucky said abruptly. Steve looked down, at Bucky’s face still hidden in his shirt, and raised his other hand to stroke his cheek gently. “Tell me about my sister?”

“She was a little spitfire,” Steve answered in a soft voice. He didn’t know what was going through Bucky’s head just then, but felt the thrumming discomfort in the bond and knew that his Alpha needed to be distracted. “Followed you around everywhere until she started school. When she was really little, she had trouble saying hard consonants and ended up calling you Buggy instead of Bucky.”

“She called me Bugsy,” Bucky murmured.

“Yeah, started around when you were nine. She was three years younger than you. She is, I mean, she’s still alive. She’s old, though, she’s in her nineties.”

For all he knew, it was from files and records S.H.I.E.L.D. gave him, not from talking to her in person. Because he hadn’t had the courage to go and speak with her in person since waking up, hadn’t spoken with her since mid-October of 1943 when she told him to get lost and not go looking for Bucky.

“So are we,” Bucky mused, breaking Steve from his guilty thoughts.

“She looks it, though,” Steve said quietly. “She’s got grandchildren. Two great-grandkids, too.”

“Who did she marry?” Bucky asked. “I don’t remember his name, there was a boy she liked.”

“I don’t know if it was the same guy that you remember,” Steve said, “but her husband’s name was Arthur, Arthur Proctor.”
“His parents must have been masochists,” Stark quipped. “Arthur Proctor, what a mouthful.”

“Not him,” Bucky mumbled. “The guy she liked was a Beta.”

“Arthur was an Alpha,” Steve answered.

“Ma didn’t like that guy,” Bucky said. “Cause he was a Beta.”

“Times were different back then,” Steve told him. “One of Becca’s granddaughters, she’s marrying a Beta girl now.”

“Ma didn’t like you, not after we started growing up and didn’t get less touchy,” Bucky added, quiet and shameful. “’S why she told me I raped you.”

There was a loud clatter as Stark dropped whatever he was holding before he snatched it back up and resumed his work. Steve kissed the top of Bucky’s head again, his chest tight with a heavy sorrow. “She was lying,” he murmured.

Bucky had never said just what his mother had told him to keep him away from Steve. He didn’t know if he could have expected something as brutal as that.

“Are they dead?” Bucky asked. “My parents. Are they dead?”

“Yeah,” Steve said quietly, “they passed away before I woke up.”

“How?”

“Your dad had cancer. Your ma died in her sleep.”

Bucky nodded faintly into his shirt. “Peaceful, I bet.”
“It was,” Steve agreed quietly. It was unfortunate, he had thought.

“What did Rebecca end up doing? For a career?”

“She taught English. She’s retired now.”

“Her husband?”

“He was an engineer, he helped build schools. It’s how they met.”

“Is he dead, now?”

“Died a few years ago, too,” Steve said. “Just like your ma went.”

Bucky nuzzled his face into Steve’s shirt. “What about the guys? The Howlies? What happened to them?”

“They lived happily ever after,” Steve promised. “Falsworth and Pinky, they married sisters and lived across the street from each other in England. Falsworth had twin boys and Pinky had twin girls, then those four went out and married two more sets of twins.”

“Sounds like a trashy romance novel,” Bucky murmured, and Steve felt him smiling into his shirt.

“Jim got to marry his girl back home, they had three kids, two girls and a boy. Their first daughter is a lawyer, she’s got two kids of her own, their son was in a couple of Broadway shows, then he directed a couple, now he’s a teacher at Juilliard. Their littlest, she’s a dentist. Jim and his girl were real proud of them.”

“I’d be proud,” Bucky mumbled. Steve felt a pang in his chest and ignored it.

“Dum Dum married his girl as soon as he got stateside, it was in the papers and everything. They had four kids, all of ‘em joined the forces, but not one joined the Army. His two boys joined the Marines, his older girl joined the Navy, his younger girl joined the Air Force.”
“Traitors,” Bucky laughed gently.

“Junior, he didn’t get married, but he got to go to college, got a degree, became a lawyer and did his old man proud.”

“Good for him,” whispered Bucky.

“Happy Sam and his wife, they had seven kids.”

Bucky groaned. “Tell me at least two were twins.”

“One set of twins and a set of triplets,” Steve laughed softly.

“One for each of us,” Bucky murmured. “If you ‘n’ me shared, and Gabe and Dernier, too.”

“Why would Gabe and Dernier share?” Stark threw in.

“They were sweethearts,” Bucky said. “I guess that wasn’t in the history books, neither?”

“Lots of things weren’t,” Steve reminded him.

“This is ridiculous,” Stark grumbled, “I’m guessing half the team were Betas, too?”


“I got something against sexism and fragile masculinity,” Stark muttered. He then held out a hand and snapped his fingers. “Brucey! Grab me the other thing you keep losing!”

“I don’t lose it, and you keep forgetting what it’s called,” Bruce called back, but handed a new tool
to Stark. Then, to Steve: “It’s nice to know one of your men was a Beta, Steve. I’m sorry he got his designation erased.”

“What happened to him and Frenchie?” Bucky asked. “They get married?”

“No, not even France had Alpha/Beta marriages legal back then,” Steve sighed. “They did get to live together, though, after the war. Quiet like.”

“What did the history books have to say about that?” Bucky muttered into his shirt.

“Absolutely nothing,” Stark answered, “which, now that I know the truth, is highly suspicious, ‘cause the other guys got their happy endings written down.”

“Feminism was just starting in the early 20th century,” Bruce said in a musing tone, half thoughtful half apologetic. “It took all the Alphas going to war to give Omegas the right to work, even then, male Omegas weren’t recognized by the state and given the right to vote until after.”

“Fuck, I guess that means you never got to vote, Steve,” Stark huffed. “Fucked up, man, fucked up.”

“I had bigger things on my mind than voting rights in the 40’s, to be honest,” Steve muttered.

“What, you and your soon-to-be cybernetic boyfriend were too busy being sappy in secret?”

“Sure,” Steve said, not wanting to get into the whole sordid tale with Stark just then. He focused and combing his fingers through Bucky’s hair, on breathing slow and deep so Bucky could match it, like he used to do whenever Steve had an asthma attack when they were kids.

“There was a war goin’ on,” Bucky added.

He didn’t seem to want to get into it, either.

“Fair point,” Stark said absently. “Hey, let me know if you can feel this.”
Bucky abruptly winced and Stark pulled back from the arm. “Felt it?” Stark asked.

Bucky only nodded.

“Did it hurt?” Stark added, raising both eyebrows.

“Some,” Bucky grumbled.

“Right, on a scale of one to ten, one being blissful oblivion and ten being the worst agony in the world, how much did it hurt?”

“I – I don’t know?” Bucky said hesitantly. He was losing his accent again. “I am not used to pain mattering.”


He looked at a loss for words, which normally would have been blissful oblivion in and of itself, but right then, Steve was too focused on Bucky.

“Alright, how about, one being a pinch and ten being a gunshot wound, how much did that hurt?”

“A three, I don’t know –”

“Could I hook you up to a brain scan thing? It’ll just be a couple of wires on your forehead. I want to see what’s receiving the signals from the mechanisms.”

Bucky lifted his head from Steve’s chest to look at Stark. Steve looked at Stark. Bruce looked at Stark. Stark looked at them, then said: “What?”

“Fine,” Bucky said before anyone else could speak. “Do it.”
Bruce gave Stark a look, but walked away without a word. Stark shrugged and picked up a different tool to approach Bucky’s prosthetic again.

“Whoever made it, it’s pretty advanced for Cold War-era tech, it definitely appears to be hooked up directly to your nervous system. Which should make it easier for me to set up better touch receptors, but it also might make it more difficult to adjust the anchoring and reinforce your bones. We might have to disconnect it completely to do that.”

“I need my arm,” Bucky growled.

“Hey, the surgery won’t take more than a few hours, we’ll hook you right back up when it’s over.”

Bruce reappeared with another rolling cart and machine. “This is an electroencephalogram, Barnes, well, something like that. I’m going to attack a few pads with wires to your head, and the computer’s going to be able to see your brain waves.”

“Just do it,” Bucky said.

“Just making sure you’re on board,” Bruce said calmly, and Steve shifted so that Bruce could begin attaching the electrodes to Bucky’s face and head. Steve had had a few EEG’s done since waking up, they were completely painless, the electrodes just felt weird, but he still kept his wrists where they could brush against Bucky’s skin.

“You got that hooked up, Bruce?” Stark called, nose buried in the arm.

“Just a second,” Bruce mumbled, attaching one last wire. “There.”

Bruce stepped away and clicked at the computer. “Barnes, wave at me with your flesh hand, please.”

Bucky automatically raised his arm and waved. He made no other movement, the reaction jerky, and once he dropped his hand, he shuddered in Steve’s arms. Steve kissed the top of his head.
“And can you raise one finger for me?” Bruce added from behind the computer.

Bucky lifted his arm again and raised his index finger.

“All good,” Bruce said to Stark.

Stark stepped away from Bucky to join Bruce behind the computer. “Barnes, move your cyborg arm.”

Bucky stiffened in Steve’s grip, exhaled, and then raised his left arm to give Stark the finger. Steve grinned at that, at knowing he was beginning to resist the urge to comply automatically and cooperatively. Stark gave a snort, though Steve wouldn’t have cared if he was offended, and flipped Bucky off in reply.

Bruce was frowning, though.

“Bucky?” Bruce said softly. “Can I call you Bucky?”

“Sure,” Bucky answered in a mutter, but it was encouraging to hear him say it, anyway.

“When you move your bionic arm, do you feel pain?”

Bucky dropped the arm back onto the table and didn’t answer.


“Meaning unclear,” Bucky said hesitantly.

“Does it hurt to move your arm?” Bruce asked carefully. Steve looked at them, at Bucky, then at the arm. “Not just the joint, even moving your fingers.”
Bucky didn’t answer them. Steve brushed his hair from his forehead, pushing it back. “Does it hurt?” he murmured.

Bucky was slow in answering.

“Yes.”

“What kind of pain is it?” Bruce asked while Steve sucked in a breath. “Like, a dull ache or a shooting pain?”

“Shock,” Bucky mumbled.

“Right,” Stark said quickly, “sorry to ask you to, but I need to you to move your arm for a few seconds. Just, wave it around.” He made a vague gesture.

Bucky lifted his arm and waved it through the air five times, then dropped it again. It hit the table with a reverberating clunk.

“It’s definitely hardwired directly into his nervous system, his cerebellum is controlling it, but this is looking like it’s wired directly to where the nociceptors were, too.”

“So every movement causes him pain?” Bruce spluttered. “This doesn’t make sense!”

“They’re HYDRA,” Stark insisted.

“What does that mean?” Steve asked hastily.

“On top of being anchored sloppily, his arm is wired to tell the brain that it’s feeling pain every time he moves it,” Stark answered bluntly. “Intentionally. This wasn’t a fluke, HYDRA wanted him to hurt every time his finger twitches.”

His gaze, horrified, dropped to Bucky, who didn’t lift his face from where it was pressed to Steve’s chest. He’d been in pain this entire time and hadn’t been saying anything? Had HYDRA
programmed him to think the pain was necessary?

“Can we please take the arm off?” Bruce asked Bucky quietly. “There’s no reason for you to be in this much pain all the time.”

“I barely feel it anymore,” Bucky said.

“But it’s still pain,” Steve said softly. He brushed through Bucky’s hair with his fingers again. “Please?”

“I can get this fixed in two days, max,” Stark added, “two point seven if you want me to turn your middle finger into a vibrator.”

“We’re safe in the tower,” Steve continued, “and you can still shoot with your right hand.”

“I have to protect you,” Bucky insisted.

“I have to protect you,” Steve whispered into his hair. “Please, let them take it off, please don’t keep putting yourself in pain because of me.”

“I – It’s not that bad,” Bucky said, “maybe a four or whatever, I can deal with it.”

“You don’t have to,” Steve reminded him. “Please, Bucky?”

“But –”

“Barnesy,” Stark interrupted, “your Omega’s right. It isn’t necessary for you to be in pain all the time, and even one-armed, you’re probably still more dangerous than everyone in this tower. Maybe not Red Scare, maybe you’d be equal at that point.”

“He means Natasha,” Bruce added.
Bucky, again, didn’t answer them.

“Buck?” Steve prompted, a sudden thought occurring to him. “Do you think you should be in pain?”

“There’s no one to punish me,” Bucky whispered, almost too soft for Steve to hear it. “So I have to punish myself.”

“What – Bucky, you don’t have to – Why do you even think that?”

“Near mission failure. Severe damage to gingerbread.”

It felt like a punch to the gut, Bucky’s quiet voice and his lips murmuring those words into his chest. Steve gripped his chin and tilted it up so that Bucky had to look into his eyes, look at the determined set of his jaw and the forgiveness in his gaze. “You do not need punishment,” he insisted. “You saved my life, alright? I forgive you, you don’t need punishment of any kind, Buck.”

“But –”

“You do not need punishment,” Steve stressed. “And you know what, I couldn’t forgive myself if I let you put yourself in any pain, let alone constant pain like this, because of me. Please?”

Bucky’s lips were turned in a frown and his gaze was stubborn, but after a second, he dropped his forehead onto Steve’s chest again.

“Do you have robots that can kill people?”

Steve was slightly taken aback. Apparently, so was Stark, as he said: “Uh…”

Bucky looked up at Stark. “Do you have robots that can kill?”

“I suppose I could make a turret for Stupid?” Stark mused.
“I would prefer one that wasn’t named Stupid,” Bucky said wryly.

“Why do you need a robot capable of killing?” Bruce asked, audibly concerned.

“I’d rather have backup on hand,” Bucky said firmly but also evasively.

“Ooh, I can put one of my old suits in sentry mode,” Stark suggested.

“Iron Man suits?” Bucky asked, as if he were considering his options.

“Yeah, granted, if you scratch the paint on it, I’m gonna make you do Shitcan’s maintenance for a month.”

“What are we going to do with it?” Steve asked Bucky, confused and mildly reluctant to have one of Stark’s suits walking around their apartment.

“Have it cover the exits,” Bucky said, then to Stark: “If I can have it until you fix the arm, you can take it off.”

“Deal,” Stark said before Steve could even respond. “I can take off the prosthetic right now, the shoulder itself is attached beneath the skin, but past that, it’s removable. Bruce, can you fetch Barnsey some of your fancy painkillers? I’m gonna bet taking it off is gonna hurt like a bitch.”

“Will they impair my functionality?” Bucky said as Bruce stepped back. “I’m not taking them if they impair me.”

“Uh,” Bruce echoed Stark’s word of earlier. “I haven’t exactly tested these on anyone yet.”

“What are you going to give me?” Bucky said, startled.

“A cocktail of Asgardian magic?” Bruce answered hesitantly.
Bucky blinked at him. So did Steve.

“Asgardian… magic,” Bucky repeated slowly.

“Yes,” Bruce said, with a bit more confidence. “I’ve been developing it for Steve.”

“We were racing each other to see who could get it done first, super drugs and super alcohol,” Stark added.

“You’re definitely not giving it to Steve untested,” Bucky snapped.

“See, we can test it on you first,” Stark answered quickly. “It’s basically Asgard’s version of morphine and ecstasy mixed, only not something they get addicted to. I don’t know, chemistry’s not my strong suit.”

“That sounds like it would impair me,” said Bucky with a scowl.

“Now, funny enough, it just causes symptoms like mild intoxication,” Bruce argued. “According to Thor.”

Bucky looked considering. Then, he huffed. “Fine,” he said, “but the lowest dose possible.”

“You got it,” Bruce said happily, already running off.

“So, what happened to my super alcohol?” Steve asked conversationally.

“I have it,” Stark said, snapping his fingers at Steve with raised eyebrows. “Somewhere. In the making.”

He raised an eyebrow in return.
Bucky gave his waist a squeeze and flicked an eyebrow up at him when Steve looked back down. “What d’you need super alcohol for?” he asked, a light smirk counteracting the suspicious tone of his voice.

“New Year's Eve,” Steve said flippantly. Bucky flicked his eyebrow back up. “What, he offered to make alcohol that could actually get me drunk, what was I supposed to say?”

Steve had longed for the bliss of drunkenness after Bucky’s death, after all.

“Hmph,” Bucky answered.

Bruce ran over again, or walked quickly, an IV pole and supplies in hand. “Okay, I’ve got about half the dosage that I estimated would work on Steve, so you should feel little to no side effects other than being kinda drunk. You won’t feel pain, but you may find that your sense of touch and smell intensify.”

“Why?” Bucky asked while Bruce began setting up the IV.

“Thor says that this stuff can have the effect of a mild aphrodisiac,” Bruce admitted. “Now, this isn’t pure Norse ambrosia, it’s a cocktail of it and some Earth drugs, and it’s cut with saline since you’re worried about being impaired, but I haven’t tested it yet, like I said, so if you do start to get horny, just let me know, yeah?”

Bucky blinked a few times. Steve found his ears going warm thinking about how handsy Bucky got normally after hitting just a light buzz. Bucky looked at the IV, then at Bruce, then back at the IV and raised his eyebrows.

“I’ll be sure to tell you to scram before I start taking Steve’s clothes off, then,” said Bucky in a calm tone.

“Hey, nobody is allowed to have sex in this lab but me,” Stark called.

“I’m assuming you also mean Pepper, otherwise that’d be some lonely sex,” Steve quipped.
“Are you shocked?” Stark asked Bruce, sounding only a little sarcastic. “I’m shocked. Captain America made a dirty joke. I feel like that should be illegal.”

Steve rolled his eyes pointedly.

“Hey, my Stevie makes dirty jokes with the best of ‘em,” Bucky defended.

“Two Alphas walk into a bar,” Steve began sarcastically, only for Stark to make loud noises of protest.

“Captain America is a proprietor of virtue and chastity!” Stark shouted and Steve rolled his eyes. “Dirty jokes are not in your repertoire of humor!”

“What’d I just say?” Bucky called back.

“Shh, you, you’re the one who took Captain America’s virginity, you don’t get to talk.”

Steve stiffened and bit the inside of his cheek. The lab fell abruptly silent, even Bruce looking up from where he was prepping Bucky’s arm for the IV drip.

Bucky buried his face in Steve’s shirt and gripped his waist tighter.

“What?” Stark said, breaking the awkward silence.

“Hey,” Bucky murmured to Steve, completely ignoring Stark. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

But it did matter, didn’t it? It would always matter, like an old wound left to fester and congeal over time, what he had done would always be there in the back of his mind to leer and sneer from back alleys late at night and remind him that he’d committed the worst sin imaginable. Past Steve telling him and Bucky insisting that he’d never hate him for it, they had never discussed his time as a prostitute. Steve had always felt too shameful, and Bucky had never seemed to want to know, not even the name of the Alpha who had bought Steve’s virginity. Maybe especially not that. It was good he’d never asked, though, because Steve couldn’t have told him. He didn’t know.
“What?” Stark repeated, louder this time.

“Stevie,” Bucky whispered, still ignoring Stark and still barely loud enough for Steve to hear it. “I mean it, sweetheart, it doesn’t matter. And if you’re not gonna let me punish myself for nearly killing you, I ain’t gonna let you do the same after all these years, alright?”

“Okay,” Steve whispered back, and wished he could believe it. Bucky kissed his shirt, then lifted his hand to the back of Steve’s neck, rubbing the inside of his wrist down his neck to his shoulder, then curling his fingers in his hair possessively.

“What just happened?” Stark said.

“Shuddup,” Bucky grumbled, and the moment was over.

“Hey, I’m going to need to insert the needle, now,” Bruce said softly.

“Yeah, fine,” Bucky answered shortly. He scented Steve a second time, then offered Bruce his flesh arm, and Steve felt him wince into his chest as Bruce inserted the IV drip.

“It’s going to be cold for a second,” Bruce added.

“Love you,” Steve whispered to Bucky, who dropped another kiss onto his shirt.

Bucky then let out a breath as Bruce started the IV, his face pressing harder into Steve’s shirt. They were all silent, the four of them, for a long moment. Then Bucky turned his cheek and nuzzled lightly against Steve’s chest.

“Feeling woozy at all?” Bruce asked him.

Steve smiled lightly and Stark snorted while Bruce gave a nod. “Guess we’re a go, then,” he said to Stark, who moved around the computer and back to Bucky’s arm. “You do know how to detach that thing, right?”

“Duh,” Stark muttered. “Come be my lovely assistant again, Bruce.”

Bruce flicked his eyebrows up at Steve before joining Stark on the other side of Bucky, who was still nuzzling and scenting Steve gently. Of course, Steve wasn’t complaining. The more Bucky scented him, the more Steve could relax.

“Right, so the joint is here,” Stark was saying to Bruce, “and these are what need to be disconnected.”

“Stevie,” Bucky mumbled.

“Hmm?”

Bucky shifted his hips closer to him, causing Steve to notice the abrupt situation in Bucky’s pants.

“This stuff is a mild aphrodisiac.”

Steve gave a snort while Bucky grinned into his chest, then he reached out and stopped Bucky from lifting his arm where it was attached to the IV when he shifted it. “Hey,” Bucky complained, “not like I’m tryna cop a feel here, babydoll, I just wanna hug you.”

“You gotta keep your arm still,” Steve insisted. “Don’t jostle the needle.”

“But, doll, I wanna hug you,” Bucky whined. He nuzzled again, kissing Steve’s shirt. “I’m only gonna have one arm in a second, y’know.”

“You can hug me when you’re not attached to a needle, Buck.”

“’S no fair,” Bucky grumbled. He abruptly set his mouth, open, on Steve’s nipple through his shirt
and bit gently. Steve sucked in a breath and hastened to lean back despite Bucky protesting. “No, no, come back, babydoll, ‘m not doin’ nothin’.”

“Behave,” Steve tried to warn him.

“Hmph,” Bucky just said. Then he leaned his temple against Steve’s pec to look over at Stark. “I officially declare that you can’t give this stuff to Steve unless I’m around to take care of his stiffie.”

“I officially declare that I heard no such declaration,” Stark said. “Because officially Captain America does not get stiffies.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but Bucky was already protesting the first part of what Stark had said. “Hey, don’t you need my permission to give him anything anyway, I’m his Alpha.”

“No?” Bruce said questioningly. “Why would we need your permission?”

“Cause I’m his Alpha,” Bucky repeated, like they were dumb.

“Bucky, they don’t need an Alpha’s permission to give their Omegas medication anymore,” Steve told him.

“I don’t know how I feel about that,” Bucky grumbled. “I think I oughta be around if you take this stuff.”

“You can feel something about it later,” Steve said, though he rolled his eyes at Bucky’s stubbornness.

“Was that even a thing in your time?” Stark asked them.

“Yeah,” Bucky said, turning his face into Steve’s chest again to nuzzle him. “I mean, ‘s not like I ever got to say something about what docs gave Steve, on account of him pretending to be an Alpha himself.”
“Yeah, but before the serum, wait, did you have to write Barnes to get his permission to take it in the first place?”

“Stark,” Bucky growled before Steve could even open his mouth, “shuddup.”

“Touchy subject, I’m guessing he didn’t.”

“Shut up,” Bucky repeated, more firmly this time as he lifted his head to glare at Stark, who shrugged and buried his nose in the exposed joint of Bucky’s prosthetic shoulder again.

“Anyway, it’s a good thing,” Steve continued, looking at Bucky’s face buried in his chest with raised eyebrows and a light smile. “I might not have cared, but lots of people are happy to have that independence now.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re probably right,” Bucky grumbled. Then he lifted his head again and looked at Stark through squinted eyes. “How long do you reckon this is s’posed to take? I got a itch.”


“Shuddup or I won’t let you scratch it,” he said.

“I am definitely scandalized,” Stark announced. “And, like, half an hour. Maybe twenty minutes.”

“Seriously?” Bucky whined. Steve chuckled.

“Hey, this is a bionic limb, not a splinter in your fingernail.”

“Ugh,” Bucky declared, turned his head, and started sucking on Steve’s nipple through his shirt again. Steve sucked in a breath and dropped his forehead onto Bucky’s hair for a second, then consciously forced himself to reach out and grip Bucky’s jaw to pull him off. “Hey, c’mon, Stevie, I ain’t doin’ nothing!”

“Behave,” Steve repeated.
“Oh, sure, I’ll behave,” Bucky said, then winked. “Badly.”

“You’re such a little shit,” Steve sighed. Bucky grinned up at him and dropped his chin onto Steve’s sternum.

“Yeah, but you love me, so you just gotta deal with it.”

“Don’t use my words against me,” Steve laughed.

Bucky winked at him again, and though Steve kept telling him to behave, he loved Bucky’s loose attitude then. It felt the most natural Bucky had been since showing up in Sam’s kitchen the previous morning.

“I’m gonna use more’n your words against you, sugar,” Bucky flirted and Steve hastily pinned his arm back on the table before he could fling it around his waist. Bucky laughed at him and dropped another kiss directly onto Steve’s nipple, the bastard.

“You do know that both Bruce and me are still here and can hear every word you’re saying, right?” Stark called.

“Think I give a shit? Hell, I think I blew Steve behind a tree with the whole team on the other side of it in the middle of the day once. Am I remembering that right?”

“It was barely dawn, Buck,” Steve corrected him while Stark let out another undignified squeak. “And they were just getting up.”

“Hey, we should try that again, babydoll,” Bucky said with another grin.

“I think you tried that yesterday,” Steve laughed.

“We are still right here!” Stark insisted. “Fucking hell, never give this shit to anyone ever again, burn it, Banner, throw it into the fiery pits of hell and never look back. How do Asgardians even deal with
“I meant the behind a tree part,” Bucky said, again, ignoring Stark, then winked at him again. “Though I wouldn’t say no to a repeat of yesterday.”

“How are you not red as a tomato?” Stark demanded of Steve, whose ears were barely tinged pink.

“He’s blushing a lil’, Stark,” Bucky assured him, and Steve pinned his hand again when he tried to lift it up. “Hey, c’mon, Steve, just a touch, huh? Don’t be mean to me, I’m an old man and I’m ‘bout to lose an arm!”

“I take back my offer to turn your middle finger into a vibrator, I take back everything I’ve ever said about your alleged chastity, Rogers, and I wish I could take back my offer to let you live here.”

“Steve’s a good Catholic boy, Stark, you shuddup,” Bucky threw over his shoulder. “And I don’t need my middle finger to vibrate to take him apart.”

“I regret my existence,” Bruce muttered.

“That face is not the face of a good Catholic boy, that face is the face of somebody who’s had lots and lots of premarital sex.”

“Hey,” Bucky said, tone sharp again suddenly, “I get to joke about Steve having sex, you don’t.”

“I can joke about it if you’re discussing it blatantly right in front of me.”

“No, you don’t, asshole.”

“Can no one discuss me having sex?” Steve asked.

Bucky turned to him with a pout. “Aw, but dollface,” he whined.
“Yeah, c’mon, dollface,” Stark snorted.

“You don’t get to call him that, neither,” Bucky snapped.

“Possessive much, Barnes?”

“Very,” Bucky growled.

Steve shouldn’t have found that as hot as he did. He found it very hot.

Bucky, apparently, could tell, as he flicked his gaze back up to Steve and quirked his brow, a light smirk curling his lips. Steve couldn’t help but lean in and kiss him; he’d seen that face so many times and it never lead to anything wholesome. He loved it.

“I have half a mind to ask Bruce to see what Barnes’s brain is doing right now,” Stark called out. “But I also don’t want to know what the brain looks like while aroused.”

Steve pulled back, having forgotten that Bucky was still wired to the EEG. Bucky chased his lips and pouted firmly when Steve didn’t let him catch them again.

“You’re no fun, doll,” Bucky grumbled.

“Stark is, unfortunately, right, we can’t neck in front of them.”

“Thank you,” Bruce whispered while Stark snorted out a disbelieving “Neck?” and Bucky said: “Ain’t nobody getting hurt by a little bit of smooching, sugar.”

“Bruce is being traumatized,” Stark threw in.

“Bruce is being a baby,” Bucky decided before turning his pout on Steve again. “C’mon, Stevie, I’ll be good, just a peck, sweetheart, I’m goin’ through withdrawal here, I need your kisses, babydoll.”
Steve pecked him on the mouth and held his hand firmly in place. “There.”

“One more, doll, that was barely a touch, that don’t count –”

“Hey, hey, keep your cyborg parts still, Barnes, I’m disconnecting your fingers!” Stark abruptly called when Bucky tried to move both arms.

“Behave,” Steve insisted.

“Oh, sure –”

“Behave well,” Steve corrected, and Bucky scowled. “How long is this stuff gonna affect him?” Steve added to Bruce.

“I have no clue,” Bruce sighed regretfully.

Bucky tried to move his flesh hand again and Steve gripped his wrist tightly, his fingers closing over the inside of his forearm. Bucky grinned suddenly and buried his face in Steve’s shirt, wriggling his wrist in Steve’s grasp. He shifted on the stool again and his hips brushed against Steve’s thigh, the bond between them flaring with a jolt of pleasure that nearly made Steve gasp.

“Keep that up, Stevie, tha’s good, that’s gold right there,” Bucky was mumbling, “you got the best hands, prettiest fingers, tha’s real good, babydoll.”

Steve realized that his fingers were closed on Bucky’s scent gland, tight enough to feel erotic, and hastily adjusted his grip so that he wasn’t touching it any longer. Bucky let out a whine and tried to squirm his wrist back under Steve’s fingers, but Steve flattened his palm over his arm and held it still.

“Don’t be mean to me, doll, c’mon.”

“Bucky,” Steve warned.

“Halfway done,” Stark announced.
“Thank fucking Christ,” Bucky growled and Steve had to bite his lip to keep in the hiss of breath. Bucky nuzzled his chest again, his shirt no doubt stinking of Bucky by then, and kissed his pec. “M take you apart bit by bit the second I got a free hand, doll.”

“The second you get back to your apartment, you mean,” Stark commented while Steve shivered.

“Eh, fuck that,” Bucky decided, kissing Steve again. “I think I fucked him in a church once, I don’t give a shit where we are.”

“Oh, my fucking god,” Stark muttered. “This is insane.”

“It was a courthouse, Bucky,” Steve said, and, for his credit, he did blush again.

“S right, church crosses one line too many, huh?”

“Li’l bit,” Steve said.

“Right, church crosses a line, but explicitly discussing sex in front of your friends doesn’t?” Stark quipped.

“I ain’t being explicit,” Bucky defended himself. “I could do worse.”

“Don’t,” Stark begged.

“Please,” Bruce muttered.

“Yeah, well, Steve don’t like that, so your lucky day,” Bucky said, then mouthed at Steve’s nipple again just to be a shit. Steve had to lean away immediately and Bucky huffed. “No fun at all, Rogers.”

“Hey, question, if you’re a thing, why’s his name still Rogers?”
“Hey, dumbass, it was illegal.”

“Oh yeah,” Stark mused. Bucky rolled his eyes. “Well, it’s legal now.”

Bucky nudged at Steve, who stepped closer despite Bucky’s likelihood to try and fondle him with just his mouth again. “Wanna change your name, Rogers?”

“You wanna propose better?” Steve answered with a smirk.

“Rogers is such a dumb name, anyway, doll, Barnes is much better.”

Steve rolled his eyes, again, while Bucky scented him, again. “I think Barnes is dumber than Rogers.”

“Barnes is definitely dumber than Rogers,” Bucky agreed quietly. “Barnes didn’t go home to get Rogers.”

“What does that even mean?” Stark muttered while Steve dropped a kiss onto Bucky’s head.

“I’ll change my name if you want me to,” he offered softly.

“Lemme ask you again right when I ain’t boozed up, huh?” Bucky murmured back. “That was definitely a shit proposal.”

“Was it even a proposal?” Bruce asked. “You just asked if he wanted to change his name.”

“Peanut gallery, shut it,” Bucky answered.

Bruce shrugged in surrender. “Whatever you say, boss.”
“But are you going to change your name, is the point,” Stark added. “I vote you hyphenate.”

“We what now?” Bucky asked. “And who says you got a vote?”

“You hyphenate,” Stark repeated, ignoring Bucky’s comment about votes. “Go with Barnes-Rogers or Rogers-Barnes instead of one or the other.”

“Steven Grant Barnes-Rogers,” Bucky tried out. “That’s a fucking mouthful, there.” Then he grinned up at Steve. “Just like the man himself.”

“I vote Rogers-Barnes,” Bruce said.

“I do, too,” Stark threw in.


“You love it,” Bucky said, delighted.

“Are we going with Rogers-Barnes or what?” Stark asked.

“Again, who says you got a vote?” Bucky said snappishly.

“Cap, back me up,” Stark said. “Almost done, by the way.”

“Barnes-Rogers rolls right off the tongue,” Bucky insisted.

“I don’t know,” Steve said, just to be difficult, “Rogers-Barnes has a nice ring to it.”

Bucky looked at him and huffed. “See if I eat you out when we get upstairs, Rogers.”
“That’s explicit,” Stark commented while Steve raised his eyebrows at Bucky, daring him silently. Bucky huffed again.

“It’s a good thing you’re gorgeous,” he said.

“Uh-huh,” Steve said, smiling and pleased while Bucky pretended to be irked and was really just as pleased as him. “It’s a good thing you’ve got one hell of a mouth on you.”

“That’s even more explicit with the context of the last thing said!” Stark exclaimed wearily. Bucky just gave Steve a lazy grin and dropped his chin onto Steve’s chest to stare up at him with pleased eyes.

A second later, though, his face went from pleased grin to abject shock as his prosthetic arm detached from his shoulder.

“Hallelujah!” Stark called. “Gimme two seconds and then you can go.”

“Oh, that feels weird,” Bucky mumbled. His eyes were wide, his pupils nearly eclipsing his irises – not aroused, not anymore – glazing over as his chin slipped off Steve’s chest. “That feels really weird,” he went on, “fuck, it’s weird, Steve? Stevie, baby?”

“I’m right here, I got you, it’s okay,” Steve said over Bucky’s ramblings; he let go of Bucky’s arm, not even caring when it immediately latched to his waist, fingers digging into his ribs, to bring both hands to the back of Bucky’s neck and soothingly caress his skin. “It’s okay, Buck, I got you.” Bucky pressed his face into Steve’s chest again, his breathing fast and shallow, and Steve peppered kisses on the top of his head. “I got you,” he promised.

“Hey, can I take the IV out, Bucky?” Bruce asked quietly.

Bucky didn’t let go of Steve, at first, then he nodded into his chest and reluctantly uncurled his arm from Steve’s waist to lay it back on the table. Bruce withdrew the IV and held gauze over the break in Bucky’s skin, taping it down with medical tape before releasing Bucky. Instantly, Bucky’s arm flung around Steve’s waist again, his fingers digging into his ribs, his left shoulder a stump, pressing into Steve’s body with no arm to cling to him.

“Wait, wait, I still have to do a few things, bring that back over here,” Stark protested.
Bucky growled into Steve’s chest for a second, then leaned his left shoulder away. Steve dragged his wrists over the back of Bucky’s neck, kissed the top of his head, and murmured softly to him. Stark did a few more things to Bucky’s shoulder, then said: “Wait right there, I’ll be right back,” and scurried off. Bucky pressed his shoulder into Steve’s body again, like he was reaching, shaking uncontrollably.

“It’s so fucking weird,” he hissed. “I don’t even know what to do with it, it’s fucking weird, I don’t like it, it feels wrong, it’s not supposed to be –”

“I’m gonna cover the joint so you don’t accidentally mess up the wiring, Barnes,” Stark said, having returned.

“What’s not supposed to be what?” Steve murmured to Bucky.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Bucky exhaled.

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” he asked gently.

“No,” Bucky whimpered, and Steve kissed his hair firmly.

“It is,” he insisted. “It is.”

Bucky shuddered against his chest. “It’s weird,” he hissed again.

“Hey, can I get to your shoulder, please?” Stark asked quietly.

Steve glanced at him briefly, enough to pass a silent thank you, and Bucky pulled his left shoulder back again so that Stark could cover the joint.

“This is just a cloth, so be careful with it and don’t get it wet,” Stark instructed. “I’m going to get started on fixing your arm immediately. You can go now.”
Bucky stood up so quickly he nearly knocked Steve over. He kept his remaining arm firm on Steve’s waist, tugged on him, and half ran, half staggered back to the elevator. Steve wrapped both arms around Bucky, walking sideways almost, until they were back into the elevator and Bucky pinned him against the wall and buried his nose in Steve’s neck. He was still shaking, the elevator began to move without either of them speaking, and Steve wished he knew what to say to comfort him.

When the elevator doors opened, Steve gave Bucky a light push to get him moving. “Let’s go lay down, alright?” he said and Bucky barely nodded to indicate that he had heard.

Steve kept his arms around Bucky, Bucky kept his head tucked into Steve’s shoulder, and he walked them back to the master bedroom where Bucky wanted Steve to sleep without him. Steve guided his Alpha onto it, then bent and unlaced his shoes. Bucky’s hand, his only hand, curled into his hair and Steve pressed into the touch. He then helped Bucky out of his shirt, took off his own shirt and shoes, set aside Bucky’s gun, then crawled up the bed to lie with his head tucked in the pillows. Bucky still sat on the edge of the bed, until Steve reached out and tugged him down, then squirmed until he was wrapped around him and nearly laying on his chest.

He rubbed his cheek over the plates of Bucky’s metal shoulder, gentle as possible so not to cause pain. Bucky let out a shuddering breath, then another, until they were sobs and he rolled them over so he could bury his face in Steve’s neck again and cling to him, his only hand curled around his neck and shoulders to tangle in his hair. He was shaking all over, the sobs going down to his core, while Steve ran his hands down Bucky’s back, skimming his wrists over Bucky’s skin, overwhelmed by the rush of emotions through their bond and crying himself.

“It’s okay, Bucky,” he said, even though it clearly wasn’t. “I’ve got you. I’m sorry. It’s gonna be okay.”

After a long, long minute, Bucky’s sobs quelled into long intakes of breath.

“’S not your fault, Stevie,” Bucky rasped. “’S my fault. Order came through pain, ’s what they said. I let ’em do it, I let ’em turn me into a weapon.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Buck,” Steve whispered back, “HYDRA’s full of psychopaths and monsters, you’re just one guy, what could you have done to stop ’em?”

“Could’ve let ’em kill me,” he murmured.

Steve held on tighter then. “You could’ve,” he said, because who was he to talk when someone
thought giving up was better than living? “But you held on, you’re here now. We’re here now.”

“I shouldn’t be,” Bucky sighed, then nosed at his jaw, kissed his pulse, and then the smooth skin over his scent gland, where the marks of his teeth ought to have been and weren’t, and pushed his fingers into Steve’s hair. “You really are better off with somebody not broken.”

“I’m just as broken as you, Buck,” Steve swore to him. “We can be broken together.”

Bucky laughed, a dry and cold laugh that understood the desperation of the situation, curled his fingers over the back of his neck, kissed him again and nuzzled his neck, not the flirtatious gesture of earlier, but a need to be grounded, assurance that they were both there and they were both real. Steve understood it, it was why he’d taken their shirts off, so they could be skin to skin, so he could feel Bucky’s heartbeat in his chest and splay his fingers over the notches in Bucky’s strained spine.

“We’re here,” he whispered again, “we’re alive, we’re together. That’s all that really matters, right?”

“All that ever mattered, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured. “You ‘n’ me, ’til you wise up and go looking for the guy you really deserve, ’cause it ain’t ever gonna be me again. I got too much blood on my hands. Can’t get it out.”

_OUT, DAMNED SPOT, OUT_ , Steve remembered from Shakespeare.

“Well, I’m really stupid,” he promised, a little bitter and a little sad, “stupid in love with you, and nobody could ever be better than you for me, Buck, so I ain’t ever leaving. I’ll wash the blood off your hands if you’ll keep me safe and warm, okay?”

Lady Macbeth had walked and talked and washed her hands in her sleep and thrown herself from the highest tower. She had never stopped seeing the blood on them, and no one had helped her to wash her hands. The doctor and the servant had pointed and watched and done nothing. Once, Steve had seen an alternate spin to the scene. Lady Macbeth had walked and talked, and the witches in the shadows had fueled her nightmares until she walked herself off the tower. Steve would not be the doctor or servant, he would not let the witches poison Bucky any longer. He would wash Bucky’s hands, he would wash Bucky’s hands until the skin was raw and new and clean, until Bucky stopped seeing the blood under his nails. He was familiar with scrubbing skin raw and new and clean and never being able to feel cleansed. He would always wash Bucky’s hands.

Bucky sighed, a soft exhale on his clavicle and neck that warmed him from the outside in, mouthed
at his pulse, maybe just reassuring himself that it was still beating. “You keep me warm, too,” he whispered. “S cold all over everywhere else. Cryo’s cold. The Artic’s cold, too, wasn’t it?”

Steve could only nod, kissing Bucky’s hair.

“You could’ve swam ashore,” Bucky whispered on. “Coulda made it back home.”

“Wasn’t a home to go back to,” Steve said. “Thought I was going on, gonna see you again. That’s home.”

“Home,” Bucky rasped, only hand tight on him, breath hot on his skin. “You’re my home, too, doll, right here.”

His breathing was evening out; though it was still quick, he was no longer at risk for hyperventilating. Steve combed his fingers through Bucky’s hair, skimmed his wrist down his spine, kept his head thrown back so Bucky could keep his face buried in his neck. Their hearts beat in time, fast with Bucky’s yet fading panic.

“I had dreams,” Bucky whispered. Steve listened. “Sometimes, you ‘n’ me, in the park, and it’s warm ‘cause it’s summer, an’ you’re laying with your head in my lap, I’m petting your hair and you’re pretty as a picture, all for me. Then sometimes it’d be you ‘n’ me in the trenches, and we’re getting bombed and shot and there’s too much space between you ‘n’ me, I can’t reach you, and you’re getting shot and there’s nothing I can do. I just sit there and watch you bleed out.”

Steve pressed his cheek against Bucky’s hair; his nails – always dirty, forever caked with someone else’s skin and semen, like the blood soaked into Bucky’s cuticles – bit into Bucky’s back.

“Sometimes, you’re trying to get me out of cryo, or out of the lab, or whatever, but you’re small, and you die fast, and they just laugh while I can’t do nothing, I beg ‘em to just shoot me and they just laugh. You look like an angel, but your wings, they get all bloody, and they just laugh.”

“They were just dreams,” Steve forced out.

“And the train,” Bucky mumbled, and he had to feel the way Steve’s heart skipped a beat, his pulse kicking beneath Bucky’s lips. “S the worst sound in the world, you crying. I just want it to stop, but I’m falling, then sometimes you jump with me, and they get us both, and just to break me, they kill
you slowly in front of me. Kill my angel, so I know I don’t got nothing left to fight for.”

“I’m right here,” Steve echoed, “I’m alive, we’re alive, we’re here.”

“I did that,” Bucky whispered, hoarse. “I killed Omegas in front of their Alphas slow and painful, just to break them. So they don’t got nothing left to fight for.”

“HYDRA did that,” Steve told him, insistent, instant. “It wasn’t you, it was HYDRA.”

“My hands,” he said, and it came out like a whimper.

“If somebody cut off your hands and slapped someone with them, you’d still blame the guy who cut your hands off, Buck.”

“Think I’d be more mad about them cutting off my hands,” Bucky muttered, it brought a little smile to Steve’s lips.

“You know what I meant.”

Bucky nodded, nudged his nose against the line of Steve’s jaw, and then sat up a little. Steve held onto him, confused, until Bucky tugged at the blankets beneath them and he realized that he was just looking to get under the covers. Steve sat up and crawled beneath the blankets, Bucky sliding in next to him, Steve going into Bucky’s arms automatically, Bucky kissing his temple.

They just lay there, for a long time. They didn’t sleep, they just lay there, Bucky checking Steve’s pulse every so often, scenting him every time he did, as if just reminding himself that Steve was really there. That he was corporeal, that he was alive, that he even existed.

The sunlight from the window in the living room slowly crossed the floor outside the open door. It trailed from one end of the living room to the other, peeking into the doorway of the room, as if to say goodnight, before slipping off with dusk riding behind it. In the dusk, Bucky’s shallow breaths deepened. In the now growing darkness, Bucky kissed his pulse and pulled his only hand from Steve’s hair. He sat up, his hand ghosting down his chest to his stomach, and Steve lifted his own hand to press down on Bucky’s.
“You should eat,” Bucky mumbled.

“You should, too,” Steve said back.

Bucky shrugged, like he didn’t care about his own needs. “You need nourishment. I need to check the perimeter.”

With that, he slid off the bed and lifted his gun from the nightstand. Steve made to get up and Bucky pressed his hand to his shoulder.

“Wait here,” he said. His voice was flat. Steve felt his hand trembling where it held him still. “I’ll be back.”

Steve sat up when Bucky took away his hand, bit his lip when Bucky cleared the bathroom, curled backward to press his face into the depression left by Bucky’s body when he slipped out of the room. They weren’t cured, not by a long shot; one afternoon of cuddling while Bucky came down from a panic attack and Steve felt so overwhelmed he couldn’t hold back tears wouldn’t magically fix them. Bucky was barely feeling better, their bond felt fragile and trembled each second their bodies disconnected. He kind of wanted to scream into the pillow, but knew that would only make Bucky panic worse and wouldn’t make him feel better. They could joke and tease each other again, sure, but if something was setting something off every five minutes, what good would crude humor and winks accompanied by smirks do?

The past three years, Steve had moved on autopilot. He hadn’t felt anything, like all his emotions were still frozen, like his heart was iced over and he couldn’t thaw out completely. He’d moved, numb, with only a muted repetition of life isn’t fair and what Bucky would have said if he were there in the back of his head to keep him company.

There had been nights where he’d lain down to sleep and realized that he didn’t even know what day of the week it was, since every day was so dull and devoid of warmth that one blended into the next. There were days he’d wake up and it would already be time to go back to bed, days when he’d look up when the sunrise lit up his hands and he hadn’t slept at all. He’d thrown himself into working for S.H.I.E.L.D. so hard he’d collapse the minute he got home, but even with missions taking up days at a time, there would always be the end of them, when Fury sent him home and didn’t call him back for at least two weeks, sometimes a month. The past three years had felt like an eternity, each step taken was another drop in an endless ocean, even just two weeks ago, he had gotten out of bed, gone for a run, and pretended to have emotions like a normal human being to joke around with a stranger.

There had been nights where he woke up in a cold fever, his skin crawling as though he were
covered in someone else’s sweat and semen again, and no matter how many showers he took, he
could never get it from the creases of his knees, his elbows, or out from under his nails. He had
washed his hands until the skin was raw and dry and cracked and never, never cleansed. The witches
always cackled, the doctor and the servant gossiped and pointed, and never could he feel clean.

But the past four days, he’d been overflowing, and despite how happy he was to have Bucky back,
to have him alive, to have the heart put back in him, every emotion was so bright and intense it hurt.

The rage at HYDRA would make his vision tint red at the corners. The horror at what had happened
would send his knees buckling. The delight when Bucky touched him made his eyes sting. He had
been so starved for touch that every brush of Bucky’s fingers sent his blood singing, but every time
Bucky withdrew, the places where he had touched Steve’s skin would light a-fire and itch until
Bucky came back and touched him again. He’d lived so long alone and cold, it hurt to feel again.

How was he meant to heal Bucky when he didn’t know how to heal himself?

Bucky’s scent filled the room, his footsteps were quiet as he entered. Steve heard the click of the gun
on the wood of the nightstand, then the mattress dipping as he sat. Bucky set his hand on Steve’s
shoulder, ran his fingers down the length of his arm, then a single finger touched the underside of his
chin and tapped lightly.

He opened his eyes and tried to smile at him. Bucky tried to smile back. His fingers brushed away
the streaks of salt-water on his cheek; first the left, then brushed away tears on the right, rough
against his skin, his palm cupped his cheek, his thumb caressing gently the crest of his cheekbone.

“You need to eat, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured into his hair. “C’mon, I’ll make dinner.”

“You need to eat, too,” Steve whispered back.

“I’ll eat if you eat, how about that?”

“Deal,” he said, then tangled a hand in his hair and brought Bucky’s lips down for a kiss.

The love he felt was so bright it burned. Bucky leaned in and pressed a kiss to his temple, and Steve
would gladly combust and turn to cinders, finally sanitized, if it meant he had Bucky back.
wow that was fun. btw, the nashville statement is a real thing, obvs i edited it to make it fight the 'verse, but it's a real thing with real rage-inducing 'affirmations' and denials. anyway, you can see that we're delving into some deep issues here, so, if it wasn't clear already, warning for future depressive content. everything will get worse before it can get better.
я призрак

Chapter Summary

"i am a ghost."

Chapter Notes

ha, betcha thought i was gonna be way late again, didn't you? well... a bit... whatevs, i went to a university open house this weekend so i'm blaming that (btw it was amazing i can't wait to start). just to clarify, the chapter title is russian for "i am a ghost." you can find this playlist's chapter here. enjoy!
edit: you can find the cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“...By 1900, it was considered acceptable for a low to middle-class Omega to suffer employment for a few short years after presenting, after which she would be let go in order to raise her children.”
Whether or not the Omega was even married let alone had children mattered little. The sorts of jobs they were allowed to take were even reflective of this, Omegas populated temp work, where they would be expected to do little and be paid even less... The farthest from the world of temporary jobs Omegas were allowed to venture were in paid domestic labor; childcare, early education, or food service. By the age of 22, an Omega could expect to be given a pink slip and sent home, and if she were not married by this time, she would have to hurry to find an Alpha, and until then, remain in the care of her father.

“But in the cases of Omegas whose fathers were deceased, simply finding a new Alpha to take care of them was a long-term solution to a problem that needed an immediate answer, and the only profession that encouraged Omegas to stay or begin at 20 and older was, at that time, prostitution...”

*

[september 26th, stark tower]

Natasha sat at the breakfast island of her apartment, fiddling with the chain at her neck, while Clint stirred a pot of chili on the stove. His hearing aids were still out, fortunately, so he couldn’t hear her thinking probably loud enough to disturb Barnes on the floor above them.

Barnes, who she was sticking her neck out for. Who had left a four-inch scar over her hip. Who had once lifted her, an eleven-year-old child, off the ground by the hair and thrown her across the room, broken eight ribs, fractured her clavicle, dislocated her shoulder, and given her a concussion, because she had resisted his Alpha voice.

It had been Lukin’s idea. The Widows had needed to be taught that they would always submit to their betters, that the nightmare that would come for them if they stepped out of line was real, that they were nothing more than pawns, and could be just as easily controlled. The Red Room had brought the Winter Soldier in, lined up the nine Widows that were, at that point, still alive, and he had commanded them to slice open their wrists. They had thought that the Winter Soldier commanding them would drive the message farthest into their skulls, that they were pawns, for the Alphas to control, to send where they wished. That they would be so frightened of the Winter Soldier, the ghost story they were told for bed every night, the lullaby Madame B sang to remind them what would come for them if they ran, that they would begin to associate the Alpha tone with him, and then the power he had with every Alpha who used their Alpha tones on them.

Eight had done it immediately. Two had screamed, and then been shot. They weren’t allowed to make noise without permission. Natasha had held her knife to her arm, then dropped it.

The Winter Soldier had been the face of everything the Red Room had done to her once. Everything that had been taken from the three-year-old born in an orphanage in Stalingrad, everything that had been shoved in and everything that had even touched her. She’d made a promise to herself, long ago,
long before she’d even escaped the Red Room, that one day, she would find the ghost, she would take that very same knife, she would sing *Zimniy soldat* to the tune of *Tili-tili-bom* like Madame B had done, and she would slit his wrists.

Now, the Winter Soldier was on the floor above her, not the shadow creeping closer to catch the Widows who did not obey, but a man in pieces. The same things done to her had been done to him, only worse, since he’d had his whole life ripped from his mind, over and over and over, and she, she’d only been conditioned. He had been erased.

To top it off, Steve was one of her few friends. She couldn’t very well kill the Winter Soldier knowing what she knew then.

Clint snapped his fingers in front of her face. She blinked, realizing that he was leaning on the counter in front of her and looking at her with raised eyebrows.

He raised his hands and signed: *What’s the million mile stare for?*

He preferred signing to talking when he had his hearing aids out. Natasha stopped worrying her necklace to answer him, signing: *Same old, same old.*

Clint raised an eyebrow. She raised both of hers. He signed: *I know you better than that.*

Natasha huffed and dropped both hands to the counter, shaking her head. Clint gave a nod and walked around the counter to fetch his hearing aids, patting her on the shoulder as he walked by. She didn’t lean into his touch, didn’t feel the need, but it still lifted some of the tension from her shoulders as it came and went. When he returned, he was fiddling with the volume on his right hearing aid. He resumed his place in front of the counter, leaning on his elbows, looking at her with raised eyebrows.

He never needed to ask. He only ever needed to raise his eyebrows, she would sigh, then work out whatever was bothering her, and he’d do his best to make it better.

“You’re concerned about Barnes,” he said. “Or, to be more specific, you’re concerned about what he means to you.”

Sometimes, he didn’t even need her to voice it.
“I’m conflicted,” Natasha said. “On the one hand, how can I hate him if he went through the same things? On the other, I still…” She trailed off, at a loss for words.

“You’re not planning on murdering him in his sleep, are you?” Clint asked.

She gave him a look. He raised his hands, muttering: “Just covering my bases.”

“Obviously, I’m not planning on killing him anymore,” she said dryly. Then she raised her eyebrows, adding with a heavy tone: “At the least, I don’t want to be the reason Cap offs himself.”

Clint’s jaw dropped. “Um,” he said, then reached up and adjusted his hearing aids. “Run that by me again?”

“Rogers said he didn’t want to be around if Barnes wasn’t,” Natasha answered. “Told Fury that if he had to kill Barnes to stop Insight, he himself would be next.”

“Fuck,” Clint muttered. “And I thought I was dependent on you.”

“I know,” Natasha sighed, “it was pretty shocking. It’s a miracle they did both make it out of there. Until he showed up at Sam’s place, I thought we were gonna find him on the bottom of the Potomac with a bullet in his mouth.”

“Fuck,” Clint repeated.

She only nodded. She had been prepared to find him at the bottom of the Potomac with a bullet in his mouth. She was still reeling from having not found him that way.

“Alright,” Clint sighed, “okay. That’s Cap’s issue. He can talk that out with Barnes. Right now, I’m concerned about you.”

Natasha gazed at the granite countertop for a while, then gave a light shrug. Clint reached out and lifted her left hand, holding it between both of his, to give it a light squeeze.
“You haven’t slept,” he said quietly. “Not since he showed up.”

A corner of her lip turned upward, giving him a look. “You weren’t even in the country when he showed up.”

Clint squeezed her hand again. “I know my girl, alright? Her boogeyman shows up, she ain’t shutting her eyes.”

Natasha had nothing to say to that, so she didn’t, she just raised her other hand and cupped it over the back of Clint’s hand.

“Talk to me,” Clint said quietly.

“I owe Rogers a debt,” she said quietly. “And I owe Barnes a painful death.”

She stopped after that, shaking her head.

“Well, you can’t kill Barnes,” Clint prompted.

“Yeah, I know, it’s just – I spent a long time planning what I would do, what I would say –”

“Now he’s just like you,” Clint finished for her.

Natasha nodded, silent.

“You could take the high road,” Clint mused, slotting their fingers together as he spoke. “Help him break out of his programming, help him readjust. I’m sure that’s what you’re thinking you should do.”

“I owe Cap,” she murmured, but he shook his head.
“The high road, that’s gonna have low oxygen due to the altitude. The level road, though,” he said with a nod, “you let Cap take care of his own and you take care of you first. You don’t get sick from the bad air, you don’t tire yourself out, and If Barnes wants your help, he can come to you for it, and you’ll be ready if he does.”

“Why do you make such valid points?” Natasha grumbled.

Clint smiled and shook her hands lightly. “It’s my job to make sure you don’t run yourself into the ground paying back debts.”

“Hmph,” was all she said in reply. Clint squeezed her hands again.

“The boogeyman's not coming for you tonight,” he told her. Then, he raised both eyebrows, as if considering. “Though, he might be coming for Steve. Or in. Or on.”

Natasha let out an ungraceful snort, because of course Clint would make that joke.

“Chili’s ready,” he added. “You’re gonna eat, then you’re gonna take a bath, then you’re gonna sleep.”

“You gonna massage my feet again?” she asked, a smile curling her lip.

“No,” Clint laughed, “I’m gonna massage your shoulders. I can see the knots in them from here.”

Natasha laughed as well, squeezing his hands in return, and accepted the bowl of chili Clint put in front of her. She took the bath he drew for her, relaxed into the hot water and bubbles while Clint worked the kinks from her neck and shoulders, then collapsed, skin pink from the bath and still naked, into her bed. She almost fell asleep before Clint joined her, but was out cold by the time he pulled her into his side.

The boogeyman didn’t come for her that night. She slept soundly, with no shadows huddled in the corners watching her with penetrating gazes.
“...The male Omega is as common in popular fiction as the unicorn is in real life. Between 1980 and 2000, over one million novels featuring female Alphas were published, and in that same time period, approximately 500 novels featuring at least one named male Omega were considered for publication...”

Steve woke abruptly, bolting to an upright position as he panted, listening, straining, but for the life of him, he didn’t understand what had woken him. Then, whatever it was sounded again, and Steve pushed back his blankets to slip out of the bed, silent, creeping towards the door.

After the dusk had given way to night, after they’d eaten grilled cheese and tomato soup again, after Steve had started to nod off sitting in the living room, Bucky had sent him to bed. Alone. He’d slept fitfully, which was probably why he woke so easily, until the noise had jerked him from his doze. The clock on his phone read half past three, and outside his door, there was a quiet snuffling.

Steve pressed his ear to the door. He heard something shift, a heavy weight on the polished hardwood floors, then a quiet thud and the return of the snuffling.

More importantly, he smelled who it was. Steve opened the door without a second thought, fell down beside Bucky, and drew him into his arms, tucking his head under his chin. Bucky was limp, didn’t hug back or nose at his jaw, but held the gun in his hand with white knuckles.

“It’s okay, you’re safe,” Steve whispered to him. “You’re home, Buck, you’re okay. C’mon, come to bed, alright?”

“Ya dolzhen smotret’,” Bucky muttered.

Taken aback, he was quiet for a second.
“Is that Russian?” he asked quietly, confused.

“Da.”

“I don’t speak Russian, Buck.”

“Ya znayu chto ty ne.”

Steve sighed heavily. “Come to bed,” he said. “Please?”

But Bucky just shook his head. “Ya dolzhen smotret’,” he said again. “Ya dolzhen derzhat’ vas v bezopasnosti.”

Steve rubbed his wrists up and down the flat of Bucky’s back, kissed the top of his hair, then settled back on his butt to lean against the wall like Bucky had been when he’d first opened the door. He let go of Bucky, and he sat up straight again, resumed his sentry’s stance, didn’t look at Steve or move, so Steve just pressed against his side, curling his arms around his waist and resting his head on Bucky’s shoulder.

In the hallway, the faint glow of Stark’s empty suit illuminated Bucky’s silhouette. Gave the gun in his hands an eerie glow. Made the lifelessness in his eyes palpable. Steve nuzzled at Bucky’s shoulder, and Bucky never moved. Not when the darkness deepened, not when it began to lift, not when the dawn lit up the room and brushed over their toes before lighting up the barrel of the gun and giving it a gentle look.

“Vy dolzhny byli spat’,” Bucky murmured.

“I still don’t speak Russian,” Steve said back.

Bucky’s head, the first part of him to shift since three, fell back against the wall. “Ya znayu.”

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Steve asked.
“Ya ne znayu.”

“Do you know who I am?” Steve then asked, a sudden chill passing over him.


He didn't know what Vy moy meant, but da was yes, so it mattered little. “You gonna speak English anytime soon?”

Bucky shrugged. Steve wished that he had his phone, he could have used it to translate what Bucky was saying, but it was on the nightstand in the room behind him, and he didn’t want to leave Bucky’s side even for a second.

“Do you know who you are?” he asked. He wasn’t sure why he kept asking questions, if Bucky was only going to answer him in a language he didn’t speak, hadn’t even known Bucky could speak, but there he was, asking.

“Ya prizrak.”

Steve didn’t know what to say any longer. “Do you know I love you?”

“Da.”

“Do you –”

“Stop asking,” Bucky rasped.

He stopped. Bucky eventually set the gun on the ground to wrap his arm around Steve’s shoulders, drew him in and held tight with only one arm to secure him. Exhaled shakily onto his hair, the fingers of his one hand dug into Steve’s shoulder, little that he cared, and the cold weight of the fragile bond between them was, as ever, overwhelming.

“S what I meant,” Bucky murmured, “about not remembering.”
“But you’re back?” he answered, daring to feel hopeful. “Now?”

“Yeah,” Bucky echoed, kissing his hair now, and Steve sagged in relief a little. “You shouldn’t have come out here.”

“Tough shit,” Steve said, and kissed Bucky’s neck, which was all he could reach with his head tucked under Bucky’s chin. “You needed me.”

To that, Bucky said nothing. Only nudged at him until he stood up, kept his one arm wrapped around Steve’s waist, guided him into the kitchen.

“How do you need nourishment,” Bucky said to his questioning glance.

“So do you,” he answered automatically. Bucky said nothing, only opened the fridge and started digging through it, for quite what, Steve couldn’t know.

“I think a family of ten could eat from that fridge for a month,” he said instead.

He couldn’t tell if Bucky heard him, as he said nothing in response. Another time, Bucky would have made a sarcastic comment about how his metabolism meant he ate just as much as a family of ten, but not now.

Now, Bucky only withdrew packages of lunch meat and cheese, dug bread from the pantry, and began assembling dry sandwiches, one hand making him slow. Steve remembered eating those as a kid, cabbage replacing the meat most days, but he’d always hated the dry texture of stale bread and old cheese in his mouth.

He stepped closer and set a hand on Bucky’s wrist. When Bucky stopped, he reached back into the fridge and drew out mustard and mayo, a head of lettuce, a tomato, and a jar of pickles, because they were all there. Bucky looked at the additional things Steve had set out, then at him with a confused frown.

“There is little nutritional value to those items,” he said.
“Lettuce and tomato are good for you,” Steve countered gently. He went looking for a knife, then began slicing the tomato on the bare counter.

“This is high in sodium,” Bucky said, reading the pickle jar. “It will dehydrate you.”

“We’ll drink more water,” Steve said.

“This is entirely simple carbohydrates,” Bucky added, reading the mayonnaise now. “It won’t provide any substantial energy.”

“We’re not doing anything today,” Steve offered, then reached for the jar in Bucky’s hand. “It’s for taste.”

Bucky blinked at him, and held onto the jar.

“Like yesterday, with the grilled cheese and tomato soup?” Steve prompted.

Bucky blinked more. Steve tore a little more, but tried for a smile anyway.

“Food can be more than nourishment, remember?”

Slowly, Bucky lowered the jar. “Did you tell me this already?” he asked quietly.

“It’s okay,” Steve said instead of yes.

“It’s not okay,” Bucky grumbled, but handed over the jar of mayonnaise.

Steve set down the jar initially, just to grasp Bucky’s fingers and squeeze them, then started spreading the mayo over the bread. He built the sandwiches, made two for both of them with twice the layering of meat and cheese needed for civilians on each, then filled two glasses with water so Bucky would feel better about the sodium in the pickles. He pushed two sandwiches to Bucky and
took a seat on a stool to eat his. After finishing one, he looked up to see that Bucky hadn’t touched his.

“You can eat,” he prompted, gesturing to the sandwiches.

Bucky looked at them. Then he picked up one and bit into it. He made no noise, no hum of appreciation, no facial expression to relate his thoughts on the taste, but ate quickly, devouring it in large bites. Steve started on his second sandwich and nodded encouragingly at Bucky’s second when he finished the first.

In the quiet, with the only sound in the kitchen being the two of them chewing, a faint buzzing caught Steve’s attention. He turned his head, a frown on his lips, trying to pinpoint its origin.

It sounded like a phone vibrating on wood. Steve set down his sandwich and held up a finger to Bucky, who frowned as well while Steve ducked back into his bedroom.

“’S the matter?” Bucky called after him.

“My phone’s ringing,” he answered.

Bucky didn’t say anything to that, or nothing that Steve could hear, and he plucked the phone off his nightstand.

*Sam Wilson is calling*, the screen read.

Steve swiped a thumb across the screen and held the phone up to his ear, already walking back towards the kitchen. “Hey,” he said.

“*Dude, I’ve called you, like, four times.*”

Steve checked his notifications. He had five missed calls from Sam Wilson. Putting the phone back to his ear, he muttered a vague apology.
“It’s whatever, man, JARVIS said he’d tell me if something was wrong with you guys. Look, I actually called to see if I could come in?”

“What?” Steve repeated, as Sam’s word choice was a little questionable.

“I’m in the elevator.”

Steve’s lips parted to form an O as he looked at the elevator, the light above which was blinking helpfully to indicate someone wanting to get in. “Oh,” he said dumbly, “sorry.”

“Yeah, just let me in already.”

Steve hung up, setting the phone on the counter to kiss Bucky’s cheek. “Sam’s waiting to come in,” he said in explanation.

“I heard,” Bucky answered softly. He reached out, dragging the inside of his wrist down Steve’s arm almost as if he didn’t realize he was doing it. Steve resisted the urge to preen and ignore the elevator entirely.

“Is that okay?” he asked; he was a little hesitant. It would be the second time in the two days they’d been there that Bucky had his space invaded, and Steve wanted him to feel safe where they were. Though Sam hadn’t seemed to bother Bucky before, considering…

Bucky just nodded, so Steve kissed his cheek a second time and walked to the elevator. Stark’s empty Iron Man suit turned its head as he passed, but otherwise remained still. He glanced over the buttons, then pressed the one that was blinking and the elevator dinged lightly before opening.

Sam gave him a smile and stepped out.

“Something I can do for you?” Steve asked him.

“I was hoping to talk to your boy,” Sam said.
“About?”

“Stuff,” Sam answered evasively. “You, too, probably.”

Steve, again, hesitated. Sam had an honest face, though, and he looked as though he wanted nothing more than to be helpful. So he nodded and waved Sam on to the kitchen. Bucky was holding his second sandwich, but he hadn’t started on it. He was watching Sam with a suspicious eye, and when Steve resumed his seat by the counter, Bucky moved around to stand at his side.

Sam didn’t appear bothered by this, rather, he stepped around the other end of the counter to stand facing them.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Steve asked.

“How are you doing?” Sam asked in reply.

Steve glanced at Bucky, figuring that Sam meant his Alpha more than him.

Bucky said nothing.

“You could give me a status update?” Sam suggested.

“Good,” Bucky answered immediately. He laced his arm around Steve’s waist.

“Sorry I interrupted your breakfast,” Sam said, nodding to the sandwiches. “I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind telling me a bit more about what constitutes a functional status, see what we can do about the things that the guys who had you before thought were okay but aren’t.”

“Meaning unclear,” Bucky replied.

“Well, like hunger,” Sam began, now leaning on the counter while he talked to Bucky. “They said before that hunger wasn’t a necessary bodily function unless it got so bad it impaired your actions?”
“Yes,” Bucky said, a little more slowly now.

“Do you still think that?” Sam prompted.

Bucky glanced at Steve. “It’s okay if you do still think that,” Sam said quickly, “it’s not your fault. We just want to make sure you’re taking care of yourself, make sure that you know the difference between what’s healthy and what’s not. Eating when you feel hungry, whenever you feel hungry, is healthy, eating only when you absolutely have to isn’t.”

“They –” Bucky started, then stopped, frowning.

“Take your time,” Sam offered.

Steve pushed an arm around Bucky’s waist, slid his palm beneath Bucky’s shirt and brushed the inside of his wrist against the skin of Bucky’s hip. Bucky dropped his gaze to the countertop.

“The asset does not eat,” he recited, like it was a line programmed into the back of his head and he was just reading words aloud from the granite surface of the counter. Steve fought back the urge to tense up, not wanting to upset Bucky. “Nutrients are provided upon exit from cryostasis via the tube.”

“They gave you a feeding tube?” Steve mumbled.

“I guess?” Bucky muttered. The tone had slipped back into his voice.

While Steve ground his teeth, Sam held out a hand. “Alright, now you know that that’s not okay. You, sir, are in control of what you eat, when you eat, and how it’s delivered. If you find that you absolutely adore protein shakes and want all your food to be in shake-form, that’s totally fine. It’s healthy for you to eat when you feel hungry. You remember I told you the symptoms of hunger?”

Bucky gave a short nod.
“You understand so far?” Sam asked.

“I understand?” Bucky said, but it wasn’t a confirmation. “I… No one has asked me that before?”

“I’m gonna ask you that a fair bit,” Sam said with a smile. “Do you know what it means to understand? Understanding doesn’t have to mean you accept it, now, or that you have to like it. It just means you fully know what I mean.”

For a second, Bucky worried his lower lip between his teeth. Then he hastily blew it out and clenched his jaw, wiping his expression. Steve caressed the crest of his hip again. Bucky frowned at the counter, then, deliberately, he bit down gently on his lower lip. His little rebellions, the tiny movements he made and ceased instantly before carefully starting over, they made Steve’s heart sing a little. A lot. Bucky was slowly but surely breaking down the constrictions and rules layered over his mind by HYDRA.

When he had finished, Bucky gave a nod. “I understand,” he said with confidence. “You are trying to fix my damages.”

Sam flinched a little. “You’re not broken, Barnes, I’m not looking to fix you. What you got is something we call trauma. It’s a wound, like a cut, only it’s not physical, it’s mental. Emotional. It doesn’t make you broken, doesn’t make you something that needs to be fixed. You can function alright with unhealed trauma, function, nothing more than that most of the time, but it’ll get infected, like gangrene. Eventually, it’ll spread everywhere and rot out whatever it can. You understanding all that?”

Bucky nodded, frowning.

“What I want, or other people want from you,” Sam went on, “that doesn’t matter much. What you want is what’s important. Trauma can heal, and a lot of the time you need other people’s help to heal it, but it’s not something that just gets fixed. You’re not an engine, y’know, you don’t have broken parts that are just rusty and need to be replaced. You got a wound. You gotta look after it, take care of it, keep it clean, and with all that care, you can heal it.”

“How do I heal it?” Bucky pressed. Steve squeezed his hip, catching his attention.

“You gotta heal for you,” he said softly. “Because you want it.”
“I want it,” Bucky insisted. “It upsets you.”

Steve fought a flinch of his own, trying not to look at Sam and see the disappointed look on his face. “I told you, that doesn’t matter to me.”

“You’re sad,” Bucky said, an open-ended statement.

“I’m happy that you’re here,” Steve said firmly.

“I’m gonna talk to him, too, Barnes,” Sam spoke up. Both of them looked in his direction. “He’s got trauma just like you, just like the rest of us.”

Bucky looked down at him, a question in his eyes, mouth tipped to the right and then down, nose wrinkled, eyebrows scrunched together and eyes narrowed. “You been takin’ care of yourself, sweetheart?”

Steve opened his mouth, then realized that insisting he was fine when he and Sam were trying so hard to show Bucky that his non-physical hurts had as much bearing as physical would only make things worse.

So he shut his mouth. Bucky frowned more. “Steve,” he said quietly, and Steve ducked his head against Bucky’s shoulder. It was easier to hide, though cowardly. Propaganda said Captain America was always brave. Steve Rogers trembled going to confession.

“C’mon, doll, talk to me.”

“You gonna talk back?” Steve muttered.

“If I know how,” Bucky grumbled, then caught his chin with a finger and pushed his face up, gently forcing him to look him in the eye. “You been taking care of yourself, sweetheart?” he repeated.

“No,” Steve mumbled shamefully. He knew he hadn’t been. He always felt like he really couldn’t, not while propaganda said Captain America was always strong and brave and he couldn’t bring himself to feel anything at all.
“Stevie,” Bucky sighed, and left it there.

“I want to help you guys,” Sam said after a moment’s quiet. “Both of you. I might not be the best qualified for this kind of thing, but I figure you guys won’t want to talk to somebody you don’t already trust. I thought we could start somewhere small, like what things HYDRA told you were okay but aren’t, Barnes. I can’t help you if you don’t want me to, I won’t try if you don’t want me to. So, what’ll it be, boys?”

“I don’t know how to heal trauma,” Bucky said, not taking his eyes off of Steve.

“Steve?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Steve said, letting out a long breath as he nodded towards Sam. “I don’t… I don’t know how to heal. I don’t know what to heal, either.”

“Everything goes at your pace,” Sam promised. “Wherever you want to start, that’s where you start. You take this one step at a time.”

Steve lifted a hand and rubbed at his eyes, until Bucky set a hand at the back of his neck and he dropped his own, relaxing a little into his touch. “Okay,” he said, nodding. “I can do that.”

Sam gave a nod of his own in return, then flicked his gaze back to Bucky. “How about we talk about your statuses? Are you comfortable having them, does it make it easier for you to understand your needs?”

Bucky nodded and Sam rubbed his hands together, visibly thinking. “Alright, how about we talk a bit more about functional and non-functional? Hunger means you’re non-functional, right?”

“Now, yes,” Bucky said.

“And thirst?” Sam asked.
“Non-functional,” Bucky answered. Sam gave him a warm smile, an encouraging nod.

“What about pain?” Sam continued. “Physical pain? Tony mentioned to me what happened yesterday when you let him take your arm off.”

Bucky pressed closer to Steve’s side. “Pain is… bad,” he said after a long moment.

“Do you really believe that?” Sam asked, as if he knew exactly what Bucky had whispered to Steve as Stark removed his arm.

Bucky dropped his gaze. Steve scent-marked him again, leaning in to rest his weight on Bucky’s shoulder. During the war, when Bucky got overwhelmed or someone they knew died or they themselves had almost died, Steve would lean on him. The weight, he had said, grounded him. Provided him with the reassurance that he wasn’t alone, that Steve was there and still needed him. It comforted him then, and in the future, Bucky rested his temple on Steve’s hair, almost unconsciously taking a long breath.

“I have no more handlers,” he began. Sam gave him an encouraging nod. “I have only failed a mission once, I think. I can’t remember. The punishment then was… I think – I think the right word is bad? But worse than that? There were times when I came close to a mission failure, or I was almost found out, almost exposed HYDRA. Punishment in those cases was almost as bad.”

“What would they do to punish you?” Sam asked quietly.

“Electrocution, now,” Bucky mumbled. “It used to be, they used a whip.”

Steve full-on hugged him then, his chest tight and close to bursting with sudden and intense emotions, horror, rage, most of all love.

“Did you or do you believe that you deserved it?” Sam pushed, gentle, tone implying that Bucky did not have to answer if he didn’t want to.

“I failed,” Bucky said quietly.
“Did you, though?” Sam asked. “You said you only failed a mission once, the other times were close calls.”

Bucky said nothing for a while, only frowned, so Sam added on. “And, really, when you did fail that one time, were they in the right to punish you physically like that?”


“Physical violence is never the answer to someone making a mistake,” Sam told him. “Nobody’s gonna do that to you ever again now, just so you know. If you find in the future you’ve messed up, on anything, you’re not going to be punished like that. There might be consequences, but no one will ever hurt you to punish you again. With me so far?”

“I – Meaning of phrase ‘with me so far’ unclear,” Bucky said, hesitant and fidgeting in Steve’s arms.

“Means do you understand?” Sam clarified.

“I guess,” Bucky muttered. “Is that an acceptable answer?”

“For now, yeah,” Sam said, shrugging a little. “We can come back to talking about pain later if you want.”

“Later is subjective,” Bucky said quietly. Sam didn’t push him further on that, only waited for his answer.

“Do you want to stop?” Steve asked Bucky when he didn’t give one.

Bucky shook his head. “No, I – I need to heal?”

“That’s gonna take time, bud,” Sam reminded him, “you can’t do it all in one morning.”

“Why not?” Bucky asked, looking up now, looking Sam in the eye.
Sam offered Bucky a smile. “Trust me, if people could heal in a day, I’d be out of a job. It’s just how we work.”

“Emotions are complicated,” Bucky said, musingly.

“That’s right,” Sam replied with another smile, and a nod this time. “Not even the best psychologists out there know fully how they work.”

Bucky nodded as well, looking at his feet. Sam flicked his gaze over to Steve and raised his eyebrows.

“How about you have a turn, huh?” he asked. “Something small you want to get off your chest?”

Steve almost laughed at that. *Something small*, as if the mess in his head and his chest had any small pieces that he could pick apart from the rest and confess on their own. As if it wasn’t just one great, big, conglomerate of shit piled up on his shoulders and he could unload it slowly.

“Or something bigger,” Sam suggested.

Perhaps he was psychic?

“I don’t know,” Steve muttered.

“You ain’t been taking care of yourself,” Bucky grumbled in his ear. Steve leaned into him, his eyes drooping while he exhaled.

“That’s someplace to start,” Sam prompted lightly.

He nodded, reluctant, but Bucky needed him to do this. Bucky needed his support in this, and how was Steve supposed to do that if he was struggling under his own problems that were half the size in comparison?
“I told you a couple of things,” he said, stalling for time.

“Maybe someone else needs to hear them now,” Sam answered softly.

Steve leaned his weight on Bucky’s shoulder again. He’d said plenty to him already. Said that had he not been able to save Bucky, it wouldn’t have been worth it to keep living. Said that he needed Bucky all the time. Bucky knew how much it hurt for him to feel again from the bond, he knew that he was the heart and soul in him.

“Why don’t you take turns?” Sam asked after a long pause. “Steve, you can tell him something that happened, something he needs to know, then Bucky, you tell something to Steve that he needs to know.”

“I can do that,” Steve said, a little relieved. Bucky gave a nod, then pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

“You want me to go first, sweetheart?” he murmured.

“I can go first,” Steve said back, but didn’t lift his head from Bucky’s shoulder.

“How about telling him about Father Elliot?” Sam prompted him gently.

“You been goin’ to confessions, Stevie?” Bucky asked, squeezing his waist gently.

“No, not now,” Steve mumbled, “before. Before the serum.”

“Oh,” Bucky said.

Obviously, he knew what Steve had been confessing.

What Father Elliot had told him, though, Steve hadn’t ever told Bucky. They’d skirted the subject, so it never came up.
“He called me brother of Rahab,” Steve said into Bucky’s shirt. “When I told him what I was doing. Didn’t tell me to stop, didn’t tell me to give up. Told me God had plans for me, like Rahab.”

“God had big plans for you, doll,” Bucky said, kissing his hair again. “Look at you now.”

Steve nodded vaguely, sucked in a breath, and confessed: “You know, I don’t know if I believe God anymore. Doesn’t feel like he’s around much.”

Bucky caressed the back of his neck, wrist brushing his skin as he offered him a weak but sincere smile before drawing him close. “Thank you for telling me,” he murmured into his hair. “I know… Church was important to you.”

It had been, even when they were kids. His mother had raised him with the saints, had him praying to Holy Mary with rosary beads ever since he knew how to string more than four words together. They’d shared the same set of rosary beads most of his life, until she’d passed away, and he was the only one using them. He hadn’t brought them to war. He’d brought a medal of St. Christopher, later strung it along Bucky’s dog tags when they’d swapped, prayed to the saints whenever someone died, but not much more than that. There had never been much time for more. Bucky’s dog tags and the medal were probably on the bottom of the Arctic now. Lord only knew what HYDRA had done with Steve’s dog tags after they’d taken Bucky. Smelted them for scrap metal, likely. The Smithsonian had his mother’s rosary now.

“My turn?” Bucky asked quietly. Steve nodded. “I think I killed a president.”

“Which president?” Steve mumbled.

“Dunno his name. It was over here, in the US.”

“1963?” Sam said abruptly.

“Sounds right,” Bucky answered. Steve lifted his head to look at Sam, who had raised his eyebrows high on his forehead.

“So, that guy’s name was John F. Kennedy,” Sam said, “and that’s, like, the biggest conspiracy
“Oh,” Bucky said for the second time. “Uh…”

Sam waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it. File’s classified now. Both the original files on his death and your file. Carry on.”

“Uh,” Bucky carried on. Then stopped, frowning.

“I jumped out of a plane without a parachute,” Steve blurted out.

“You did what?” Bucky screeched.

Steve clapped a hand over his mouth. Why did he just say that? What the fuck, mouth? Who gave his tongue permission to betray him?

“According to Natasha, that happened more than once,” Sam said from across the counter.

“Steve!” Bucky barked while Steve flipped Sam the bird.

“To be fair,” Steve said in his defense, "I was jumping into water and I never meant to tell you that, I don’t know what came over me.”

Bucky flopped against Steve’s body, groaning loudly. “You’re gonna kill me,” he grumbled into his hair. “M gonna die of high blood pressure.”

“There are worse ways to go?” Steve suggested.

“Fuck you, pal,” Bucky sighed.

“Sam’s here,” Steve said, a smile growing on his lips. “Later.”
Sam covered his face with a hand. “Tony told me about this, too,” he mumbled. “Oh, boy.”

“Death of me, doll,” Bucky promised, kissing his temple. “Swear to God.”

“At least you’ll die smiling,” Steve said, blinking up at him innocently. Bucky huffed, a grin threatening to curl the corners of his mouth. At least he’s smiling now, Steve thought.

“Aren’t we s’posed to be baring our souls right now?” Bucky said dryly.

“You can bare souls in a joking manner,” Sam defended. “I confessed to my first high school girlfriend that I wanted to date her through a knock-knock joke.”

“Smooth,” Steve quipped while Bucky snorted.

“Like you’ve done better;” he sniggered.

“Oh, sure, I was a hit in my neighborhood,” Steve said without thinking.

There was a long moment’s quiet. Steve realized what he had said and regretted it. Bucky looked vaguely uncomfortable. Sam pursed his lips, looking at the countertop like he was trying not to smile. To be fair, if Steve thought about it objectively, it was a pretty good joke.

“Joking about stuff like that is usually a good sign?” Sam suggested.

Steve shifted on the stool. Bucky chewed on his lip.

“Let’s move on?” Sam added.

“I remember Mary-Anne Bennet,” Bucky said softly.
Steve turned to look at him. “Who was she?” he asked in response. He didn’t know, had never met a Mary-Anne Bennet before. He knew a Marianna Bennet, once, but doubted they were the same girl. Bucky must have met her after he moved away.

“A girl,” Bucky began, frowning a little, like he was still remembering all the pieces. “No one special. Her ma was friends with my ma. They set us up on a date, early August of ’34. We went out a couple of times, on the third date, I gave her a kiss.”

Steve didn’t mind that, he had done worse. But what had Bucky frowning still, that intrigued him. What had Bucky’s nose wrinkling in distaste, that sparked a little something like pride in him.

“I didn’t like it,” he said. “Not a bit. She could tell, she took it well, said she knew what a fella who already had a girl in mind looked like. I went home, told Ma it went alright but we weren’t all that similar. Never had a second date with any of the girls she set me up with after that; she kept doing it, I dunno why I kept going. Never kissed another one of them.”

He looked down at Steve, still frowning a bit. “I don’t think it was just ‘cause none of ‘em were you. It was part that. I think… I think I felt ashamed, all the time, about what I did, what I thought I’d done. I looked into the mirror and didn’t like what I saw. Saw a monster.”

His eyes drifted away. “Guess I have that in common with who I used to be,” he whispered.

Before Steve could protest, could insist that Bucky was never a monster, never ever, Sam spoke up.

“I wanna ask you something, Barnes, I don’t think you’ll like it, but I’ll ask it anyway. If you and Steve, your positions were reversed, he was the one HYDRA got instead of you –”

And Bucky did indeed tense up, glared at Sam, who held up a hand to pacify him. “Let me finish,” he offered gently. “If Steve was the one they got, if they did all the things to him instead of you, he came back and called himself a monster, what would you tell him?”

“He’s insulting my best guy,” Bucky answered, then his face fell. “That he was wrong.”

“And Steve? What were you about to say?”
“You’re insulting my best guy,” Steve said, then reached up and brushed a lock of hair from Bucky’s face. “You’re not a monster.”

“But –”

“Hey, listen to this,” Sam interrupted. “There’s this thing called cognitive distortion, right? It’s a trick your brain plays on you to convince you of something negative that isn’t true.”

“But –” Bucky started again, but Sam held out his hand a second time, eyebrows lifting while he looked at Bucky.

“All those things you did, would you have done them if you had a choice?” Sam asked pointedly. Steve looked quickly to Bucky.

“Well, no,” Bucky muttered.

“So you know that you didn’t have a choice in it,” Sam pointed out. “And if you didn’t have a choice, then it can’t have been your fault, because you weren’t the one in control.”

“But I –”

“You weren’t in control,” Sam repeated. “Cognitive distortion says that even though you could not have done anything different, it was still your fault. That’s the point of it being a distortion. It can’t have been your fault, because you were not in control of yourself.”

Bucky blinked at Sam, glanced at Steve, then looked down at his hands. His hand. Steve kept forgetting that he only had one, then.

“The guys that took you, they put stuff in your head to make you think you were doing the right thing, right?” Sam asked him. “They took stuff out and replaced it, twisted stuff around, trapped you in your own head.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed tiredly.
“So it can’t have been your fault,” Sam insisted. When Bucky didn’t reply, he added: “It’s okay if you can’t accept that right now. You can work up to that.”

“Oh,” Bucky mumbled.

Sam gave a nod. He glanced at Steve, then gave him a second nod, encouragingly.

“My turn, I guess,” Steve sighed. He searched for something little he could tell, a thread he could pluck from the mess that wouldn’t pull everything else along with it, a thread that wasn’t miles long or heavy or dense or unending.

When his silence drug on, Bucky nudged his shoulder gently. “’Mon, doll, first thing that comes to mind.”

The first thing that came to his mind.

“I used to imagine what you would say.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow.

“Just, in general,” Steve went on. “What comments you would make if you were there.”

“Did I yell at you for jumping out of planes without parachutes?” Bucky quipped.

He gave a laugh, nodding. “Every time.”

Bucky flicked his ear, though he was smiling a little. “Then why’d you keep doing it, ya moron?”

Steve only smiled, shrugging. Bucky dropped his hand to tap the underside of his chin, then caught it between his thumb and forefinger to pull him in for a light kiss. Steve leaned their foreheads together, drinking in the blurring of their scents, letting a calm settle over him. Yet it hurt.
“You’d tell me when my jokes were terrible,” Steve said, and his voice sounded like he was about to start crying. “When I did something awkward or dumb.”

“Sounds like me,” Bucky murmured. “Did I tell you I loved you every night?”

Steve shook his head. Bucky huffed. “Shame on your imaginary version of me,” he decided. “Should’ve focused on that instead of calling out your bad jokes.”

“They were all really terrible jokes,” Steve said weakly.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t fall in love with you for your sense of humor,” Bucky grumbled.

“Well, at least now you can make up for lost time,” Sam threw in.

“Fair point,” Bucky said. “Steve?”

Steve felt his ears getting warm but he smiled happily at Bucky. Fuck, it hurt to feel it so much.

“I love you,” Bucky murmured, kissing him on the tip of his nose.

Steve grinned and buried his face in Bucky’s chest. He felt a pleased hum filter from Bucky to him through their bond, or maybe it was the other way around, or maybe it went in both directions. Whichever, it didn’t matter much at that time.

“Maybe that’s enough for now,” Sam’s voice reached him.

He felt Bucky nod and lifted his face a little, just enough to look at Sam, to see what he was going to say next.

It was: “Movie marathon?”
“Uh,” Steve started. “Sure?”

“Excellent,” Sam said with delight. “Part two of your therapy: Catching up on pop culture.”

“On what?” Bucky said while Steve mumbled about how he was catching up on pop culture already. Sam gave him a look, as Steve had hardly touched his List of Important Shit That Happened Since 1945. It was a long fuckin’ list, it was intimidating and he hadn’t really wanted to watch Star Wars while he was unable to thaw out his heart.

“Pop culture,” Sam repeated. “Starting with movies. You saw Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone yesterday, and Beetlejuice, so we could go on with cult classics like Beetlejuice, with Harry Potter, or something entirely new. We could watch nothing but Disney movies if you wanted.”

“There’s new Disney movies?” Bucky asked, perking up.

“How many are you aware of?” Sam countered.

“I saw Snow White when it came out,” Bucky mused. “And Fantasia, and Dumbo. Pinocchio? I think that’s all?”

“Two seconds,” Sam said hastily, tugging out his phone. He tapped on the screen, then grinned. “To date, there are fifty-three animated Disney feature films.”

Steve had been aware that there were more Disney films. Perhaps not all 53 of them, but he knew a few. He’d tried to catch up in chronological order, started with Bambi, ‘cause he’d seen Snow White when it came out, then had stopped in the middle of the film and never touched it again.

Bucky, though, looked awed. “Fifty-three?” he demanded.

“And there’s one more coming out in a few months,” Sam said with pride.

Bucky gaped for a minute longer. Sam looked at Steve. “Disney marathon good with you?” he
“Yeah,” he sighed, then when Sam’s grin slipped, he added quickly, “just, skip Bambi, okay?”

“Works for me,” Sam said, “I ain’t looking to bawl like a baby first thing in the morning.”

“What’s wrong with Bambi?” Bucky asked, glancing between them.

“It’s sad,” Sam said before Steve could open his mouth. “Lil baby deer and his mama go out for a stroll in a meadow, then a hunter comes and kills his mom. I mean, circle of life and all, sure, but it’s fucking tragic.”

“Oh,” Bucky mumbled, looking at Steve, then, abruptly: “Your mother died of tuberculosis.”

Steve pressed a hand to his eyes, a little caught off guard. “Yeah, she did.”

He felt Bucky kiss the back of his hand and dropped it, allowing for Bucky to kiss his forehead. “We won’t watch Bambi,” he affirmed.

“I mean, you can watch Bambi later, on your own,” Sam added, “if you feel like crying.”

Bucky didn’t reply to that, so Steve stood up and nudged him carefully in the direction of the living room. Sam followed, and when Steve aimed for the couch, Sam aimed for the armchair.

“Hey,” Bucky protested while Sam hovered his butt over the chair. “That’s my chair.”

Sam backed off, taking the end of the couch, while Steve just grinned. Bucky frowned, looking between the couch and the chair as though realizing the dilemma of where Steve would sit if Bucky was in his chair. Steve flicked his eyebrows up, catching Bucky’s eye, and pushed him to the chair.
“I’ll sit in your lap,” he said, and Bucky promptly sat down. He laughed, then curled himself, legs hanging off the side of the chair, in Bucky’s lap, dropping his head to rest on Bucky’s shoulder.

When they were kids, they’d both fit in the chair side by side, but only when there was nowhere else for Steve to sit. And Steve never sat in Bucky’s armchair unless Bucky was in it to begin with. When they were pre-teens, Mrs. Barnes had seen them squished into the same chair on Thanksgiving one year and told them to quit it, young boys didn’t need to be sitting like that. That had been the end of it. Now, Steve highly regretted never having the guts to curl up in Bucky’s lap when they were kids. Bucky was comfortable as shit.

He could only imagine what it would have been like to sit with his smaller body tucked tightly in Bucky’s arms, how they would have fit if Steve were the size he should have been.

“Wait, hold still a second,” Sam called, lifting his phone. Bucky frowned and Steve realized too late that Sam was taking a picture of them. “Extra cute!” Sam declared, grinning at his phone.

“I am not cute,” Bucky grumbled. “I’m a cyborg super assassin.”

Steve laughed and kissed his cheek. “You’re cute, Buck.”

“You’re cute,” Bucky retorted.

“We can both be cute,” Steve said cheekily, and Bucky huffed. Steve tweaked Bucky’s nipple through his shirt, and Bucky started in his seat before turning a stern look on him. It was made ineffective by the fact that it was Bucky and Bucky wouldn’t be able to manage a stern look on his own children let alone Steve.

“Adorable,” Sam called. “Tony thinks you’re going to win couple of the year.”

“Did you send that picture to people?” Steve asked suspiciously.

“There’s a group chat,” Sam answered, much too smug for Steve’s liking.

Bucky might not be able to pull off stern, but Steve could. He arranged his face in his best Captain
“America is disappointed in you, son expression and aimed it on Sam.

“I’m not responding to that,” Sam said, pointing in the direction of Steve’s disappointed look. He was fiddling with a TV remote. “Right, we’re gonna watch the best Disney movies first, which means we’re starting with the Princess and the Frog.”

“Right,” Bucky drawled. “Naturally.”

“Hey, you shush, Tiana was the first black princess, which automatically makes it the best Disney film in my mind. You should’ve seen my nieces when it came out, all three of ‘em were Tiana for Halloween that year.”

“Oh, we should talk about racism,” Steve realized.

Bucky blinked at Steve. “Okay…”

“Namely, things not to say.”

“Right,” Bucky said, just as slowly as the last time.

“Later,” Steve decided, snuggling closer to Bucky’s chest. Bucky’s lap was much too comfortable to do anything but doze.

“Don’t you sleep, Steve Rogers!” Sam shouted from the couch.

“Don’t interrupt his sweet dreams!” Bucky defended. Steve snorted and pressed a quick kiss to Bucky’s neck.

“Princess and the Frog, Steve!”

Bucky flipped Sam the bird, just as Sam successfully did whatever he was trying to do to the TV and let out an exclamation of victory. Steve wasn’t paying much attention, he had his eyes shut.
But when the film stared, he dutifully opened them again to watch, but kept himself curled as small as possible in Bucky’s embrace. If he kept his head tucked low on Bucky’s clavicle and held his hands against his chest right, he could pretend he was 5’2” and skinny again.

After Princess and the Frog – in which the Alpha got the Omega, the Omega got a restaurant, the voodoo guy got eaten by voodoo demons – Sam put on Mulan. He sang along to *I’ll Make an Alpha out of You* and Steve laughed because Mulan seemed exactly like him, a stubborn Omega gone to war in an Alpha’s clothes. After Mulan was the Emperor’s New Groove, which was just hilarious in general because a guy got turned into a *llama*. They broke for food, Sam produced popcorn from one of the kitchen cabinets, but it came in a flat packet and Sam cooked it in the microwave. Steve did not understand what the fuck people thought they were doing with food anymore, then they started Tangled.

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[Rape Is Grossly Underreported In The U.S., Study Finds, by Emily Thomas, November 21, 2013]

“…The focal point of the study was the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) — an annual crime report conducted through household surveys by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Justice Statistics — which counted 188,380 victims of rape and sexual assault in 2010. Another data source, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, counted nearly 1.3 million incidents that same year. Data from the FBI, which gathers its statistics on rape or attempted rape reported as a crime by local law enforcement, counted only 85,593 in 2010…”

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[september 27th, the lab]

“... I don’t know how to do brain surgery,” Tony announced.

Bruce slowly looked up from his tablet where he’d been reading the *Times*. “You do not,” he agreed.

“I need to do brain surgery on Barnes,” Tony added. He was staring at Barnes’s prosthetic arm as though it had just asked him for the meaning of life.
Bruce considered this, then asked, slowly, “Why?”

“Because the problem is not how this thing is wired,” Tony said, flicking the arm with a probe. “This thing is wired fine. It’s not this that’s wired to cause pain.”

“The connection between him and it is what’s wired wrong?” Bruce guessed.

“Yep,” Tony sighed. “So, I have to do brain surgery.”

“But you don’t know how to do brain surgery.”

Tony squinted at the arm for a moment. “I don’t suppose I could teach myself brain surgery from the internet?”

“No,” Bruce said with finality.

“I need a brain surgeon,” Tony mused. “JARVIS, who’s the best brain surgeon in America? No, the whole world?”

“Current rankings for top brain surgeons show Doctor Andrew V. Beykovsky, Doctor David George Rubin, and Doctor Lynn Bartl as the chief neurosurgeons. Top results also include Doctor Stephen Strange, but he is currently missing.”

“I want the missing guy,” Tony said, because of course he did.

“Results show Doctor Stephen Strange was injured in a car accident, then six months after vanished. A year ago, he appeared briefly in New York, then Shanghai, and according to reports, his handicaps had been healed.”

“Find me Strange!” Tony called to the ceiling. Bruce shook his head and returned to his tablet. “Brucey, you’re a medical guy, you ever met Strange?”

“Once,” Bruce answered, a little disinterested. “He was an arrogant ass. More so than you.”
“Definitely want him now,” Tony said, and apparently didn’t notice the double meaning in his words. Bruce just rolled his eyes. “Wait, what happened to him in the accident?”

“His hands were shattered.”

“Oh, then he can’t perform surgery,” Tony said in disappointment.

“According to reports, his hands are fully healed after his initial vanishing,” JARVIS announced.

“Whatever, if he can’t do the surgery he can still consult.”

Bruce returned to the Times again. It was looking like the head of the Times, a guy called Baquet, was on Steve’s side. The front page article was reminding people of the struggle for suffrage that Omegas went through during the forties and fifties. And sixties. And seventies. And eighties, nineties, up to that very week, where Fox News was claiming Captain America had never actually survived the Arctic and the present-day Cap was a hoax cooked up by S.H.I.E.L.D. to pacify the masses with shiny things so they could take over the world.

“JARVIS, the man can’t vanish off the face of the earth, someone’s got to know where he is.”

Bruce flipped pages on his tablet. The stock market was looking a little poorly.

“Aha! A girlfriend! Call her!”

Bruce looked up as Tony fiddled with a screen that was now displaying Skype. Or, rather, Tony’s version of Skype. It was calling a Skype account, however, so it mattered little.

A woman in a lab coat answered. “I have exactly ten minutes before going to perform surgery, talk fast.”

Then she blinked as Tony waved at her. “Tony Stark?” she said hesitantly.
“That’s me,” Tony started. “I’m calling to see if you have any leads on Steve Strange. Stephen. Let’s just call him Stephen, there are too many Steves.”

“Uh,” the woman answered.

Bruce typed a message to JARVIS on his tablet, asking who she was. JARVIS texted back Dr. Christine Palmer, MD, PhD. Satisfied, he went back to the Times again.

“I have a case for him,” Tony added. “A ridiculously top of the line prosthetic developed by some ridiculously sadistic bastards who have hardwired it into a cyber super assassin’s brain to register touch as pain.”

Dr. Palmer blinked at Tony. “I don’t actually know where Stephen is,” she said slowly.

“Have you got a phone number?” Tony asked. “Email? Post office box?”

“Uh,” she said again, glancing at something off to her right. “Sort of.”

“Excellent! Can you give him a ring and ask him to come and look at my cyborg super assassin? Pretty please?”

“I can ask him to call you,” Dr. Palmer countered, and Tony waved a hand.

“Close enough. I’ll let you get to surgery. Thanks, bye!”

The woman waved a little gingerly while Tony hung up. Bruce shook his head and returned to his tablet.

Tony stared, waiting, at the screen in front of him. Bruce read a review of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella on Broadway, until Tony whooped and he had to look up again in time to catch Tony answering a video call.

“Doctor Strange!” Tony cheered in triumph. Bruce leaned a little to the side to better see the guy on
the screen, as he didn’t look much like the overly-confident doctor he’d met three years ago. Stephen Strange had gray in his hair, a neatly trimmed mustache and goatee, and he wore a cloak. Like, a Thor cloak. It was vibrantly red and had an intricate clasp holding it around the doctor’s shoulders.

“A cyborg assassin with a prosthetic that registers touch as pain,” Doctor Strange said, forgoing a greeting. “How, and more importantly, why?”

“I’m assuming you’ve heard of HYDRA,” Tony said, leaning on the table next to him to talk with the other hand.

“Who hasn’t these days,” Doctor Strange answered.

“Right, well, obviously they’re devious bastards. And sadistic. You heard of Bucky Barnes?”

Doctor Strange frowned at that. “What does a soldier who died in World War II have to do with HYDRA?”

“The fact that he didn’t die,” Tony said.

Doctor Strange paused, frowning, then he leaned back and resettled himself. “Color me intrigued,” he declared. Tony grinned.

“So, Bucky Barnes falls off a train in 1945. HYDRA finds him still alive somehow, but his left arm isn’t salvageable, so they make him a prosthetic one. And a damn fine one, too, for pre-Cold War tech, though it has been updated over the years. Because they’re HYDRA, they wire the arm directly to his nervous system in a way that means every time the arm does anything, Barnes feels it as pain. From a finger brushing it to punching a wall.”

“Even moving the arm?” Doctor Strange cut in.

“Even moving it,” Tony affirmed. “I have the technical know-how to change the wiring in the arm itself, but that’s not where the switch from pressure to pain is, far as I can tell, it’s how the prosthetic is wired into his nervous system at the base. Cut to last week, Barnes manages to break from his programming – they regularly electrocuted his brain to wipe his memory, by the way, he breaks the programming through the power of true love and now he’s in my tower.”
“It sounds like you need a psychologist,” Doctor Strange observed.

Tony held up a finger. “Well, yes, but at the moment, I need to reattach his arm.”

Strange raised an eyebrow. Tony lifted Barnes’s arm off the table and held it up for Strange’s inspection. “There’s a base that’s attached to his body, but this part was removable. I’m making it lighter and other such things, we’re going to reinforce his skeletal system with titanium to support the weight, too, but he’s currently paranoid and itchy to get his arm back. I got a guy talking to him about how pain is not actually acceptable as part of daily life, see, he’s of the opinion that being in constant pain is normal.”

“I’m gathering you want me to fix the way the arm is wired to his nervous system,” Strange said. Tony set down the arm.

“If you can, at the very least, I want you to come take a look at him. I’ve got a machine to run full scans on his brain that isn’t as all-encompassing as an MRI in the works.”

“Why can’t you use MRIs?”

“Daily electrocution to keep his memory from returning, kid’s traumatized,” Tony threw in. He entered a command on the screen. “You should have a schematic appearing on your screen.”

Strange’s eyes shifted, his brows frowning up again. He read over the schematic Tony had apparently just sent him, and his expression steadily became a grimace. “I see,” he murmured.

“Like I said, HYDRA is a bunch of sadistic bastards.”

“Not that it’s any of my business,” Strange mused, flicking his eyes back to Tony’s on the screen, “but if Bucky Barnes is a brainwashed and traumatized assassin, how is he in your custody and willingly letting you remove limbs?”

“Power of true love, and all that,” Tony answered blithely.
“From who?” Strange demanded, clearly highly confused.

“Captain America,” Tony said, as though it were obvious. Strange gaped at him and he spread his hands. “Don’t you watch the news? Cap’s an Omega.”

“I didn’t think it was real,” Strange muttered. “And – You’re saying that Captain America and Bucky Barnes are – They’re –?”

He lifted his eyebrows high on his forehead.

“Yep,” said Tony. Bruce rolled his eyes; Tony was having way too much fun confusing Stephen Strange; Bruce imagined Strange wasn’t enjoying it, either, it probably didn’t happen very often. “Trust me, I was as shocked as you are.”

Strange blinked several times. Then he let out a long breath, shook his head briefly, and fixed Tony with a startled but acceptant look. “Alright, I’ll have a look,” he said. “Actually, I’d been meaning to speak with one of your members for a while now, might as well do the full spiel for Barnes while I’m there.”

“Perfect!” Tony said, then frowned. “Wait, which member? Of the Avengers?”

Strange waved a hand. “I’ll be there shortly.”

“Wait, now –?”

“I’m in the area,” Strange said, and the call ended.

Tony huffed. “Only I get to do that to people,” he mumbled. Bruce waved a hand in his direction for sympathy, though he wasn’t very sympathetic.

“My question, what’s with the cape?” he said.

“Yeah, I thought that was a little weird,” Tony mused. “Maybe it’s a new fashion trend? I’ll have to
ask Pepper.”

“And, what’d he mean by spiel?” Bruce added

Tony held up a finger, opened his mouth, stopped, closed it, and frowned. “Huh,” he said. “I have no idea.”

JARVIS chimed. “Doctor Strange is waiting for admittance, Sir.”

“Wait, what?” Tony spluttered, looking around as if Strange would be standing directly behind him. “He’s at the building already?”

“No, Sir, he is standing outside your laboratory at the helipad entrance.”

“What?” Tony spluttered, louder and more high pitched. “How the hell did he get up here?!”

“He used a spacial rift to enter the Tower.”

Bruce half dropped his tablet, catching it barely in time. Tony stared at absolutely nothing.

“Should I permit him entrance?” JARVIS asked calmly.

“Did you hear spacial rift?” Tony asked in a mutter to Bruce.

“Yeah,” Bruce said, standing shakily.

They exchanged glances. Tony walked to the external door of the lab, which opened to the helipad, where the silhouette of Stephen Strange could be seen against the frosted glass.

He yanked the door open. “Did you just teleport onto my building?” he asked immediately.
“Obviously,” Strange said, breezing past Tony into the lab. “Ah, Doctor Banner, good to see you again. Shall we get started? Where is Barnes?”

“You just fucking teleported onto the roof of my building!” Tony spluttered. Strange gave a long sigh, turning back to face Tony while Bruce neared, highly invested in the conversation. “Barnes is probably cuddling Cap right now, so can we talk about teleportation first? Where the hell did you get that technology?”

“Nepal,” Strange started, then glanced over at Bruce. “I don’t like explaining things more than once and it’ll be easier to show you, so pay close attention, you can brief the rest of the Avengers later, I don’t really care. I’ll have to talk to Thor about his brother, but otherwise, I’m only here to see Barnes.”

He withdrew what looked like a pair of knuckle dusters from his pocket. “Name a destination, Mr. Stark.”

“How is that a teleportation device?” Tony demanded.

“Guess we’re going to my place, then,” Strange muttered, and held out his hands in front of him. He began drawing a circle in the air with the hand not wearing the knuckle dusters, and, abruptly, sparks of orange light appeared in the air in front of him.

“What are you even doing?” Tony said, but Strange ignored him. Bruce stepped closer, watching in awe as the orange sparks solidified into a circle, then a completely different room blinked into vision inside the sparks.

“Step through,” Strange said.

Bruce did not step through, obviously, but Tony hopped right in. He didn’t even get out a: “Tony no!” before he was across.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Strange told Bruce, and what was, for lack of a better term, strange was the way he said it without any trace of disdain. Bruce eyed it suspiciously, until Tony let out a quiet curse word and he figured that if Tony was swearing, it probably was safe. He stepped through, and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head.
“This object is called a Sling Ring,” Strange announced behind him. Bruce was busy taking in what looked like an occultist’s workshop. “I just created a portal. It isn’t teleportation, it’s a fold in dimensions.”

“That kind of tech is years ahead of what even I’m doing!” Tony whispered, also taking in the occultist’s workshop.

It was sort of an occultist’s workshop. There were no herbs or candles, but there were runes and sigils, walls of vast bookshelves, though there were clearly not enough bookshelves because there were stacks of books floating in the air. That was mostly what caught Bruce’s eye. Levitation. They were even drifting, as though held aloft by a light breeze.

“It’s not technology,” Strange was saying. “It’s magic.”

Bruce turned his wide eyes on Strange, who looked completely serious. “What happened to you?” he demanded, the first thing he’d said to Strange at all.

“You heard of my accident,” Strange answered with a shrug. “My hands were destroyed. I sought a cure.”

He gestured to the room around him. “I found it in ancient magic.”

“Holy shit!” Tony squeaked. “Bruce, Bruce, we found a wizard!”

Strange rolled his eyes while Tony beamed. “I’m a doctor,” he said tiredly. He sounded like he had this conversation often. “Not a wizard.”

“Whatever, can you fly?”

Strange sighed, spread his hands, and lifted off the ground. Tony nearly squealed.

“To get back to the original conversation,” Strange said, feet touching the ground once more. “I am a
sorcerer, but first and foremost a doctor, I do need to speak with Thor, then I can do more than look at some brain scans of Bucky Barnes.”

“Wait, can you use magic to restore his memories?” Tony asked. If he clapped his hands together like a child presented with a pony, Bruce was going to kill him.

“No, that’s not how magic works,” Strange scoffed. “I’m going to rewire his prosthetic’s connection to his nervous system, what did you think I was going to do?”


Strange hummed a little. “Sure,” he said, and held up his hands again. “Shall we return to your lab?”

“Oh, yeah, right.”

Strange conjured the portal again. Bruce had arrived in wherever the hell this place was through a portal. Made by magic. And he was going back through another magic portal.

Sometimes, he wished he had studied business in university instead of physics, like his father had wanted him to. Like when all the laws to the cosmos got thrown out a magic portal by an egotistical but miraculously polite neurosurgeon.

He followed Tony through the portal, Strange on his heels. Back in the lab, Strange tucked his magic portal-creating device, whatever he had called it, back into a pocket and looked expectantly at Tony.

“Barnes?” he prompted.

“Right, Barnes,” Tony muttered. “JARVIS, tell Cap we’re coming upstairs and not to let Barnes greet us with a gun again.”

“Message sent,” JARVIS announced.

“AI,” Tony added to Strange as they neared the elevator. “Oh, wait, the MRI –”
“I don’t really need an MRI,” Strange said dismissively. “Not right now, anyway.”

Tony blinked a couple of times. “Right,” he said, drawing out the word. He shook his head and stepped into the opened elevator. Bruce tucked himself into a corner, holding onto the bars, while Strange glanced over the interior and the doors shut. The elevator lifted.

“Thor isn’t here at the moment,” Tony added to Strange. “I don’t actually know where he is, but he’ll be back for Avengers brunch on Sunday.”

Bruce frowned at Tony. “Since when do we have brunch on Sundays?”

“We can have brunch on Sundays,” Tony defended.

“Yeah, but since when?”

“Since next Sunday,” Tony sighed, rolling his eyes.

“And how does Thor already know about it?”

“I sent him a text,” Tony said with a shrug.

Bruce shook his head at him. “Isn’t he in Asgard?”

“Apparently phones work in Asgard?” Tony suggested.

“Or he’s on this plane,” Strange added in.

The elevator opened. Sam greeted them, Tony’s empty Mark X suit behind him, staring at the wall. “You’re interrupting Tangled,” was what he greeted them with.

“I have a magic neurosurgeon,” Tony countered.

“I was told Bucky Barnes has a prosthetic that is wired to cause him pain with every stimulus,” Strange said, brushing past Sam.

“Wow, hey, don’t just—”

Strange ignored Sam, walked directly past him, and froze midway through the kitchen before hastily sticking his hands in the air.

“Barnes, it’s okay, this guy is a friend,” Sam said hastily.

Bucky, in the living room, was kneeling in front of an armchair and aiming a gun with his one hand. Steve was sprawled behind him and rubbing at his ass with a grimace on his face. Bruce was only mildly startled at the fact that Steve, as he was now on the floor, had likely been sitting in Barnes’s lap and been shoved off onto the ground at the new threat. They had, after all, explicitly discussed the kinds of sex they would be having after Tony was finished removing Bucky’s arm yesterday.

“Ow,” Steve muttered, then tried to stand up. Bucky abruptly elbowed him before turning the gun back on Strange and Steve fell back again. “Bucky, it’s okay—”

“JARVIS just said Stark and Banner,” Bucky snapped. “Who are you?”

“D–” Strange started and Bruce hastily cut him off.

“Stephen Strange, neurosurgeon,” he said, darting in front of Strange to give him a pointed look before mouthing doctor is a trigger at him, having picked up on the way Bucky had reacted to Tony mentioning Doctor Cho the day before.

Strange squinted for a second, then shook his head. Sam hissed the words in his ear then, and he nodded.
“Why are you here?” Bucky demanded.

“I’m here to look at your prosthetic,” Strange re-explained. Patiently. Bruce was just glad his bedside manner had improved over the past three years. “Stark tells me it’s wired poorly into your nervous system.”

“It does its job,” Bucky snapped.

Strange raised an eyebrow. “It puts you in constant pain.”

Bucky opened his mouth, then Steve set a hand on his shoulder and he shut it again. He settled for glaring at Strange.

“We’re working on the pain thing,” Sam muttered.

“Okay, well, at any rate, I can wire it to register proper touch,” Strange said. “Light pressure, temperature, texture, all that fun stuff. Better?”

“You can put the gun down,” Steve said softly to Bucky.

Strange flicked his eyebrows up, as if to say please . Bucky huffed, then lowered the gun and straightened, though he kept his body between Strange and Steve.

“Can I approach?” Strange asked carefully. When Bucky nodded, he lowered his hands and stepped towards the living room, taking the step down and stopping just before the couch. “I have fairly unconventional methods, Mr. Barnes. I just need to hold my hands about six inches away from your body.”

“What are you gonna do, use X-Ray vision?” Bucky said gruffly. It was nice to hear him making a joke that wasn’t sexual.

“Something like that,” Strange said. Bucky gave a shrug, and Strange stepped closer yet. “Mr. Stark
told me about your relationship, by the way. I hope that you don’t mind.”

“‘S fine,” Bucky mumbled. Strange held his hands out in front of him, hovering just over Bucky’s shoulders.

“My hands are going to glow a bit,” Strange added.

Bucky squinted at him. “What are you, a surgeon or a wizard?”

“Sorcerer,” Strange said, as Bruce crossed his fingers to hope he didn’t say doctor.

Bucky squinted harder. “Stevie,” he said carefully, “I don’t like the future.”

Behind him, Steve laughed as Strange’s hands began to glow a faint blue. Steve’s laugh cut off and he stepped around Bucky’s side, only to be caught by Bucky’s arm. Bruce wandered a little closer, then stopped when Bucky’s gaze flicked to him and it didn’t look reassured. He sighed softly, stuck his hands in his pockets and stepped back.

Strange steadily ran his hands up from Bucky’s metallic shoulder to his neck, then shifted around to examine his back, causing Bucky to tug on Steve’s arm and pull him away from Strange. Strange didn’t seem to notice, only moved his hands up Bucky’s spine to the back of his head.

“I see the problem,” Strange announced. “Should be a simple adjustment.”

“Great,” Bucky grumbled. “Can you back off a bit?”

Strange stepped around Bucky and then the couch, Bucky tucked Steve behind him again. Strange glanced at Bruce, then Sam and Tony, but said nothing of Bucky’s behavior, which likely appeared very strange to Strange.

Bruce kind of hated Strange’s name, to think about it.

Steve, though, didn’t appear to mind Bucky acting as his shield unnecessarily, and simply dropped
his chin onto Bucky’s right shoulder as he wrapped his arms around Bucky’s waist from behind.

“When do you want to have me fix the wiring?” Strange asked Bucky.

Bucky looked blankly at Strange. He looked then at Steve, then at Sam, and then, shockingly, at Tony. Then he glanced back at Steve and said nothing.

“You can pick when,” Steve prompted.

Bucky blinked. He frowned a little, then looked at the floor.

“I’ll be done with your arm by tomorrow night,” Tony threw in helpfully. “And my friend Helen Cho will be here on Sunday.”

At Bucky’s blank look, he added: “The day after tomorrow.”

“Sunday?” Bucky said to Strange, a little hesitant. “Would… Cho want to reinforce my bones Sunday?”

“She wants to start her part on Monday,” Tony added.

“Then on Monday,” Bucky said. “You’re re-attaching my arm after she’s done, aren’t you?”

“We can’t do both surgeries on the same day,” Strange said quickly.

Bucky frowned again. “Why not?”

“That would be incredibly stressful on your body,” Strange insisted.

“So?” Bucky asked.
“You know, he can do his part before Tony re-attaches your arm,” Steve pointed out.

Bucky considered this. “Tomorrow,” he said.

“Alright,” Strange said, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. “I’ll be back tomorrow, what time?”

Bucky looked at Steve again.

“Morning or afternoon?” Steve asked.

“Morning?” Bucky said, switching his gaze to Strange. “Will it take long?”

“A few hours,” Strange said, shrugging. “No more than four.”

“Morning,” Bucky decided. “Not – not really early.”

“Eleven?” Steve suggested.

Bucky nodded. Strange copied the movement, then withdrew his magic portal device thingy. “I’ll be on my way,” he said, slipping it onto his hand. “I’ll see you again tomorrow. No food and clear liquids only until after your surgery,” he continued, drawing the circle to conjure the portal. “It was nice to meet you both,” Strange concluded, stepping through his magic portal.

For once, both Steve and Bucky had blank looks of confusion.

“Magic neurosurgeon,” Tony repeated.

“I give up,” Sam declared, striding back to the couch. “We’re watching Tangled.”
“Ooh, I love Tangled!” Tony said, following. Bruce grabbed his arm as he walked past.

“How’s Bucky’s arm?” he prompted.


Tony then pushed Bruce back towards the elevator. Bruce rolled his eyes, used to this by now, and got into the elevator. As the doors shut, he saw Steve push Bucky back into the armchair they had vacated when Strange walked in, then plop back into his lap. Bruce shook his head.

Magic neurosurgeons and gay childhood cartoon characters. The fuck.

* [Tie-tacks, Cufflinks, Omegas, and other Male Accessories by Geraldine Wright, published March 1994]

“... In works of fiction, the Omega exists as an object of pleasure for the Alpha, both the audience and the fictional Alphas they accompany, and nothing more. In the real world, there is little difference. The Omega exists to please the Alpha, it is her only goal and hope to hang off an Alpha’s arm, to look pretty and to smile on command and to serve…”

(This work was banned in nations such as Iran, Afghanistan, China, and select schools across the country. As of September 2014, twelve United States public school districts still blacklist Ms Wright’s work.)

* [september 27th, deep in the appalachian mountains]

“Just activate whatever fucking trackers you’ve got and give me a hundred square mile radius, I don’t give a shit, give me one haystack to dig through!”

“Sir, I can’t. I never had access to the Winter Soldier project, I don’t have the right codes, I don’t have the right knowledge, I’ve never laid eyes on the asset in my life!”
“You think I care?”

“Please – Please don’t kill me –”

“Find it. Before Captain fucking America tames it.”

“S–sir, all due respect, but there’s no way there’s enough of a man left in the asset for anyone to –”

“Rogers has already gotten it to spend a rut with him! You think Rogers cares if there’s anything left in the Soldier’s head? The Soldier’s his damn mate, dumbass, there’s enough in that monster that it dragged Rogers out of the river and carted him off to hide him during his heat, there’s fucking enough!”

“Boss, maybe this is a lost cause –”

“Oh, no, no, we’re getting the asset back. And we’re going to make it kill Rogers, slowly.”

“Boss…”

“Hail HYDRA, rookie.”

“Hail HYDRA…”

Chapter End Notes

i hope you liked this chapter! tell me what you liked, comments are my lifeblood. and the second to last article has a link bc it's a real article. and its facts are true to reality. if you want to learn what you can do to combat rape culture in the US you check out stuff like the Women's March and this article from Southern Connecticut State University, take a stand against enforcers of rape culture like the dump truck in office rn, etc. on that note, pls have a good day and stay safe guys, holding your keys between your fingers isn't the greatest strategy try putting them on a lanyard so you can swing them, talk on the phone if you're walking late at night, don't walk late at night alone, etc.
tell me a memory

Chapter Notes

atm, i have a lot of content banked, so i'm going to give you guys weekly updates instead of biweekly for the time being. this might change in a few weeks time if i hit a dry spell, but hopefully i'll be able to keep up the momentum i've been having lately. i hope you enjoy this update, you can find the playlist here, don't forget to comment bc your comments make my whole day.
edit: you can find the cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Five Common Myths About Feminism, WeAreFeminism.Org

“1. Feminism is for female Omegas only.

While it is true that the feminist movement began for women’s rights, it began for the rights of Beta and Omega women both...

Ultimately, the goals of feminism look to better the positions of all genders and designations
After Tangled was over, there had been more talking. Something had loosed in Bucky that evening and he began describing missions. It had been good that Steve was already so close to him, wedged between his hip and the arm of the chair, through their bond he had been able to tell that his presence was a constant and soothing comfort as Bucky recounted every kill he could. When he was done, Sam had reminded Bucky that he had not chosen to do any of it, Bucky had nodded and said nothing, and Steve had pressed in tighter when he felt the bond radiate Bucky’s distress and shame.

“Why don’t you try a bubble bath?” Sam had said after that. Then he had gone back to his apartment, leaving them alone.

Steve had drawn a bath. He’d undressed Bucky and Bucky had undressed him, Bucky had stared in slight confusion at the bath and Steve had told him to sit down in the tub. Steve got in after, pressed his back to Bucky’s chest, and Bucky had wrapped his remaining arm securely around Steve’s body, keeping his left shoulder out of the water’s creeping reach.

When the water had cooled, Steve had toweled Bucky off and Bucky had dried him in return. Then Steve had suggested they go to bed, and Bucky walked away. Steve had resisted the urge to call him back, had gotten into bed alone, had laid there, awake, for hours.

Around one in the morning, Bucky had crept into the room. Steve hadn’t moved, and Bucky hadn’t gotten into the bed. He had sat down on the floor by the bathroom, a gun in hand, taking up a guard’s stance. Steve had sat up a little, and Bucky shook his head.

“Sleep,” he had rasped. “Just sleep, sweetheart.”

Steve listened, or tried. He had slept fitfully, one hand dangling off the edge of the bed. He woke briefly when Bucky’s head nudged his hand, had curled his fingers into Bucky’s hair and let them rest there. After that, he slept better.

He still woke just after dawn, the crown of Bucky’s head still pressed to his palm. He sat up, leaving his fingers tangled in Bucky’s hair, looked around blearily while his brain caught up with his body.
Bucky was watching the closed door. Gently, Steve scratched his nails over the surface of Bucky’s scalp. His Alpha let out a quiet breath, his eyes fell shut and he pressed into Steve’s touch.

“Breakfast?” Steve offered.

He made eggs. Sam texted him to let him in from the elevator not long after they’d finished, Sam declaring that they were going to watch Mary Poppins the second Steve let him in.

“It’s not animated, but it’s still a classic,” he said.

So they watched Mary Poppins. Steve liked it. And then they watched the Jungle Book, and Steve liked it even better. Then it was eleven, and orange sparks appeared in the kitchen. Steve still didn’t know what to make of magic neurosurgeons, but Bucky was startled and shoved Steve off his lap onto the floor to cover him with his whole body again when Stephen Strange dressed in hospital scrubs appeared in their kitchen. It happened so quick, Bucky fired off three shots before Steve even recognized the man in the kitchen, but Strange waved a hand with reflexes just as quick as Bucky’s and a glowing symbol appeared in the air to catch the bullets.

For a second, the four of them stared at one another, Strange’s eyes comically wide. Steve’s left ear was ringing painfully and he cupped a hand over it to try and relieve the sensation. It had been a while since his sensitivity to noise had caused pain in the ear that had been almost deaf before the serum, Steve had forgotten how much it fucking hurt.

“Dude,” Sam called after a tense moment, looking at Strange as though he were insane, “use the elevator!”

Bucky didn’t lower his gun, only glared at Stephen Strange. “Rude,” he added gruffly.

“Sorry,” Strange said, though his manner was – understandably, Bucky had just shot at him – spooked. “Can you put away your gun? Do you do this to everyone?”

Bucky huffed, glowered some more as he set the gun on the floor. He spun around on his heels and plopped down onto his butt, grabbed Steve by the arm and tugged him back onto his lap, settling him between his legs and against his torso. Steve, his ear still hurting, pressed the left side of his head and ear against Bucky’s warm chest. The warmth eased the throbbing somewhat. Bucky rubbed the back of his neck, an apologetic tone going through the bond for startling Steve.
“Does he?” Steve heard Strange say, probably to Sam.

“Well, what would you do if somebody just popped into existence in your kitchen?” Sam retorted.

“You were expecting me!”

“Yeah, in the elevator!” Bucky snapped.

The pain and ringing finally abated and Steve lifted his head. “Just use the elevator next time,” he said.

Strange held his hands in a defensive position. “Fine, fine,” he muttered, walking closer to the living room. He squinted at the TV screen for a minute, then looked down at Steve and Bucky on the floor. “Shall we head to medical?”

“There’s, like, thirty minutes left in this,” Sam said, waving a hand at Strange. “Have a seat.”

Steve gave a glance at Bucky, but Strange walked around the other end of the couch and Bucky made no protest. Technically, this was Bucky’s space and Strange was an unknown and invasive Alpha, Bucky had every right to be territorial. And while his eyes did track Strange’s every movement, his arm was tight around Steve, he didn’t go for the gun again or even growl in Strange’s direction. Steve took it to be a good sign.

“Is this the Jungle Book?” Strange asked. “I’ve never seen it.”

Sam ogled Strange openly. “You’ve never seen the Jungle Book?”

“It never seemed important,” Strange answered with a shrug.

Sam turned to Steve and Bucky with a get a load of this guy look. “See, even some people from this century haven’t seen the classics.”
“It’s a classic?” Strange said, frowning. “Wasn’t Rudyard Kipling incredibly racist? He wrote imperialist propaganda.”

Sam faltered. “I mean,” he said, “yeah… Okay, the original Jungle Book we can shun, but Disney Jungle Book is a classic.”

“How is this a children’s film?” Strange asked ten minutes later as the jungle caught fire.

“It’s an old Disney movie,” Sam said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Remember Pinocchio?”

“I haven’t seen that either,” Strange said.

Sam spluttered, then looked at Bucky imploringly. “Do you remember Pinocchio?”

Bucky considered it. Steve hadn’t seen Pinocchio either, so he had no idea what Sam was talking about. “I took my little sister to see it,” Bucky said after a second.

“Remember the island?” Sam prompted. “Where they all got turned into donkeys?”

Bucky shrugged. “Becks and I thought it was funny. I think.”

Sam shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Depression-era humor,” he grumbled, looking back to the screen. “We’re watching that next.”

“I’m performing surgery next,” Strange countered.
“After that,” Sam said with another wave of his hand.

Bucky nudged Steve gently. “I’m gonna have to take more Asgardian morphine,” he murmured.

“I think we’ll want to just rest after that,” Steve announced. He heard Bucky give a low chuckle in his ear and shivered a little.

As the credits for the Jungle Book rolled, Strange got to his feet.

“Shall we, then?”

Bucky tapped Steve's side, who pushed up to his feet before holding out a hand to Bucky. He took it, let Steve help him up, wrapped an arm around his shoulders and brushed the inside of his wrist over the back of Steve's neck as he did.

“We're taking the elevator,” Sam said firmly as he stood, too.

Strange sighed, but didn't protest. Steve was grateful, he still hadn't quite processed the idea of magic neurosurgeons who could teleport.

In the elevator, Bucky put his back to a wall and guided Steve into the corner. Sam stood between them and Strange, who sent what was probably a look of concern in Steve's direction as the elevator doors shut.

Steve knew Bucky’s behavior was odd, he doubted Alphas held their Omegas out of reach of other people the way they did when Steve was growing up any longer. It was a good change, he’d thought, he remembered seeing women with their eyes fixed steadily on the ground before their feet as they hid in the shadows cast by their husbands, women who flinched when their Alphas turned around but who couldn't walk away. Omegas had been granted an autonomy that hadn’t even been a dream for most when he was a kid and it was a blessed thing that it happened. But Bucky wasn’t just a jealous and possessive Alpha, Steve wasn’t just a complacent and demure Omega. There were things to be said for how much a comfort it was to Bucky that he could hold Steve out of reach. It was an old base instinct, primal and protective, but in equal parts reassuring and grounding, from when God made Eve for Adam and bade them to be fruitful and multiply. Steve would never deny him that.
“Medical floor,” Strange said to the ceiling.

“As you wish,” JARVIS answered.

The elevator glided, smooth and quiet, down ten or so floors in about ten seconds. The doors pinged softly before opening, Strange stepped off first followed by Sam. Bucky’s arm around Steve's shoulders gave a gentle tug before he began moving, keeping him close. Steve gave a look around the first room of the medical floor, what looked like an operations hub – comfortable looking armchairs lining the walls for waiting visitors, a large and round desk off the center of the room, banks of computers and filing cabinets – but was deserted.

Until Stark popped up from behind the desk, hitting his head on the way up and swearing loudly.

“Good morning,” Strange greeted dryly. “I assume you're here to supervise?”

“Obviously,” Stark said, rubbing the back of his head and wincing. “Bruce is on his way with Barnes’ painkillers. I'm guessing he still doesn't want to get knocked out.”

“I don't,” Bucky agreed. Stark started, then pressed a hand over his chest and blew out a breath.

“Steve, put a bell on that guy.”

“We all walked in together,” Steve said incredulously.

Stark waved a hand. “I'll give you the tour,” he said to Strange. “And brief you on Asgardian morphine. Barnes will likely get handsy again. To Steve only, of course. But he will not refrain from making dirty talk…”

Strange, with a bemused glance at Bucky and Steve, followed Stark through a set of double doors. Sam dropped into a plush armchair.

“Now we wait,” he said.
“Now we wait,” Steve echoed.

Bucky tugged him to a chair, sat down and held up his arm. Steve settled on his knee before reclining to tuck his head under Bucky’s chin. Bucky’s arm curled over his knees and thighs, holding him in place. The elevator dinged behind them and Steve shifted his head to see the doors open. Bruce waved, dressed in nurses’ scrubs, pushing a cart with an IV set-up.

“Morning,” he said cheerily. “How you feeling, Barnes?”

Bucky grunted. Steve let out a quiet breath and turned his head back into Bucky’s neck.

“I get to play nurse again,” Bruce said from somewhere a bit closer. The wheels on the cart squealed softly as it neared. “So does Steve, come to think of it.”

Steve lifted his head. “I do?”

“Oh, yeah,” Bruce said, smiling pleasantly at them before it morphed into a smirk and he raised one eyebrow. “For one thing, I’m sure Bucky will want you there to take care of his stiffie.”

Steve gave a snort, feeling more than hearing Bucky chuckle, the vibrations low and rumbling in his chest.

“In all seriousness, we assume you don't want to be separated for too long.”

“No,” Steve said, mirth fading. “Not really.”

Bucky kissed his temple, nosed gently at Steve's hair, scenting him again. Steve pretended not to notice Bruce pretending not to notice. That was another difference in relationships from before the war. Couples didn't scent mark each other so frequently, he realized, and never in public.

Then the double doors opened again and Strange appeared, Stark behind him. “You can come back, Mr. and Mr. Barnes.”
For a jolting second, Steve didn't even realize that Strange had said *mister* twice but followed it only with Bucky’s surname. He stood up automatically, Bucky's hand caught on his hip, then Bucky stopped halfway in standing up while Steve's brain processed Strange’s sentence.

Bucky rose the rest of the way and fixed Strange with a slightly unreadable look. Slightly, because Steve knew him.

Strange stuck his hands in the air as if he thought Bucky might shoot at him again. “Tony told me to say it,” he said defensively.

Stark sniggered. Bucky glanced out of the corner of his eye at Steve, who felt his ears go warm. Bucky was definitely not considering shooting Strange, that was for sure.

“I'll be out here,” Sam piped up. “Have fun.”

“Thanks,” Steve said to Sam. He laced his fingers through Bucky’s, followed Bruce and the slightly squealing cart to the double doors. Stark gave a wave as he exited and they passed, and Strange led them through the next hallway to another room.

Steve wasn't sure what he'd been expecting to see in the surgery room, but a high cot with an attachment at its head with a gap for a patient’s face and cartoonish Captain America plastic sheets, and fish-patterned wallpaper wasn't it.

“I'm told this is a pediatric room,” Strange said to them, “and that you dislike normal medical equipment.”

Bucky said nothing. He was eyeing the fish with slight concern. They were humanized somewhat, with wide faces and eyes pushed together. They were also slightly disturbing.

Then Strange held out a hospital gown to Bucky. “You'll need to put this on,” he said. “Banner and I will step out so you can change.”

They did, and Bucky unfolded the hospital gown. His eyebrows shot up. “This is a dress,” he said, with mild concern again.
“It’s a hospital gown,” Steve told him. “So you won't have to be naked.”

Bucky looked up at him and grimaced. “I can't just take my shirt off?”

Steve shrugged. Bucky sighed, set the gown on the cot and tugged his shirt off. Steve took his clothes as Bucky removed them, folded them and stacked them neatly on a chair. Bucky, now nude, picked up the gown and shook it out. Then he let out a yelp and Steve whipped around in time to see Bucky look at the open back of the gown with horror.

“It’s not even a smock!” he said. “What happened to modesty?”

Steve let out a laugh, stepped nearer and grasped the strings, giving them a tug. “It ties in the back.”

Bucky looked at it, aghast. “How does that make it better? I'm practically gonna be naked in this!”

Steve, still chuckling, took it from him and held it up. “You'll be fine, Buck.”

Bucky huffed, but donned the gown and let Steve tie it in the back. He kept tugging the flaps more securely around his ass. The left sleeve hung empty at his side. “Feel like I’m about to do a cabaret,” he grumbled.

Steve kissed the back of his neck. “You’d do a very nice cabaret.”

“That ain’t helping,” Bucky muttered despondently. He seated himself on the plastic covered cot and yanked the hem of the gown over his knees. He squinted distastefully at it, then flicked a glare at Steve when he let out a snort. “Shuddup,” he growled.

A knock at the door caught their attention. “Everything alright in there?” Strange’s muffled voice came.

“Peachy,” Bucky called back sarcastically. “Not like I'm wearing nothing but a poncho,” he added under his breath, and Steve sniggered again.
“You can come in,” Steve said as Bucky shot him another glare.

The door opened and Strange re-entered, Bruce behind them. “Good,” Strange said; he was carrying a box filled with plastic covered fabric items, which he set on a counter. “Banner is going to check your vitals and get the IV started,” he added, then waved to Steve; Bucky’s hand shot out and grabbed him by the wrist, but Strange didn’t seem to notice. “I'll need you to put on a surgery smock.”

Steve raised his eyebrows at Bucky, until he dropped the glare and Steve's wrist. He leaned in and pecked a quick kiss on Bucky’s cheek, then walked over to Strange. He was handed a full-length green smock, one that wrapped around the front and had long sleeves with elastic in the cuffs, and a hairnet. He washed his hands, pulled them on, Strange donning an identical getup, while Bruce took Bucky’s temperature, blood pressure, checked his breathing and pulse. Strange handed him a face mask as Bruce pulled on gloves and had Bucky hold out his arm for the IV.

“Go ahead and take your left shoulder out of the gown, if you don’t mind, Mr. Barnes,” Strange said as he placed a mask over his face.

Bucky looked at his right arm, at Bruce carefully inserting the IV, then at Steve. He raised his eyebrows. Steve shot him a gentle smile as he stepped over and untied the strings at the top of the gown, then pulled the sleeve off of the metal stump, still covered by the fabric Stark had placed on it. Strange walked over, tugging on medical gloves, and he removed the fabric covering from Bucky’s arm.

The mass of gears and wires inside Steve had expected, the latches and hooks that connected to the actual arm itself. The exposed bone and socket of Bucky’s shoulder jarred him. Wires dug into his skin, most hidden by the mechanics of the mounting. Strange set the fabric covering aside, then calmly began to cover the mounting in plastic, using tape to seal it. Bucky’s eyes darted around the room, never settling in one place, his flesh hand curled and uncurled, and he kept swallowing. Even without seeing it, Steve could feel through the bond the anxiety swelling in Bucky. He tugged off his mask, baring his face, and stepped around Strange to stand in front of Bucky.

“You’re okay,” he reminded him, “you’re safe here, everyone here is just trying to help you.”

Bucky only swallowed again. He held out his hand, and Steve took it, squeezing tight.

“Ready to begin the IV drip,” Bruce said.
“Alright, if you could lie down on your front, Mr. Barnes?”

“You okay to do this?” Steve asked before Bucky could move.

Bucky inhaled, then nodded. “Don’t – Don’t let go,” he muttered. Steve squeezed his hand again.

“Never.”

Bucky carefully clambered onto his front, leaving his hand in Steve’s, his arm lying flat on the table. Strange produced a sheet, hardly paper, and draped it over Bucky’s body from the waist down. Steve stood at Bucky’s right side, one hand by his shoulder and the other clasped by Bucky’s, Strange at his left shoulder and Bruce on the opposite side of the cot from Steve. Bucky set his face in the hole of the pillowed attachment, Steve heard him exhale deeply.

“I’ll need you to put on gloves and your mask,” Strange said to Steve.

“I’ll be right back,” Steve said to Bucky, then tugged the mask over his face with his free hand. He turned, but Bruce handed him a set of gloves, the crinkling of his eyes the only indication that he was smiling, with his facemask already on. Steve gave him a nod of thanks, then squeezed Bucky’s hand before letting go to pull on the gloves. He grasped Bucky’s hand again the instant they were on, and Strange gave a shrug. Steve figured wearing the gloves did little good if he was just going to keep holding Bucky’s hand, but it wasn’t like he could do any harm from here.

“Banner, start the IV,” he said.

Bruce reached out and slid open the valve of the IV drip. The golden liquid of the Asgardian morphine cocktail swept down the tube, disappearing into the crook of Bucky’s arm. Bucky exhaled heavily again, sucked in another breath, exhaled heavy. Steve kept a firm grip on his hand.

“Feel it,” Bucky said, voice muffled slightly by his position.

Strange gave a nod, switched on a lamp, then opened a set of tools.
“M’toes tingle,” Bucky mumbled.

“That’s a good thing,” Steve reminded him. “Means the medicine is working.”

Bucky hummed. His fingers shifted in Steve’s hand, changing his grip to clasp over his wrist past the glove. Bucky thumbed over Steve’s scent gland, gentle, drawing out Steve’s scent.

“Keep your arm straight,” Steve reminded him.

“Gimme your wrist.” Bucky replied in a grumble. Steve offered his free hand, holding it just under Bucky’s face. His Alpha nuded his nose at his wrist, just breathing.

“Speak up if you need a break,” Strange announced. “I’m starting now.”

Bucky hummed again to acknowledge that he had heard. Steve purposefully looked at his feet and not at where Strange was pressing a scalpel into Bucky’s skin.


Bucky made a noncommittal grunt.

“How about school? When we were kids?”

Steve caught Strange glancing up, but the doctor quickly refocused. Bucky squeezed his hand a third time.

“Alright. You remember how I kept getting into fights?” Another squeeze of his hand. “So, fourth grade, you were in fifth, you’d just turned eleven, literally the day before. It was a Monday, and I’d been gone the past week ‘cause I was sick again, but Sister Daniel, she taught math, she’d just started teaching division and spent the whole week telling everyone it was the simplest thing in the world. But me, I couldn’t quite figure it out, I hadn’t had all the lessons the rest of the kids had had.”
Bucky squeezed his hand, and Steve paused. “Your wrist,” Bucky muttered. Steve realized he’d dropped his hand, lifted it quickly and Bucky nosed over it gently. He squeezed his hand again and Steve resumed.

“I was having trouble and Sister Daniel was pretty irritated ‘cause Edith Benson and Darla Falk were talking all through the lesson about how their pas had gotten them this new dollhouse to share, they were cousins, and Roy Codd was pulling Emily Smith’s braids, and a whole bunch of other mess, and I just couldn’t wrap my head around long division, so she got mad at me and made me wear the dunce cap.”

Bucky grunted again, this time with a displeased air. Steve smiled a little at him.

“Yeah, yeah, so she put the dunce cap on me and made me sit in the corner while she separated Roy and Emily, she told Emily off for smacking his hand, and Roy and his goons, they all just laughed.”

“Roy was a sixth grader,” Bucky mumbled.

“That’s right,” Steve said brightly – Strange was lifting a stainless steel tool and had blood on his fingers – he was meant to be ignoring Strange. “He was twelve, almost thirteen, and he couldn’t wrap his head around long division, neither. Anyway, Sister Daniels hit Emily with her ruler and told her not to hit boys, but she didn’t say a word to Roy about pulling on her braids, so after school –”

“You went up to him and gave him a piece of your mind,” Bucky finished.

“Yup,” Steve said, and Bucky gave a snort. “I told him he was a pig and he shouldn’t tug on a girl’s hair, and he pushed me over and said ‘What would you know, dunce?’”

“Gave you a split lip,” Bucky mumbled.

“I broke his nose,” Steve countered. He’d always been proud of breaking Roy Codd’s nose. It had still been crooked in the middle years later when they met on the docks.

“I blacked his eye,” Bucky added and Steve ignored the train of thoughts beckoning him down dark alleys in Brooklyn late at night. “We both got suspended.”
“It was worth it,” Steve said. “We got back on Friday and Emily Smith went up to me and told me I didn’t need to go around breaking people’s noses for a bit of hair-pulling, but she appreciated it.”

“She kissed you on the cheek,” Bucky growled abruptly, and Steve felt his ears flush a little. “I didn’t like it.”

“Well,” Steve tried to say, the flush crept towards the back of his neck, “I didn’t know that.”

Bucky had been in a sour mood the whole of that day, from what he recalled, but Steve had always attributed it to his ma not letting him read the comics in the morning even though he wasn’t grounded any longer.

Bucky mumbled something, then nudged at his wrist with his nose again. Steve lifted it closer, Bucky nuzzled it for a second before putting his mouth directly over Steve’s scent gland and sucking. Steve half started, managed to bite back a moan through biting his lip, yet held still, hoping no one noticed. Bucky released his lips a moment later, nuzzling again at the now wet patch of skin.

He mumbled something again, and this time, Steve’s superior hearing managed to pick it up.

“You’re mine.”

Steve fought back against the shiver going down his spine. Strange pulled a long and metal tool from Bucky’s flesh and set something that clicked on a metal tray.

“Did you know you have bullets embedded under your prosthetic?” Strange asked. Steve jolted.

“No,” Bucky answered gruffly.

“I would recommend having another X-ray, a full body one, to see if you have foreign objects still lodged in you anywhere.”

Bucky grunted.
“I’ll ask you again when you’re not drugged up,” Steve promised. Bucky grunted a second time. “Want me to keep talking?”

“Who was Charlotte Heyman?” Bucky asked suddenly.

“Uh…” Steve said. He had to think about it for a while. “She was in my class.”

“I remember not liking her. Don’t know why.”

Steve frowned, unsure why Bucky would dislike her either. She had been a particularly sweet girl, always helpful and quick to laugh. She’d been rather dumb, too, or perhaps it would be kinder to say she was naive. She’d had a poor job at spelling, so Sister Thomas had asked Steve to help her out during that hour since he was almost always ahead. He’d never seen Bucky be rude to her, nor seen her be rude to Bucky, so what reason Bucky would have to dislike her eluded him.

“Bunch of people I don’t remember why I don’t like ‘em,” Bucky said, and Steve squeezed his hand.

“That’s okay,” he said. “Better to not speak ill of the dead.”

“They’re not all dead, I’m sure,” Bucky said, and Steve shrugged.

“I dunno, Buck, not a lot of people from when we were kids lived past 80. We’re the exception.”

Bucky gave a snort and Steve squeezed his hand again. “At the very least, our schoolmates will be very, very old.”

“Bet Charlotte Heyman’s still an awful flirt,” Bucky huffed, then let out a quiet noise of recognition. “She was an awful flirt. That's why I didn’t like her.”

“So were you, Buck,” Steve said with a light laugh. “You’d flirt with a brick wall! You flirted with me, even, all the time.”

“I flirted with you ’cause I was in love with you, dumbass,” Bucky said dryly.
Steve opened his mouth and then shut it again. Bucky… had a point. “Alright, but you still flirted with anyone who stood still long enough. You flirted Sister Thomas into letting us out of detention once.”

“Yeah, but I never meant any of it and people knew that. Well,” he paused, sounding contemplative, “’cept you. But Charlotte fucking Heyman wouldn’t quit batting her eyelashes at you.”

Steve blinked, then leaned to the side to peer sideways at Bucky’s face. He was a little purple from lying with his face in a cushion so long.

“Bucky, are you telling me you thought Lottie Heyman was flirting with me?”

At Bucky’s side-eyed look, Steve gaped in disbelief. “Nobody flirted with me but you!”

“You deserve that dunce cap if you never realized Heyman flirting with you,” Bucky growled. “Lottie Heyman, my ass…”

He trailed off into grumbling. Steve lifted his eyebrows. “Well, I never thought you were genuinely flirting with me.”

Bucky squinted at him out of the corner of his eye. “I called you sugar and dollface in every sentence.”

“You called everybody dollface!”

“I didn’t call everybody sugar!”

Steve opened his mouth, frowned, shut it and flushed. Bucky snorted again.

“Blind ass motherfucker,” he muttered.
Steve saw Strange looking at Bruce with raised eyebrows. Bruce returned the look, and they both shook their heads.

“How are you doing, Mr. Barnes?” Strange asked.

“I got a itch,” Bucky answered.

Steve dropped his head with a grimace while Strange frowned and Bruce adopted a distressed expression.

“Uh,” Strange said.

“Ignore that,” Steve said quickly. “He’s being difficult.”

“I got an itch!” Bucky insisted. “Right on my ass, doll –”

“Behave,” Steve said firmly, and Bucky smirked sideways at him. “He’s fine,” Steve added to Strange, who still appeared concerned, before turning back to Bucky. “You’re going to traumatize Bruce even more, Buck.”

“Oh, please, don’t put me on the spot,” Bruce said dryly.

“Aw, c’mon, Steve –”

Steve leaned sideways again and gave Bucky a stern look. All it did was make him snort.

“Sure,” Bucky said, “that’ll get me to behave better.”

Steve rolled his eyes; at least Bucky wasn’t panicking. He could be optimistic. “I’ll tell you more about Lottie Heyman if you don’t,” he threatened.
“Lottie Heyman can go fuck a duck,” Bucky answered; Steve snorted, too. “I got you, don’t I?”

“Yeah, you got me, Buck,” Steve said, and Bucky aimed a sideways – and slightly squished – smirk in his direction. Or maybe it was a smile and it was the squished aspect of it that made it appear to be a smirk.

“‘Sides, don’t talk ill of the dead, you said,” Bucky added victoriously.

“She’s probably still alive, she’s two years younger than me.”

“Then she’s ninety-what and wrinkly as balls, who cares?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “She’d be ninety-five now.”

“And wrinkly as balls!” Bucky added insistently.

Steve rolled his eyes again. “Alright, alright, you’ll be pleased to remember she quit hanging around me in fifth grade, then.”

“I remember,” Bucky said. He sounded quite pleased. Steve rolled his eyes a third time. “I feel you rolling your eyes, doll, don’t think I don’t.”

“Is that even possible?” Bruce asked. “Do bond connections extend to eye-rolling?”

“Ours does,” Bucky insisted.

“You don’t smell bonded,” Strange spoke up in a musing tone.

Steve’s smile slid off his face. Bucky half lifted his head and Steve quickly reached out to set his hand on the top of it, to hold him still. Strange, seemingly unaware, continued to operate on Bucky’s shoulder.
“It’s likely due to his abnormal rate of cell reproduction,” Bruce answered Strange. “Scents fade from him quicker than others.”

“Well, you’ve been together the past week, haven’t you?” Strange asked Steve. “You smell like him, but you don’t smell bonded.”

“We are,” Steve said, a little more sharply than he perhaps ought to have done. Strange glanced up at him briefly, his attention focused on Bucky’s shoulder.

“Didn’t know you didn’t smell like it,” Bucky mumbled.

“It doesn’t matter, Buck, I reek of you anyway—”

“And you don’t smell bonded.”

Steve bit his lip, then dropped his hand under the table again to offer his wrist to Bucky. His Alpha nosed at his scent gland gently, absentely, frowning all the while.

“Couples don’t always bond these days,” Bruce said, catching Steve’s attention. “I’d say only two thirds or a half of married couples bond even a year or so into their marriages, and never before, in case they ever want a divorce.”

“Which we’d never do,” Steve said hastily to Bucky.

“Of course not, you’re the ultimate love story,” Bruce added, “Hollywood would love to make it into the next Fault In Our Stars.”

“Or they would if you weren’t Captain America and Bucky Barnes,” Strange said.

“Maybe they will in the future,” Bruce said with a shrug. “Who knows?”

Bucky said nothing. Steve leaned to the side to look at him; he found his eyes shut and his lips pressed in a thin line. Steve pressed his wrist a little closer, hovering just below Bucky’s mouth.
Bucky opened his eyes, looked at his wrist and at him, then just kissed the skin above his scent gland lightly.

“Do you remember the time you and me took Becca to a Dodgers game?” Steve said abruptly. “We snuck in, didn’t have the money for tickets.”

“You were thirteen,” Bucky mumbled.

“She was ten, you were fourteen. It was a few weeks before you presented, too.”

“Tell me about it,” Bucky said quietly. Wearily.

Steve told him. They’d gotten all the way in, settled into seats and Bucky had bought popcorn for a nickel, peanuts cost a dime and they only had seven cents between them, they all shared, sat in one of the last rows in the nosebleed section. Becca had been so happy, she’d cried. They’d gotten halfway through the game before somebody noticed there were three kids unattended and asked for their tickets.

“They had us sit in the office while they called your parents,” Steve said. “My ma was at work so you said I was your brother. Your pa came to get us and didn’t bat an eye when the park official told him to get better control of his sons. I thought he’d whip us both with a paddle when we got back, ’cause we were both claiming it was our idea and trying to take all the blame, but he just sent all three of us up to our rooms, that’s what he said, go to your rooms, kids , Becca to hers and me and you to yours.”

“You weren’t my room half your life, anyway,” Bucky muttered.

“Yeah,” Steve chuckles, “it was a fair thing to say.”

“Pa never paddled us,” Bucky announced. “Not one day in our lives. Not even when I broke some of ma’s wedding china.”

Steve thought about, then shrugged. “I guess you’re right. I got my ass spanked a couple of times by my ma, but I always deserved it. Do y’know, they’re saying you shouldn’t spank your kids anymore.”
“Seems fair,” Bucky mumbled softly.

“You falling asleep on us, Bucky?” Bruce asked.

“Nah, ‘m awake.”

“It’s okay if you do,” Strange said. “Feel free to doze off whenever.”

Bucky mumbled something else they couldn’t catch. Steve gave his hand a quick squeeze.

“Anyway, they say not to spank kids these days because it’s a poor way to show kids consequences,” Bruce said to Steve. “When they’re young, teaching them that pain is the price of misbehaving creates negative precedents for when they’re older, and when they’re old enough to understand why they’re being spanked fully, they’re too old for spanking to be appropriate. It’s better to revoke privileges; even a three-year-old can understand why if they draw on the walls they get their favorite toy taken away.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Steve said, now looking at Bucky again.

“You gonna take my favorite toy away if I misbehave, Stevie?” Bucky said with a lazy grin.

Steve’s ears went hot. “I think that would be punishing me just as much as you.”

“Who said you’re my favorite toy?” Bucky snorted.

Steve squeezed his hand. “You do, all the time.”

“Alright, alright, I admit it, you’re my favorite dolly.”

Steve rolled his eyes, though he was smiling.
“Quit rolling your eyes at me, I’m flirting with you.”

“I rolled my eyes at you every time you flirted with me,” Steve countered. “Even when we were kids.”


“Okay, how about the time you and I skipped school to go to a fair?”

“I skipped school a lot.”

“Yeah, but you and me only skipped the once to go to a fair,” Steve prompted.

Bucky was quiet for a moment. “Tell me about it.”

The story of the time they skipped school to attend the county fair became the time they snuck out to go see a movie, then the time Bucky used half his birthday money from his grandparents to buy Steve colored pencils, and more, and more, until the time Steve drew a portrait of Bucky’s whole family for the Barnes’s for Christmas.

“That was Christmas of ’32,” Bucky inserted.

“Yep. Ma made them jam.”

“Ma left it there,” Bucky said. Steve paused. “In our old house, when we moved. She left it there.”

Steve’s pause lengthened. Mrs. Barnes had been so pleased when he’d given it to her at Christmas, but two weeks later was different.

“I guess she would’ve,” he muttered.
“What happened?” Bruce asked.

“Stuff,” Bucky said before Steve could speak.

Bruce raised an eyebrow in Steve’s direction. Strange was frowning at Bucky’s shoulder, either at something to do with the operation or Christmas of 1932, Steve couldn’t tell.

“Stuff,” Steve echoed.

It was a private pain. It had been one thing to let it out to Sam, who was practically a stranger; it had burst out of him, like he couldn’t hold it in any longer. Another thing was to confess to a friend he’d known for a few years already.

And it was a very private pain. Even in a future that casually discussed sexual partners like the weather, having a heat was something people talked about in private only.

“Did I drop out of high school?” Bucky asked, breaking the moment’s silence. “I think I dropped out of high school.”

“I don’t know,” Steve said quietly.

Bucky’s eyes slipped shut again. Strange hummed quietly to himself as he worked. An analog clock nearby ticked, tck, tck, tck, a steady pulsing drone. An idea came to him, but it wasn’t one he thought Bucky would like. He didn’t like it.

“We could ask Rebecca,” Steve murmured.

Bucky’s eyes snapped open. The look he gave Steve was startingly, one of pure and abject horror at the concept.

“No,” he said, “no, no, she can’t – I shouldn’t – I’m dead, Steve.”
Steve’s mouth fell open. “Buck,” he managed after a second, “Buck, you’re –”

“She can’t know I’m alive,” Bucky rephrased, though it didn’t lessen Steve’s distress.

“Why not? She’s your sister, she’d be so happy to know –”

“She can’t, Steve,” Bucky insisted, and Steve shut his mouth with a snap. His arm dropped to his side and Bucky’s face dropped the horrified look for one of disappointment. Steve hesitated, then lifted his wrist again. Bucky nudged it with his nose, Steve pressed his palm against his cheek.

“Why not?” he asked.

Bucky took his time in answering. Strange had stopped humming, so the ticking of the clock overtook the silence, and under that, the thrums of his eardrums roared softly.

“She had a good life, right?”

“I – Yeah, I think.”

“I don’t wanna mess that up.”

Steve gave up, dropped his arm to kneel down on the ground next to Bucky’s table, looking up at his faintly purple face with loving eyes. “You couldn’t mess up her life by not being dead, Buck. I’m sure she’d be over the moon to see you again. She loves you, you know. You’re her big brother.”

“You gone to see her?” Bucky asked.

When Steve didn’t answer, he flicked his eyebrows up and down. “You should’ve, she would’ve liked to see you. She missed you after we left.”

“Did she?” Steve countered. It hadn’t felt like it. “I saw her, before I went overseas. I went looking for you, but I just found her. She didn’t look happy to see me.”
Bucky’s face arranged itself in an expression Steve couldn’t quite read, a mix of confusion and curiosity and annoyance and something that got lost in the fact that his face was sort of stretched by the cushion.


“We should ask Becca,” Steve said. They should. They really should ask her, but mostly so she could see her brother again. She was ninety-four years old and Steve wasn’t sure how much more time she’d have in her.

Bucky wobbled his head side to side in the cushion gap. “Shouldn’t.”

“She’s old, Buck.”

“Then I’m not messing up the rest of the time she’s got.”

Steve wanted to argue further, but he just sighed and shrugged. He could argue with Bucky when he wasn’t buzzing from Asgardian morphine.

“Keep talking, doll,” Bucky mumbled, his eyes falling shut again. Steve repositioned himself to sit on the floor, though it was probably breaking all sorts of surgery protocol, adjusting his grip to keep his hand in Bucky’s and the top of his head close to Bucky’s face.

“There was that time we all got to go to the Smithsonian. Week-long trip. Your pa was one of the chaperones, but that was ‘cause my ma wouldn’t let me go if there wasn’t somebody around who knew what to do if I got sick.”

“I knew,” Bucky said. He yawned; his breath made Steve’s hair flutter.

“See, I said that too, but Ma said, I still remember it, she said James Barnes, you are eleven years old, you are much too young to be responsible for the life of another human being. Then she told you not to spend so much time fussing over me you missed the mammoths.”
“Mammoths?” Bucky said questioningly. “I don’t remember no mammoths.”

“Cause you were too busy fussing over me,” Steve laughed.

“Ah,” Bucky said, a chuckle escaping his lips. “Makes perfect sense. What happened that distracted me from mammoths? Asthma? Fight?”

“Neither, funny enough. I fainted.”

Bucky opened his eyes and squinted down at him suspiciously. “Did you eat breakfast that morning?” he asked, equally suspiciously.

“I was too busy thinking about mammoths,” Steve admitted with a wry smile.

“Menace,” Bucky decided. “You’re a fucking menace. Gonna be the death of me.”

Steve grinned at him, lifted up a little so Bucky could kiss his forehead. “I’m your menace,” he teased, and Bucky snorted. His fingers tightened their grip on Bucky’s hand; his chest felt like it would burst at the seams and gush and gush and gush, it hurt but it felt right.

“Tell me all about the Smithsonian.”

The surgery ended up taking three hours and twenty-four minutes, and by the time it was over, Bucky was half asleep from the painkillers by that point, the only indication he hadn’t yet fallen asleep was the way he kept attempting to sing Star Spangled Man with a Plan. Steve had regurgitated any and every detail about their lives together he could think of, half of them to Bucky’s mumbling I ‘member that and another half receiving mere hums, until he’d gotten to the chorus girls and Bucky had launched into song. Fortunately, he was hardly through the first verse when Strange announced he had finished the stitching.

“Bedrest, the rest of today,” Strange said as he tossed away his gloves. Steve had already pitched his, and the face mask. He was standing by Bucky’s head, carding his fingers through his hair while Bucky continued to hum the off-key tune. Somehow it was less annoying hummed poorly.
“Though,” Strange went on, “that can be accomplished while watching Disney animated classics.”

“Thank you, Mr. Strange,” Steve said.

Strange opened his mouth, caught sight of Bruce giving him a look, and shut it again. He nodded.

“Anytime.” From the pocket of his scrubs, he withdrew a knuckle duster, drew a circle in the air, and vanished with the orange sparks.

“That’s not normal, right?” Steve asked Bruce. Maybe he’d just missed the rise of magicians amongst the invention of smartphones and second and third-wave feminism.

“Nowhere near it,” Bruce sighed. He looked, then, at Bucky and raised his eyebrows. “So, how are we going to get him to get up?”

“Mmmm,” Bucky said. “Stay.”

“Bucky, your ass is on full view,” Steve said, trying to motivate him, though barely the beginnings of his thighs were visible.

“S a nice ass,” Bucky mumbled. “You should ‘preciate it more.”

“I appreciate it very much, but wouldn’t you like me to appreciate it up in our apartment?”

“You c’n… ‘preciate it jus’ fine… ‘n here…”

Steve lifted his hand from Bucky’s hair to put both fists on his hips and look down at him with the expression of a disgruntled mother cat.

“Nnnuuu,” Bucky whined the instant Steve’s hand left his scalp. He lifted his head and arm to grope vaguely in Steve’s direction. His hand landed on Steve’s pec and he smiled vaguely in satisfaction before curling up again. He patted Steve on the nipple.
“I have an idea,” Bruce said.

“Does it involve me being bait?” Steve asked, looking at Bucky’s fingers curled in his shirt.

“You’re a mind reader,” Bruce answered brightly.

Steve sighed. He plucked Bucky’s hand from his shirt and stepped towards the door.

“Hey, come back ’ere, sugar,” Bucky mumbled. He lifted his head again, reaching for Steve.

“You’re gonna have to come to me, Buck,” Steve said.

Bucky pouted at him. He flopped onto the table, wiggling his fingers in a gimme motion at Steve. Steve crossed his arms over his chest and stood firmly about a foot out of reach.

“Ugh,” Bucky declared in pure disgust, then shimmied off the table. He stumbled, but Steve caught him and he promptly folded himself onto Steve’s chest, his one arm slung around his neck. “‘S better.”

“Come on,” Steve said, tugging in a valiant effort to get Bucky moving again. “Let’s go upstairs.”

Bucky mumbled something, then went limp in Steve’s arms. Steve gave a quiet oof as he staggered a little under the weight and Bucky resumed humming.

“If you get that stuck in my head again, Barnes, I swear to God, you’re not going near my ass for a week,” Steve told him sternly.

Bucky chuckled, low, in Steve’s ear, and dropped his arm from around his neck to grab a handful of his ass. “What we say about takin’ my favorite toy from me, eh, Stevie?”

Steve rolled his eyes, hard. He pushed up on Bucky’s shoulders to get him on his own two feet again, then twisted out of his grip and darted over to the door. Bucky made a distressed noise and took two steps before swaying and stopping in his tracks to blink hard. Bruce pressed a hand to his
mouth, looking like he was trying not to laugh.

“C’mon, two more steps,” Steve prompted, holding out his arms like a parent beckoning an infant.

Bucky raised his hand and pointed at him with a displeased expression. “You’re tricking me,” he said, still swaying on the spot.

“Duh,” Steve answered, and wiggled his fingers. Bucky huffed and took a stuttering step forwards. “There you go, Buck, almost.”

Bucky reached Steve’s hands, and Steve took a step back.

“Hey!” Bucky protested vehemently, reaching out just for Steve to slip further backwards, all the way out into the hallway. “Quit playin’ dirty, Steve, nobody likes a cheater.”

“You can’t grab my ass again until we’re upstairs,” Steve countered.

Bucky pouted harder, like a child being denied their favorite toy. Steve was probably taking that metaphor a little too far. Bucky took a step, tripped a little and Steve almost rushed forward to catch him before Bucky righted himself, his arm held out for balance.

He tipped to the right. “Fuck!” Bucky swore, staggering more to keep himself upright. “I got one arm, dammit, Steve, help me out here!”

“You got it,” Steve assured him, stepping back and beckoning him on.

“You’re no fair,” Bucky said petulantly. His right shoulder caught the doorframe and he half tumbled out of the room before catching himself with a hand on the doorframe. “Whew, room’s spinning.”

And he collapsed onto the ground. Steve walked up and looked down at him, shaking his head.

Bucky half opened one eye and squinted at him before grinning. “Hey, doll. You wanna get down here?”
“How about you get up and we go upstairs,” Steve repeated. “I’ll even let you fondle me in the elevator.”

“Or,” Bucky drawled, sticking his hand out and making the gimme motion again, “you could join me down here.”

Bruce appeared at Steve’s shoulder. “I grab his legs, you get his arms?” he suggested. “Arm?” he then corrected.

“Do you want us to carry you?” Steve asked. Bucky was scowling at Bruce. “We’ll carry you. Bruce is stronger than he looks.”

Bucky twisted onto his side and pushed himself to his feet, abruptly crowding into Steve’s personal space and wrapping his arm around his waist. Standing between him and Bruce. Bruce raised his eyebrows.

“Bucky, you don’t need to keep doing that,” Steve said to him. Bucky huffed and nuzzled his cheek. “Bruce is not going to challenge you for me.”

“Bruce personally is fine with never having to challenge anyone for anyone ever,” Bruce added. “Ever, ever.”

“I don’t know what that means but that you don’t have to feel threatened by Bruce standing next to me.”

“My Omega,” Bucky mumbled.


“Can I fuck you upstairs?” Bucky asked, voice muffled by how his face was buried in Steve’s neck.

“Sure,” Steve said.
Bucky leaned back and squinted thoughtfully. “Probably too out of it to carry you,” he said musingly.

“Probably,” Steve said, laughing a little. “I can carry you, though.”

Bucky leaned their foreheads together with a huff. “‘S principle, doll.”

Steve rolled his eyes. Bucky poked him in the cheek. “You’ll roll them baby blues right outta your head one day if you ain’t careful.”

“Don’t think I don’t notice that you still ain’t walkin,’” Steve retorted.

Bucky made a displeased sound, then started walking. While still attached to Steve, forcing him to stumble backwards before disengaging himself and turning around. This, however, only resulted in Bucky plastering himself to Steve’s back.

Bruce caught up with them and raised his eyebrows at Steve.

“... who’ll hang the noose on the goose-stepping goons from Berlin?” Bucky crooned off-key in Steve’s ear. Steve groaned.

“I hate you,” he said.

“You love me,” Bucky answered delightedly.

Bruce pushed open the doors for them. Sam stood up as they shuffled in, Bucky still singing, and promptly snorted.

“He looks high as balls,” Sam announced in lieu of a greeting.

“I dunno what that means but I’m floatin,’” Bucky answered. He wiggled his fingers, this time more
in a *hello* gesture, at Sam. “Stevie’s gonna let me fuck him when we get upstairs.”

“Well, isn’t that nice of Steve?” Sam said, clearly barely containing his laughter.

Bucky grinned. Steve could feel him beaming without looking, just like Bucky could feel him rolling his eyes.

“My babydoll’s the nicest,” Bucky declared.

Sam failed in holding back another snort.

“JARVIS, elevator,” Bruce said to the ceiling.

“Already waiting for you,” JARVIS answered, and the elevator doors dinged as they opened. “Sir has said he is waiting for you in his lab, Bruce.”

“I’ll take the stairs,” Bruce said to Steve, smiling and shaking his head. He waved as he headed for a door labeled with a neon EXIT sign. Bucky waved back.

“Bye, Bruce!” he called.

“Bye, Bucky,” Bruce said, pushing open the door and sniggering under his breath, “I’d tell you to have fun but that feels like too much of an innuendo.”

“Oh, I’m gonna have fun, alright,” Bucky said cheekily.

Steve rolled his eyes and tugged Bucky towards the elevator. For a man who had the promise of getting laid the minute they got back upstairs, Bucky was dragging his feet. Literally. He was half-asleep on Steve’s back again.

“I’ll see myself off on my floor,” Sam said cheerily in the elevator. “We can watch Pinocchio later.”
“Thanks, pal,” Bucky mumbled into Steve’s neck.

“You sure you don’t want to sleep?” Steve asked him.

Bucky pressed a little more firmly into his back. Specifically, pressed his hips into Steve’s ass.


“Your floor, Sam,” JARVIS announced.

“Have fun!” Sam crowed as he got out, the elevator doors cutting off his laughter.

Bucky’s hand promptly dropped to the front of Steve’s jeans and he pressed into his ass yet again. “Gonna fuck you so hard you see stars, babydoll,” he rasped.

Steve’s only response was to tip his head back and expose his throat. Bucky mouthed at it lazily for a while.

“The elevator has been stationary for a full sixty seconds,” JARVIS informed them.

Steve tugged, Bucky followed, all the way into the back bedroom where Steve rotated in Bucky’s arms and tugged him all the way onto the bed.

Bucky climbed on top of him, kissed him slowly, then tucked his face into Steve’s neck. Steve let his hands rest lightly on Bucky’s back, and a second later, Bucky was snoring.

Steve smiled a little. “So all it takes is getting you high as balls to get you to sleep, huh?” he said softly.

Bucky snored on.
high bucky is fun. incidentally, on the subject of being high, being in close proximity and enclosed quarters with travel cans of gasoline for an extended period of time can lead to some interesting feelings, like accidentally getting high. apparently i am ticklish when i'm high, bc my ma tickled me once and i literally fell over. that was an experience. it also lead to me not being able to feel my face and i've still got a headache, so, mandatory warning, don't do it. don't do drugs, stay in school, eat your vegetables, tell me all the things you loved about bucky being high as balls, etc. just live vicariously through bucky, kay? personally, i adore the "stevie's gonna let me fuck him when we get upstairs" "well isn't that nice of steve?" "my babydoll's the nicest" sequence. those were some of my favorite lines to write, that and "just 'cause I got more brains than you got boogers in your nose" from chapter two. ooh, and the part about mammoths! i just rlly like this chapter. these guys are hella fun to write when they're having fun. they're also hella fun to write when i'm torturing them, which is what i'm doing in the chapters i'm currently writing. i should stop rambling. i should certainly stop before i tell you that we have some fun stuff like compulsive hand washing and memory problems as bad as alzheimers and glimpses into the multiverse ahead of us. oh, and hydra. we're not done with hydra. hell, some of those fun things coincide with hydra. innit that great?
okay, so i saw infinity war.

... my thoughts can be summarized by that gif from mythbusters: "I reject your reality and substitute my own." so y'all don't need to worry about the plot of infinity war showing up here, we're heading into canon divergence territory. i promise that there will be no giant angry talking plums on legs showing up to wreck the universe. i mean, infinity stones, maybe... the playlist for this chapter can be found here, enjoy!
edit: you can find the cover art on my tumblr here
“...As kids, we’re indoctrinated with gender roles and punished for not following them, whether we do that knowingly or not. I can remember my brothers playing with their Howling Commando action figures and when I tried to join them with my Barbies, my mother shooed me away and said
my brothers didn’t want to play with Barbie dolls…

“…Captain America was just another symbol of the patriarchy, there was no time for him to go around enforcing gender roles during the war, but then he turned up alive and what does he do? Immediately begins to enforce gender roles. Alphas are allowed to have physical touch and show affection with each other, and he barely shakes hands with other Alphas. They are allowed to talk about their emotions, and he changes the subject when reporters ask how he’s adjusting. Alphas are allowed to have passions, and Captain America doesn’t seem to exist outside S.H.I.E.L.D. We know that he’s been informed of the changes to society and customs, he knows that Alphas are not restricted to being emotionless pillars of strength, and he continues to act that way despite the example it’s setting to all the young kids who are still being indoctrinated with his face…”

“Edit: In light of recent events and discoveries, I would like to offer my apologies for drawing the conclusions I did. I feel so stupid for not recognizing Captain America’s behavior as depression or PTSD, whatever it is, I feel like I’ve wasted my psychology degree. Especially his shying from touch. I wrote my graduate paper on intentional touch starvation in Omegas who experienced trauma…”

[late, home]

Bucky gradually became aware of someone snoring. Then, even more gradually, he became aware of the fact that it was him doing the snoring. He half-snorted, inhaled, then rolled onto his side and exhaled.

A second later, he tipped over, fell onto his back and woke with a start. He thought he heard Steve laughing and blinked his eyes open.

“You were laying on me,” Steve said somewhere behind him. “Then you fell off.”

“Huh?” Bucky said, trying to grasp reality again and force it into submission, he could swear he could hear the water heater rattling somewhere but Pa had fixed the thing not too long ago. He could also swear he could hear Steve, and he hadn’t seen Steve in over eight years.

He squinted, though, and found that his room didn’t look like it had when he’d fallen asleep. For one thing, it was ten times the size, for another, he could see a bathroom attached. Had he been drinking and gone home with someone? That didn’t seem like him.

He looked to his left, then, and found Steve lying next to him and smiling.
Bucky gaped for a long moment, long enough that Steve stopped smiling. Was he dreaming? This had to be a dream, in no other way could he have turned around to find his Stevie in whatever bed this was, and looking like one of those bodybuilders out of the circus, to boot! He reached out, his left hand going to touch Steve’s face, and it took longer than it should have for his arm to move.

He looked down. Reality grasped *him* and forced *him* into submission.

“Bucky? What’s the matter?” Steve was saying.

His left arm took too long to move because he didn’t have one. Steve wasn’t in his bed, he was in Steve’s bed, and Steve was a bodybuilder out of what could be compared to a circus. There was no water heater rattling anywhere, he had completely hallucinated it.

Steve was half sitting up, so Bucky pushed him back down and collapsed onto his front next to him, the stump of his left shoulder sticking out behind him. He threw his arm over Steve’s chest and tried to focus on his breathing, it was too quick, the air hardly stayed in his lungs before it fled again –

“Bucky, hey, listen to me, you’re safe, you’re home, it’s okay,” Steve cooed in his ear. Steve was hugging him, had practically pulled Bucky back onto his chest, as uncomfortable as that had to have been. “You’re with me, you’re safe.”

His breathing slowed a little. Then a bit more. Steve was rubbing circles into his back, the way Bucky did when Steve’s asthma flared up.

“You with me?” Steve asked quietly.

“’M with you,” Bucky mumbled.

He felt drowsy all over again, but nosed at Steve’s jaw anyway. “I fell asleep,” he said.

“I noticed,” Steve answered.
“Don’t sass me,” Bucky muttered reprovingly and Steve laughed. “What would your ma say? You got a guy treatin’ you good and you laugh at him ‘cause he fell asleep. Hmph.”

“Aw, you’re alright, Buck,” Steve said, prodding him in the ribs. “Though, you did promise that you were gonna fuck me hard enough to see stars and then fell asleep on top of me.”

“Forgive me, dollface, for I have sinned,” Bucky mocked, then squirmed upwards until he could kiss Steve.

The door to the room was standing open behind them. The apartment had been empty for three or four hours, and then they had both collapsed into bed the minute they walked in. Bucky had to pull back, and whatever mood he’d been in was gone, had been swallowed up by worry.

“I gotta – I have to secure the perimeter,” he muttered.

Steve reached up and touched both palms to his cheeks. “I’ll be in here when you get back,” he said softly.

Bucky nodded. He shuffled stiffly off the bed, grabbed the nearest gun, and checked the bathroom. Baby wipes, bottles of soap, towels. Clear. The wardrobe was empty, only shirts hanging in it. The living room was dark, the bulletproof glass displaying the city lights in a double haze, the two bedrooms to the side and the second bathroom were clear as well. Stark’s empty Iron Man suit still stood in the hallway, glowing faintly and still. The room without a purpose and its bathroom were empty, the gym was filled only with the shadows of the equipment. The laundry and storage room were clear, and when Bucky opened the door to check the stairs, he found it empty.

With the door swinging shut behind him, Bucky stowed the gun in his jeans. It clattered to the floor when he let go of it and made him jump; then he looked down at himself and saw he was not wearing jeans, he was wearing a dress.

Bucky snatched the gun off the floor and walked as quickly as he could without running – “James, you quit stomping all up and down my stairs, you’re gonna fall and break your neck!” “Quit running in the house, you’re liable to break something!” “Will you stop stomping around, Bugsy, you’re giving me a headache,” – to the bedroom and Steve. His Omega sat up when he appeared in the doorway, a concerned look on his face but Bucky didn’t give him a chance to say anything.

“Why am I wearing a dress?”
Steve’s eyebrows shot up. “It’s a hospital gown, Buck,” he said, but that didn’t answer Bucky’s question. “Strange fixed up your arm, remember?”

Bucky blinked for a moment.

“That’s why you took the drugs?” Steve prompted.

For a while, he struggled with the gap in his memory, then Steve swung his legs off the bed and crossed over to him, reaching out with both hands. “Hey, it’s alright, don’t hurt yourself, Buck.”

“What did Strange do to my arm?” Bucky asked. “Who is Strange?”

“The magic neurosurgeon,” Steve said.

Bucky made a face. “The what?”

“Stephen Strange,” Steve answered, smiling sheepishly, “magic neurosurgeon. He’s some sort of wizard.”

“What’s a neurosurgeon?” Bucky asked, still making the face.

“A brain surgeon?” Steve said. Bucky squinted a second longer, then his head connected its definition and he gave a nod. “He was fixing the nerve connections or whatever in your prosthetic, so it doesn’t hurt you anymore.”

Bucky looked down at his left shoulder. He couldn’t really move it, not without the full arm, so all he could manage was a wiggle. For a moment, he wondered if he’d really moved it at all and had gone back to hallucinating, so he reached up and touched the metal.

He had felt nothing when he moved it. Wiggling the shoulder should have alerted him to a disconnected and dull feeling of pain he’d long since grown used to. But touching it had him jerking his fingers away in fright.
“Buck, what’s wrong?”

“Touch it,” Bucky said, voice raspy. Steve’s big, concerned eyes hovered on the corner of his vision, but he was staring at his shoulder with shock. “Touch it, Steve,” he repeated more insistently.

Steve reached up a hesitant hand and set his fingers over the crest of the metal plating. “Does it still hurt?”

“No,” Bucky whispered. “I can feel it.”

Steve’s eyebrows shut up; he cupped his palm over Bucky’s metal shoulder, the plates gave a rustle and recalibrated themselves like he was shivering, like there were goosebumps popping up on his skin. In a vague way, Bucky recognized that his mind was trying to bring goosebumps to his skin, but in the absence of skin and the abundance of metal, the recalibration was the closest his body could get. Looking at Steve’s hand on the metal and feeling it created dissonance in his head, his brain’s saying there’s something touching me while his eyes said that is made of metal I can’t feel that conflicting drastically.

“Is it okay?” Steve asked.

“It’s…”

Bucky didn’t know. He could feel Steve touching him, it was weird and amazing and confusing and Bucky didn’t know how to feel about it yet.

“Doesn’t hurt, does it?”

Bucky shook his head.

Steve drew up his fingers, the metal plates shivered yet as Steve’s fingers moved over the surface, then he lifted his hand and bent and before Bucky realized what he was going to do, he pressed his lips to the metal plates.
Bucky sucked in a breath as a shiver went through the plates. Steve returned his hand to the prosthetic, cupping the reverse side of it and sliding his palm slowly over the metal, all causing an avalanche of sensation. He didn’t even have his full arm, and Steve’s lips brushing the metal plates of his shoulder had him breathing heavily with blood rushing to all sorts of places in his body.

“This alright?” Steve asked, looking up at him through his lashes.

“S good,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve offered him a gentle smile, kissed the metal plates once more with tenderness, reached up to cup Bucky’s jaw with both hands pressing their foreheads together. Bucky’s eyes fluttered shut, he inhaled Steve’s scent.

“You wanna eat something?” Steve asked softly.

“You hungry?” Bucky said automatically.

“A bit,” Steve answered, pecking him on the mouth. “Which means you’re probably really hungry, too, you haven’t eaten since yesterday afternoon.”

Bucky started and completed a physical assessment of himself; his gut was clenching uncomfortably.

“Let’s eat,” Bucky said, catching Steve’s waist with his only hand. “And we can watch Pinocchio.”

“I never saw it.” Steve told him as they walked out to the kitchen. “Came out while I was working as a clerk, just before ma got sick, so I never had the time or money.”

“I took Becca,” Bucky said. His mouth knew the memory better than his own head, it seemed, as he went on. “I’d just gotten a raise at the factory, she was a governess for some well-to-do Wall Street family, just signed on. We went ‘cause Ma thought it would be improper for her to go on her own and she really wanted to see it.”

“I’m sorry about your ma, Buck,” Steve told him, catching his hand when Bucky went to open the fridge.
Bucky shrugged. “What can you do? She’s dead now.”

“You never wrote her,” Steve said. Bucky stared blankly into the fridge. “You wrote to Becca, she wrote back, but half the time we were never in the same place longer than a week, so you only got to check your mail when we stopped in London. But you never wrote your ma.”

“She write to me?” Bucky asked. He couldn’t remember.

After a second, Steve shook his head. Bucky nodded absently at that. Made sense. He thought he might have told Rebecca about Steve, and if she’d told their mother, then Winifred Barnes probably washed her hands of him.

“Let’s eat,” he said instead of prolonging the topic.

Dinner was more canned soup, this time beef stew that the label said was heart-healthy and his mouth said was bland, though it took him a while to remember what bland meant. After, Bucky made Steve drink more water and Steve made him do the same, then they returned to the living room. Bucky sat in his chair, Steve sat in his lap. It felt natural, to have Steve tucked under his chin and Bucky’s only arm coiled around his waist, though Bucky couldn’t remember if they used to sit like this regularly.

Pinocchio was darker than Bucky remembered. Though, he remembered very little of the plot. At the island, Steve announced that it was fucked up. Bucky agreed. He didn’t know why it had been funny before.

Near the end of the movie, Steve’s eyes slipped shut. Bucky kissed his forehead once, and when the movie ended, Steve was asleep. Bucky couldn’t carry him bridal style with only one arm, so he arranged Steve’s legs so that he was straddling Bucky’s lap, prodded Steve in the side and told him to hold on, then hooked his arm under Steve’s ass and stood. Steve clung, sleepily, to Bucky’s neck and held his legs tight around Bucky’s waist, until Bucky laid him gently on his bed and pulled his arms and legs away.

When he made to leave, Steve caught his hand and held on tightly. His eyes opened, and while he said nothing, Bucky understood what he meant. He sighed, then sat down on the floor, his back pressed to the nightstand, and transferred Steve’s hand to his hair so he could pick up his gun.

Steve fell asleep again quickly. Bucky strained to keep his eyes open. An hour passed, then two, his
eyes began itching and Bucky had to set down the gun to rub at them.

“Come ‘n’ sleep,” Steve whispered from the bed.

“I’m keeping watch.”

“Suit’s watching. Come sleep, Buck.”

Bucky reached up to take Steve’s hand then pressed a kiss to his palm. “You go back to sleep, sweetheart.”

“I’d sleep better with you up here.”

“You’ll be alright.”

To that, Steve said nothing. Bucky set his hand back in his hair, picked up the gun again, let out a short huff and widened his eyes to bring about another wave of alertness.

Steve’s hand slipped from his hair. Bucky looked up, in time to see his Omega slipping from the bed to kneel on the ground in front of him.

“What’re you doing?” Bucky asked a bit gruffly.

Steve made a shushing noise, crawled forward until he was between Bucky’s knees. He turned around, sat his ass on the floor between Bucky’s legs, and leaned his back against Bucky’s chest.

“What are you doing?” Bucky repeated, but a smile had quirked his lips.

“Sleeping,” Steve mumbled, dropping his head onto Bucky’s shoulder. He turned his face until his nose brushed Bucky’s jaw, then let out a quiet breath.
“You’re damn stubborn, pal.”

“Told you I sleep better with a teddy bear,” Steve said. He shut his eyes, his breathing slowed and deepened.

Bucky held still throughout the night. His eyes fell shut a few times, but he always jolted himself awake.

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[Fairies and Queers, by H. J. Robeson, published April 2008]

“...The idea that Alphas and Alphas and Omegas and Omegas should never experience feelings outside the familial or platonic for one another can be traced to Biblical times, with the claim of an unfruitful relationship breaking the intentions of the Hebrew/Christian God. But how did that get turned into men with men or women with women? The relationship of a male Alpha and a male Omega is as fruitful as a male Alpha with a female Omega, but even more so than male Omegas with female Alphas, when male Omegas have higher rates of pregnancy in M/M relationships...

“...In the United States, this prejudice against same-sex and same-designation relationships rose to a height in the 1930s. With the 19th amendment granting Omegas the right to vote, the Alpha position of power in society was perceived as threatened, and the collapse of the stock market lead to rising tensions everywhere. The fact that across the globe, Hugonistic France was stepping away from the idea that male Omegas and female Alphas were malformed or servants of the devil contributed to the stress on American families, whose preachers and priests swore such attitudes were proof of the rising anti-Christ. Temperance societies were on the rise, as well, and somewhere, the religious of America decided that God must have been punishing them for the sinful nature of their fellow man...

“...Pressures from Temperance societies, anti-feminists, and other radical religious groups lead to the legislation of homophobia in America. The Deep South saw it in its cruelest forms, but only in small doses. California and Hollywood, with their deep pockets and rising humanistic ideas, bribed elected officials to turn a blind eye to fairy bars, particularly the ones serving absinthe. The mid-West, Chicago and Cincinnati and others, cracked down hard on queer culture, forcing it underground. The eastern seaboard, on the other hand, took a slow but heavy hand to homosexuality, giving the gay community time to establish their underground and time for it to thrive...”

[september 29th, 2014, stark tower]

The floor certainly wasn’t comfortable, and by the time Steve woke up, his assbones ached fiercely and his legs felt stiff. But he was warm, he felt better rested for having slept with his back pressed to
Bucky than the night before, sleeping only with a hand touching him, and twice more than the night before that, when he hardly slept at all. When he lifted his head, his breathing pattern changing, Bucky shifted, enough for his unshaven and scratchy jaw to catch Steve's temple.

“Morning, doll,” Bucky mumbled.

“Morning,” Steve answered. He looked up at Bucky, then reached up to cup his cheek. Bucky looked down at the touch, then forced a smile. Steve leaned up and kissed it, kissed it away since it looked so wrong on his Alpha’s lips. Then he dropped his head, his forehead falling to rest on Bucky’s chin, squirmed until he was facing him and could coil his arms around Bucky’s waist.

After a second, Steve heard the click of heavy metal on wood, and Bucky’s arm curled around him.

For a while, they lay there, their legs tangled, long enough that if the floor had been carpeted, Steve may have fallen asleep again. Long enough that the hungry void in him that craved Bucky’s touch nearly filled.

Steve’s phone began vibrating on the nightstand. Steve lifted his head, but Bucky lifted his arm and picked it up first. Steve dropped his head again, while Bucky answered the phone and touched it to his ear. Steve had had to be taught how to handle modern phones, once he came out of the ice. Bucky must have been introduced to them by HYDRA.

“What?” Bucky said, gruff.

“Uhhh… I don't have the wrong number, do I?” came the caller’s voice. It was Sam, confused, Steve guessed, by Bucky answering instead of Steve.

“What do you want, Wilson?” Bucky said instead of addressing the glaring question Sam had intended by his statement.

“Barnes?”

“Obviously.”
“Oh. Sure, alright. Tony's friend Helen Cho is going to be here at about 13:00 hours, thought you'd like to know.”

“Yes,” Bucky said.

“Thank you,” Steve tacked on.

“Oh, hey, Steve. You were on the john or something?”

“No,” Bucky said before Steve could.

There was silence on the other end for a second, Steve imagined Sam was frowning. “Okay?” he said a second later. “Alright. You guys want to watch some more Disney movies? We'll keep it light today.”

Bucky looked down at Steve, who shrugged. It was probably good for Bucky to have social interactions like this, with someone other than Steve, it would help him adjust to life as a person and not a thing. So he nodded, tucking his head into Bucky’s neck again.

“Sure,” he heard Bucky tell Sam. “Steve needs to eat first.”

“Yeah, I haven’t had breakfast yet, either. Here, how about I come down and make pancakes for y’all?”

Bucky caught Steve's eye and raises a brow. Steve couldn’t tell if he was asking if that was okay or what pancakes were.

“Sounds good,” was what he said. His fingers curled in Bucky’s shirt. “Come down in about half an hour?”

“Aight, cool.”

Steve plucked the phone from Bucky’s hand and hung up. He turned so he could toss it onto the bed,
then sat up a little and tugged lightly on Bucky’s waist.

“Shower?” he asked.

Bucky just nodded.

In the bathroom, Steve lifted Bucky’s shirt from his torso. Bucky took his. Steve unbuttoned Bucky’s jeans, Bucky pulled the string on Steve's sweats. They undressed, together, leaving only the plastic covering Bucky’s metal stump.

Steve looked at the stitches Strange had put in. They were neat, elegant, much better work than Steve had ever seen done. Then again, there had been time for the surgeon to take his time in stitching, and there was never time for precision in the trenches.

“You’re already half healed,” Steve remarked.

“The asset is required to maintain functionality,” Bucky answered.

Steve turned Bucky to face him, cupped his face and did his best to smile. Bucky’s cold eyes flicked down to his lips, then he reached up with his thumb and brushed at the corner of his mouth.

“Don’t fake at me, sweetheart,” he murmured.

Steve quit trying. He ran his thumb over Bucky’s cheekbone, the high crest of his face that made him look like he had Cherokee blood, when it was just the crossing of Jew and Roma in his parents.

“You are not an asset,” he said.

Bucky blinked, nodded, dropping his gaze, like he was ashamed. Steve sucked in a breath, then dropped a hand to tap a finger under Bucky’s chin.

Bucky jerked his gaze up, eyes wide. Steve didn’t try to smile.
“‘S my thing,” Bucky grumbled.

“Oh well,” Steve said and kissed him. He pressed their foreheads together when he was done, reaching up to tangle his hands in Bucky’s hair. “C’mon,” he whispered, stepping toward the shower.

Under the water, Steve washed Bucky’s hair, and his eyes fell shut. He leaned on Steve, his one arm wrapped loosely around his waist, his eyes closed like he had fallen asleep. Steve thought he had, until Bucky spoke softly:

“Tell me another memory.”

“One time,” Steve started, then went looking for a good memory to tell. He lathered the coarse ends of Bucky’s hair, thought that he’d need a trim sometime soon. “One time, I got in this fight.”

“Oh, one time?” Bucky said. “Y’sure it was just one time? I think that happened at least twice.”

“Shuddup and lemme tell you about it,” Steve grumbled, a fond smile curling his lips. “I was fourteen. It was autumn,” he added, so Bucky would know that it was 1932 and not 1933, since there were only ten days in 1933 that they’d shared. “You’d gotten out of going to school that day ‘cause you had a dentist appointment.”

“Lucky me,” Bucky murmured.

“Oh, you were thrilled,” Steve agreed dryly. “You hated the dentist, but you liked skipping school with an excuse.”

“So, I wasn’t around and you got into a fight. Maybe I should have clarified I wanted a good memory.”

“It ends good!” Steve countered. Bucky chuckled again, his shoulders shaking good-naturedly. “I was on my way home, tired and I missed you –”
“Aw,” Bucky gave a coo, "you missed me, babydoll?”

“You wanna hear the story or not?”

“‘M just teasing you, Stevie, I like teasing you.”

Steve rolled his eyes, pleased as he was. This was good, that Bucky was teasing him, it was a sign he was going to be okay, for a little while at least.

“I was walking home, ‘cept there were a couple of guys following me. Calling me names and stuff. Stubborn fool, dunce-cap, head case, stuff like that.”

Bucky nodded. “You were a crazy bastard. Are.”

Steve raised an eyebrow at him, then tugged on his hair gently. Bucky grinned and ducked his face into Steve’s neck.

“I was trying to ignore them,” Steve went on. “Ma had been getting on my case about keeping a lid on my temper, I was tryna do right by her, but then one of ‘em called me a girl-boy.”

Bucky’s head lifted, his grin gone. “I know what that is,” he said sharply. “Fuck, that’s a fucking slur, these kids called you a –” Bucky swallowed, like he couldn’t bring himself to repeat it. “They called you that?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered ruefully. “‘Cause I hadn’t presented as an Alpha or a Beta yet, ‘cause I was small, ‘cause they were hateful boys and they thought it made them look tougher.”

It actually hadn’t been the first time someone called him girl-boy. It certainly hadn’t been the last. It was just the only time Bucky knew about, or once knew.

“You lost your temper after that, didn’t you?” Bucky asked.

“I did,” Steve said, and the smile crept back onto his face. “But, see, by the time I dropped my books
and called Joey Carson a no good son of a bitch, you popped up out of nowhere and socked him on
the jaw.”

Bucky let out a little breath, a crease forming between his brows even as he smiled. “I did?”

“Yep,” Steve said, grinning now. “You came out yelling and screaming, you scared the shit out of
Carson’s goons and since you got the drop on Joey, you knocked him down quick as you please,
then you spat in his face and told him that if girl-boy was the worst insult he could come up with, he
was goin’ around telling people they’re four-leaf clovers, ‘cause male Omegas are good luck.”

“Are they, now?” Bucky asked, the smile growing.

“Uh-huh. It’s an old Romani saying, something your pa taught you.”

“I got Gypsy blood?”

Steve wrinkled up his nose. “Gypsy’s a slur, too, Buck. Your pa hated that word.”

“Oh,” Bucky said, and his smile dropped.

“Hey,” Steve prompted, giving his hair a little tug again, “’s alright, Buck. It’s okay if you don’t
remember stuff.”

Bucky nodded. “So, you’re my good luck charm, then?” he said, not looking Steve in the eye.

Steve let out a short breath, the corner of his lip curling. “Just a saying,” he answered. “I was
incredibly un lucky when we were kids.”

“Nah,” Bucky said, then lifted his face so he could kiss Steve. “You made me the lucky one.”

Steve smiled against his mouth, and maybe he was right, maybe his pa had been right, after all, they
were there, weren’t they? A couple of broken toy soldiers, but they were still there, alive and still
standing. Maybe there was good luck sewn in his womb after all, it was just taking a long ass time to
get the all caustic shit that would kill anything trying to make new life out of the way first.

“Still got soap in my hair, Rogers,” Bucky murmured.

“Boo hoo,” Steve chuckled, while Bucky grinned and tipped his head back into the fall of water.

Steve pressed his lips to the bump of Bucky’s throat. He felt the vibrations rolling through his throat when Bucky laughed softly again.

“You’re stealin’ all my moves today, huh?”

“They’re good moves,” Steve answered as he smiled against Bucky’s neck. His fingers worked the soap from Bucky’s hair, massaging his scalp in the process. When he looked up, Bucky’s eyes were closed. He reached for a bar of soap, a loofah, and lathered it up to wash Bucky’s body. At the touch of the loofah on his skin, Bucky tilted his head forward and opened his eyes, squinting a little, to look down.

“The fuck is that?” he said.

Steve held it up for Bucky’s inspection. “It’s called a loofah, you use it to wash your body.”

“Loofah,” Bucky repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Future’s fucked up, Stevie.”

Steve laughed, shrugging. “It’s better than a washcloth. It’s exfoliating.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” Bucky said, Steve rolled his eyes and went back to running the loofah over Bucky’s body. “Loofah,” he said again, snorting. “Fucking hell.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve grumbled, though he was still smiling.

Steve knelt, then, to wash Bucky’s legs. At his thighs, Steve ran a hand over his skin, then looked up at Bucky. Bucky raised his eyebrows in a question. Steve smiled, then dropped the loofah and framed Bucky’s hips with his hands.
“Hey,” he said, flicking his eyebrows up once.

“Hey, what?” Bucky asked, looking down at him quizzically.

Steve flicked his eyebrows again, then pressed a kiss to the crest of Bucky’s hip. “You wanna…?”

A second passed, then two. Steve looked up again, finding Bucky’s face set in a frown.

“Buck?”

“You don’t need to do that,” Bucky said softly.

“I want to,” Steve told him, then smiled warmly, but the look on Bucky’s face worried him. “Your cock’s one of my favorite things, you know.”

Bucky took his hand, then pulled him up. He kissed him lightly, then pushed his arm around his waist to kiss at his shoulder. Steve pushed his fingers through his hair again, his mirth slipping into concern.

“Something wrong?”

“Lemme think,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve fell silent. Bucky reached for the shampoo, poured it directly onto Steve’s hair, set it down and began working the soap into his hair. It took longer, to lather it evenly with only one hand. Steve waited, letting his eyes close as Bucky washed his hair, waited as Bucky shifted them around so it was Steve standing under the spray of water, waited as Bucky used the loofah to wash his body. He waited, until Bucky spoke finally.

“It’s not s’posed to be about me.”
Steve opened his eyes. Bucky was looking at his neck, not into his face. “What’s not?”

“Sex,” Bucky mumbled. “It’s about you.”

“It’s about us,” Steve corrected gently. He reached for Bucky, reached around him to lock his fingers together at the small of Bucky’s back.

“I don’t know,” Bucky admitted. “I can remember you doing that, and I can remember liking it, but… I don’t know if I can do something like that now.”

“I like it,” Steve reminded him. It had taken him a while to dissociate dark alleys and Bucky, but he did like it now. Somehow, Bucky always made him feel like he was the one being pleased, always spouted praise and promises of something even filthier if Steve kept up the good work, and it made him feel good, too. But Bucky only gave a short nod.

“I think I can remember that,” he said hesitantly. “But right now, it’s not supposed to be about me. Can’t.”

Steve gave it a moment before he spoke. Gave himself that moment, mostly, to make sure that his response wouldn’t put his foot in his mouth. He wanted to insist, wanted to show Bucky that it could be about him, that sex between lovers – or bondmates, maybe especially bondmates – wasn’t one-sided, it was never one-sided, even if one person got off and the other didn’t. It was very different than sex between strangers, Steve had found.

But he figured he knew what Bucky meant. He didn’t think he was worth something that gave him pleasure over Steve. There’d been a time when Steve had been the same; hell, he’d been raised to think that sex was for the pleasure of the Alpha, let alone the disillusionment he’d had with it while working in the streets. So he let out his breath, waited until his tongue was ready to comply, nodded and said: “It’s okay.”

Bucky reached up and brushed a thumb over Steve’s cheek, then pressed their foreheads together.

“Let me know if you ever want to,” Steve told him, meaning for Bucky to let him know if he ever got to the point where he could enjoy his own pleasure. “I love you.”

Bucky pecked his lips. “Love you, too, Stevie.”
Bucky washed the soap from his hair and body, turned the water off himself. They got out, Steve grabbed towels and they dried each other off. Exiting the bathroom, Steve pulled clothes from the chest of drawers, gave a set of boxers, sweatpants, and a shirt to Bucky and dressed himself. Steve checked his phone, then he and Bucky both walked out to the kitchen. Sam texted as they were walking out that he was getting in the elevator, and Steve updated Bucky. His Alpha nodded, opened the fridge, and started digging around in it.

“What are you looking for?” Steve asked.

“Bacon,” Bucky muttered. He pulled out a package and squinted at it. “Turkey bacon? What?”

“It’s healthier,” Steve said with a shrug. “Or maybe Stark’s psychic and knew you’d need kosher food.”

Bucky squinted a second longer. He looked at the bacon, then at Steve, then at the bacon. “I’m Jewish, too?”

“Your ma was,” Steve answered.

Bucky squinted at the bacon for a while longer, like it was passing him secrets. Steve waited for him to speak.

“I been to synagogue,” he said finally. “Only a few times. Ma made Becca go, but she didn’t fuss about me going. Quit for good at fifteen, I think.”

“You used to go to Mass with me and my ma,” Steve murmured. “Whenever you stayed over Saturday nights. Ma said there was no reason to leave you alone and there was no point sending you back to your place if you’d be running back over soon as she and I got home.”

Bucky looked up at him, a crease between his brows. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I remember that. You’d spend the whole time staring at the stained glass.”

Steve smiled. “Stained glass is beautiful,” he said. Bucky smiled, like he was about to say Steve was beautiful.
The elevator, down the hall, dinged at them. Bucky shoved the bacon back into the fridge. Steve jerked his head to the hall, then started to go and answer the elevator.

Bucky overtook him, grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “Let me get it,” he said in a flat tone. Steve hesitated, then sighed and nodded reluctantly. He stepped back, out of sight, and Bucky entered the hallway. This comforted Bucky, he reminded himself, and even if it frustrated him, he’d let Bucky answer doors if he needed to. He wouldn’t act like that forever, only until he got settled.

A flash of worry passed through him. What if Bucky never did get settled? What if, as soon as a week had passed, and it had only been three days, he vanished again?

Steve shook himself. Bucky didn’t want him answering the elevator, let alone being on his own. He wouldn’t vanish on him again.

He heard the elevator open, Sam greet Bucky and Bucky’s footsteps back. Steve smiled when Bucky rounded the corner, held out his hands and let Bucky crowd into his space to kiss his forehead and push his wrist under Steve’s shirt. Sam walked in, waved to Steve and flicked his eyebrows up.

“Pancakes?” he said.

“Pancakes,” Steve agreed.

Sam rattled through the cupboards, talking about ratios and flour, looking for ingredients while he did. Bucky stayed crowded into Steve’s space, who didn’t mind at all. Somehow along the course of discussing pancake recipes, Sam got to talking about home recipes, which got him talking about his family. He chattered on, filling the silence, while Bucky said nothing and Steve only made the appropriate comments. Sam found a cast iron griddle in a cabinet, set it up on the stove to cook the pancakes. Steve pretended not to watch Bucky eyeing the ingredients as Sam mixed up the batter.

Yet, in no short time, Sam had three plates with three stacks of pancakes sat on the kitchen counter, with leftovers in a dish in the oven. Sam’s was three high, but both Bucky and Steve had stacks of six.

Bucky only poked at his at first, while Sam and Steve dug in. Steve had eaten almost a quarter before Bucky began to eat in earnest.
The clock read half-past nine when the pancakes had been eaten. Steve washed the plates, Bucky dried and put them away. Sam jerked a thumb over his shoulder to the couches.

“Cinderella?” he suggested.

“Girl who got her toes cut off?” Bucky said with a look extreme confusion.

“Those were the stepsisters,” Steve corrected.

Sam’s eyebrows were high on his forehead. “Okay,” he said slowly, “I don’t know what kinda fairy tales you grew up with, but there is no toe cuttage in Cinderella.”

“No, the stepsisters cut off their toes so they can fit in the shoe,” Steve said, frowning at him.

Sam gaped for a second, then blew out his breath and tugged out his phone. Bucky turned his confused expression on Steve, who shrugged.

“Oh.” Sam muttered. Steve looked back at him as he shoved his phone back into his pocket, his eyebrows flicking upward again. “Alright, well, there’s no toe cuttage in Disney’s Cinderella. Cheesy songs, but no toe cuttage.”

Steve shrugged again. No toe cuttage was fine with him. “Good with you, Buck?”

“Sure,” Bucky said softly. Steve laced their fingers together.

Sam waved a hand and they took the step down to the living room, Sam taking up the whole sofa and Bucky dropping into his chair for Steve to fold himself into his lap. Bucky ran a hand over his side, briefly shoving his wrist under Steve’s shirt to scent-mark the small of his back, and Steve saw Sam looking away politely. Or maybe, by his raised eyebrows, it was pointedly.

He had to wonder why people didn’t scent each other so often anymore. Settling into Bucky’s chest, Steve thought it was definitely a great comfort to him to smell like his Alpha all the time. He’d been
denied the kind of marking bondmates were allowed in the military, only the trace scents that squadmates would have, and before that, he’d always smelled like twenty or thirty Alphas at once. He very much preferred always smelling like Bucky.

“No clue why all the little kids love Cinderella still, by the way,” Sam commented as the opening sequence started. “Outside Bippity Boppity Boo, ‘course.”

“Rags to riches,” Steve said. “Dream of every kid born in the 30s.”

Sam considered this, then gave a nod. Bucky caressed his wrist against Steve’s side again, almost unconsciously.

Sam sang along to Bippity Boppity Boo, unashamedly doing a little dance on the sofa. “My nieces made this up,” he said with a proud grin. “Still don’t get why they love Cinderella, it’s regressive as shit and my sis don’t take regressive shit in her house.”

“Regressive?” Bucky repeated.

“Regressive to the efforts of feminism,” Sam explained. “Cinderella implies that women can’t save themselves, they have to wait for a prince charming to come and rescue them.” He snapped his fingers, adding: “Mulan, though, she’s progressive as shit, she goes and gets shit done. So fucking glad my sister had her kids watch that before Cinderella.”

“Mulan’s awesome,” Steve agreed.

“What’s feminism?” Bucky asked then.

Sam reached out and paused the movie. He looked at Steve with raised eyebrows, who waved a hand to indicate he ought to take this one. While he was all for feminism generally, Steve still had trouble with parts of it. Like, he still thought that people shouldn’t have casual sex, and somehow sexual liberty to do whatever the hell you wanted with whoever the hell you wanted whenever the hell you wanted had become a focal point of 21st-century feminism. That was probably regressive, as Sam explained. A feminist would probably tell him that it was because he’d been indoctrinated to think that way, which, to be fair, he had for most of it. And most of which he’d had to unindoctrinate himself from very rapidly to front as an Alpha. Casual sex… He’d grown to cherish the intimacy of sex too much to think it was something complete strangers could replicate.
“So, you know Omegas and Betas got the right to vote in 1919?” Sam began.

Bucky squinted, then shrugged. “I guess.”

“Okay, so Omegas and Betas, male or female, were denied the right to vote in the States from the formation of the United States to 1919, when they passed the 19th Amendment,” Sam said. “Betas were also denied the right to own property until male Betas were granted it in about 1870 and then female Betas and Omegas were given the right to own property in 1890 something, then in like, 1912 or 1918, female Beta and Omegas were given the right to vote. But that was about it back in your day. Male Omegas only got the right to vote in the sixties, for fuck’s sake.”

“What else is there?” Bucky asked, glancing at Steve. Steve just shrugged again.

“Hell of a lot of stuff,” Sam said seriously. “Access to childcare, healthcare, workplace protections, protection against discrimination, then there’s sexuality politics that came up in the 60s, gender issues that came up in the late 2000s.” He was ticking them off on his fingers. “There’s now laws defending victims of sexual harassment and assault, child support from divorced partners, alimony from divorced partners, though the victims of assault still get victim-blamed, which we’re working on. There’s laws that prevent employers from firing Omegas or turning them down for the job in the first place –”

“That was why I didn’t have a job,” Steve interrupted. Bucky frowned at him. “Back… When I had to work on the street.”

“Oh,” Bucky said. Steve nodded.

Sam looked at his feet, tapping his toes while Bucky frowned at Steve and Steve looked at Sam tapping his toes. None of them said anything for a while.

“Sam knows?” Bucky asked softly. Steve nodded a second time.

“Oh,” Bucky mumbled. Steve looked at his hands in his lap. “Hey,” Bucky murmured, and tapped the underside of his chin.

Steve looked up, and Bucky smiled at him. “‘S okay, doll. I don’t mind. It’s good you felt comfortable enough to tell somebody.”

Steve said nothing, looking down again. He hadn’t exactly said because he felt comfortable, more
like it had burst out ‘cause he couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“That is a good point,” Sam added.

Steve still said nothing. Bucky glanced at Sam briefly before focusing his gaze on Steve’s. He brushed his knuckles over his cheek, then cupped his jaw to pull him in and kissed his forehead. Steve shut his eyes, letting Bucky work his fingers into his hair and resting his forehead on Bucky’s jaw. He exhaled, then inhaled deep.

“Back to the movie?” Sam asked behind him. “Or you wanna know more?”

He was talking to Bucky. Steve lifted his head, looking at him, and Bucky shrugged, his eyes searching Steve’s face.

“Prostitution still illegal?” he asked abruptly.

“Pretty much,” Sam said with a shrug. “But it’s mainly to protect the rights and boundaries of sex workers, not because some hoity-toities have high and mighty attitudes.”

“Hoity-toities still see prostitutes,” Steve mumbled. Bucky nodded faintly and kissed his forehead again.

“Very true,” Sam agreed. “Now, like, strip clubs are legal. Burlesque, I s’pose you might call it. Or cabaret.”

“Those were illegal,” Bucky said. “‘Cause of alcohol?”

Sam shrugged. “I don’t know.” Bucky looked at Steve.

“Mostly ‘cause of alcohol. But they were still around, still served alcohol and had burlesque dances,” he said. Then, he added in a grumble: “And only the queenie cabarets served lighter stuff than absinthe or moonshine half the time.”
“You been to queenie bars, Stevie?” Bucky asked with a laugh.

“Youpl’a times,” Steve said. He didn’t elaborate. Bucky’s smile faded a little and then he shrugged. They were good business. He’d paid two months rent with one night’s wages from working outside a queenie bar once.

“Uh, guys?” Sam called.

Steve looked over at him finally. Sam scratched the back of his neck, then dropped his hand to look at their shoes. “There’s a couple of changes to vocabulary,” he started.

Steve cringed. “I shouldn’t say queenie, should I?”

“Ehh,” Sam mused, waving a hand side to side. “Drag queens are still a thing, probably should just call ‘em queens though. But, uh, other words that –” he cleared his throat “– that your generation may have used to describe homosexual people or transgender or people of color –”

“What words?” Bucky asked. “I don’t remember any.”

Sam nodded faintly. “Well, if you do remember them. Don’t say faggot –” he said it like the word burned his throat on the way out “– or, like, transsexual or tranny. And I think fairy? That’s still a bit of a slur. Queer’s been reclaimed but only queer people can use it now; that’s the point of reclaiming a word.”

He paused, looking thoughtful. “Though, I suppose you two count as queer.”

“Because we’re both men,” Bucky said questioningly.

Sam nodded, glancing raised eyebrows at Steve. “Yep, that’s true. So you could say you’re homosexual, or gay, which would include you in the gay community.”

“Even though we’re still an Alpha/Omega couple,” Steve added. “Since gender and designation aren’t the same thing.”

Sam gave another nod. Bucky shrugged. “I don’t know what gender is,” he said. “But sure.”
“Gender is complicated as shit,” Sam laughed. “I don’t even wanna get into gender right now. That’ll take, like, a whole afternoon.” He snapped his fingers. “Tell you what. We’ll take a whole afternoon to talk about that, and the Civil Rights movement and the LGBT movement and stuff one of these days.”

“Sure,” Bucky said, like he still had no clue what was going on.

Sam gave a satisfied nod. “Right. Anyway. Words that are bad. They’re bad because they’re words that have been used to enforce oppression, by the way, not just ‘cause they’re bad. Like, the word faggot initially referred to a bundle of wood that people put at the bottom of a pyre, for like, witch burnings? Hang on, lemme Google it.”

Sam tugged his phone back out and Bucky raised his eyebrows at Steve.

“Google is like a digital librarian,” Steve said in a hiss. “You ask it questions and it gives you results from the Internet.”

Bucky frowned hard, then shrugged, shaking his head. “Future’s weird,” he repeated.

“Okay, so I was right, it refers to a bundle of wood,” Sam picked back up. “Back in the 16th century it became associated with the burning of heretics. And they burned gay people at the stake, too, so I guess it got associated with gay men eventually. Google doesn’t actually know the exact point where it became a slur for gay people.”

He put his phone away. “So, that’s why the words are bad,” he said again. “Oppression, and all.”

“Okay,” Bucky said slowly.

Sam frowned a little. “You with me so far?”

Bucky seemed to think about it. “I guess?”
“Where are you confused?” Sam asked.

Bucky thought a moment longer. “What this has to do with Cinderella.”

Steve snorted. Sam chuckled, rolling his eyes. “Okay, it has nothing to do with Cinderella. This just a PSA. Pop culture update, too.”

“What’s PSA?” Bucky hissed in Steve’s ear.


“You good?” Sam asked him, holding out a thumb’s up. Bucky looked at his hand, then at his own hand, and carefully raised it to return Sam’s thumb’s up. “Alright,” Sam said, grinning in delight. “You catching on quick there, dude.”

“So, what other words are there?” Bucky asked him. “Gypsy’s one.”

“Yeah, yeah, it is,” Sam said, holding out a hand, palm up and flat. “Refers to the Rromani people, I don’t remember what about it meant it was an insult, but it is. The word gypped came from it. Uh, other racial slurs… Nigger is reclaimed by us –” Sam placed a hand over his heart “– but from the mouth of y’all white boys, that would be a slur. And variants of it, so, negro, nigga, those words. And saying people of color is a reclaimed version of saying colored, we still don’t like that. Chink and Jap, or Oriental, those are slurs for Chinese and Japanese people. Oriental’s a kind of rug, or food, it ain’t people. There’s abo for the Aboriginal people of Australia, spic is a slur for Hispanic folk, redskin or Injun are slurs for Native Americans, squaw, too, but I think that was outdated by the time you grew up.”

Sam tapped his cheek, forehead furrowed in thought. “I think those are all that I can think of that didn’t come out during the 50s or 60s. There’s gender slurs, and designation slurs, too, but a bunch of them are from the 70s.” He squinted a second, then snapped his fingers. “Beater, that’s a slur for Betas. People used to call Beta women washerwomen, it got shortened to just washers, and then people used to call Omegas little women, to make ‘em out as helpless little girls and also to erase the existence of male Omegas. Speaking of, there’s girl–”

“I know that one,” Bucky cut him off, harsh. Steve dropped his head back onto Bucky’s shoulder, setting a hand on his shoulder.

Sam gave him a placating look, shrugging his shoulders and nodding. “Aight, you know that one.
There’s a couple of Alpha women slurs, bitch used to refer just to Alpha women but it got extended to all women, there’s harpy or witch to refer to an Alpha woman. See a theme in there?”

He raised his eyebrows at Bucky, who frowned.

“There’s no slurs for Alpha men,” Sam told him. “None that were actually used to oppress Alpha men, ’cause Alpha men weren’t oppressed on a massive, social level the way other designations and genders are.”

“Oh,” Bucky said.

“Not to make you feel bad,” Sam added hastily, “but that’s the sad and sorry truth. Alpha men run the world still, white Alpha men, really. We got a brother – a black man, I mean – for President, but Congress is still disproportionately white Alpha men. Obama’s an Alpha, even. And business leaders, and other world leaders, and religious leaders, they’re almost always white Alpha men. They ran the show for centuries, only in the past hundred years have the rest of us been making enough noise to get on top with ‘em.”

“So, that’s why Captain America is an Alpha?” Bucky asked. Steve worried his lip, still shameful on the subject.

“Pretty much,” Sam sighed, then looked at Steve. He raised his eyebrows. Steve made an uncomfortable face. “C’mon, man, you’re the actual person it happened to,” Sam pleaded.

Steve made the uncomfortable face again, but tried anyway. “Erskine said he didn’t trust the serum on an Alpha ‘cause when Schmidt took it, it drove him mad with power,” he sighed. “And, yeah, it was kinda sexist of him to assume that an Omega wouldn’t go mad with power or that an Alpha could be kind the way he wanted, but he insisted the serum be done on an Omega. His bosses told him that if they were going to let him do it, then the Omega couldn’t be a woman and he had to become an Alpha on paper, ‘cause obviously, I look like one.”

He gestured to his body. Bucky frowned and glanced down Steve’s torso and legs, then looked back up at him, confused.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “You’re gorgeous. Why was that bad?”

“Omegas are small,” Steve said. “They’re not big and muscled and strong like Alphas.”
“Omegas come in all shapes and sizes, actually,” Sam put in. “Small, delicate, that’s just the stereotype.”

Steve gave a nod. He guessed that was true, but all the Omegas he’d known growing up were little women with little waists and wide hips and narrow shoulders. It was hard to remember that that wasn’t really true anymore, or that it hadn’t been even that true when he was growing up.

“You’re gorgeous,” Bucky repeated.

Steve smiled a little. “Thank you, Buck,” he said – and there had been a time when he was self-conscious of how he looked and was meant to look, but Bucky had convinced him long ago that he wasn’t any less for not being slight and slim the way Omegas were supposed to be; were idealized to be, to be correct – but that wasn’t his point.

“It wasn’t really supposed to end up the way it did,” he said. “The original plan was Erskine tested the serum on me, saw what it did when it wasn’t taken by a lunatic, then recreate it and use it on a whole infantry. Then he died and the last vial of serum was smashed and nobody knew the formula, so I was the only one.”

He glanced at Bucky a moment. “Well, apart from you.”

Bucky nodded, still frowning, though Steve knew it was to do with his story still.

“Since they couldn’t recreate it, the Army needed a way to make a profit out of the experiment,” Steve went on.

“Capitalism,” Sam added helpfully.

“Yeah, that. Phillips refused to put me in the field, so Brandt had the idea of me doing the war bond circuit. It lead to Captain America becoming famous, there were cartoons and comics and a fucking line of cereal boxes,” he scoffed, frustrated. “But Captain America was the one who got famous, not Steve Rogers. I guess, after I died, the propaganda didn’t stop. They just retooled it for more than just wartime stuff, is all.”
“Gender rules,” Sam said. Steve nodded to him. “Alphas don’t cry and don’t need emotional intimacy and are better ‘cause they’re bigger. Essentially, I mean. And other stuff, mainly traditional Christian values.”

“That,” Steve muttered.

Bucky shook his head slowly, lips curled downward. “I don’t get any of that,” he sighed. “I don’t remember Omegas being less powerful or Alphas never crying, I don’t –” He broke off with a frustrated sigh. “I don’t remember.”

“Maybe that’s not such a bad thing?” Sam suggested. “Most gender rules are toxic, anyway.”

“The important stuff, you’ll remember,” Steve reminded Bucky; he knew Bucky’s point wasn’t that he didn’t remember those things. It was that he didn’t remember remember at all. “Or I’ll tell you.”

Bucky nodded, face still screwed up in a frown. Steve kissed the line between his eyebrows and got a startled noise that turned into a laugh from him, then kissed his lips tenderly. Bucky ran a hand through his hair, dragging his wrist over the back of his neck. Steve settled into his neck again, and waved at Sam to play the movie again.

He kept thinking about gender rules, though. Traditional Christian values. While he couldn’t say for sure where God was in the modern world, he felt positive that the modern church didn’t much care. He’d seen too many supposed Christians who wrinkled their noses at queer people, too many who insisted that all Muslims were terrorists, who proudly displayed the Confederate flag in their homes or even their churches. He read the modern Bibles, with modern English and translated a thousand times, with a thousand editions, and found verses different from the ones he’d memorized in Sunday school, and not just the placing of commas. He’d seen the preachers who preached out of modern Bibles and denounced modern ideas like the gender equality Steve still had trouble wrapping his head around. He didn’t know when the idea that Alphas flat-out out-ranked Omegas started, but when he was growing up, the nuns taught Alphas to follow their Omegas advice when they taught Omegas to submit to their Alphas. Even if he was sure of God’s place in the modern world, he wouldn’t be sure he could find his place in a modern church.

At the end of Cinderella, Sam played Sleeping Beauty. He pointed out that the Prince kissing Aurora at the end was regressive, too, because even if it was to break the curse, Aurora never consented to that.

Steve thought that was a brilliant observation. For a moment, he had wished that someone had told S.H.I.E.L.D. that before they woke him up, but reminded himself that if they hadn’t, Bucky would
Still, consent was nice. The insistence for consent in the modern world was something Steve never had difficulty understanding. Consent hadn’t much mattered when he was a kid.

“And they only met the one fucking time!” Sam shouted at the TV. “How the fuck was that twue wuv?”

Bucky raised an eyebrow at Steve. Steve shrugged hopelessly.

Sam looked over at them. “You don’t get that reference, do you?”

“Uh,” Steve started. Bucky made the same hopeless gesture. “No?” Steve finished.

Sam sighed heavily. “When we’re done with Disney, we’re doing classics. Starting with the Princess Bride.”

Steve glanced at Bucky, very confused. Bucky made another hopeless gesture. “You been in the future a whole…” He broke off, frowning. “How long you been in the future?”

Before Steve could answer, Bucky’s eyes widened abruptly. “Did you never die?” he gasped. “Have you been alive since 1945?”

“No, no, no, I was frozen,” Steve said hastily. Bucky’s eyes went wider. “Not cryostasis, not intentionally. I put a plane full of nuclear bombs in the Arctic and then got frozen. S.H.I.E.L.D. found me and defrosted me in 2011.”

Bucky blinked a couple times, but his expression softened. “What year is it now, then?” he asked.

“2014,” Steve said.

Bucky gave a nod, swallowing. “That’s… That’s better. God, I dunno what I would’ve done if you’d been on your own for the whole time I was…” He left it there.

Steve shook his head, dropping his gaze. He heard Bucky sigh, then his Alpha cupped the back of
his head and pulled him in to kiss his forehead before tucking him into his neck. Steve went happily. He saw Sam fiddling with the remote, taking care not to watch them again.

“Wait,” Bucky said.

Steve lifted his head. Bucky gave him a suspicious look. “Did you just tell me you took a nosedive in a plane full of bombs into the Arctic ocean?”

“Uhh…” Steve repeated.

“Steve,” Bucky said warningly.

“Possibly?” Steve answered hesitantly.

“Oh, my God,” Bucky muttered. He tugged him in to plant a kiss on his mouth, then pressed their foreheads together. “You’re gonna kill me, Steve. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“Let’s just watch the movie,” Steve mumbled.

“Steve,” Bucky said warningly again.

Steve looked to Sam for backup, making a vague gesture with his hands. Sam shrugged. “Maybe you should explain.”

Steve hissed an expletive. Bucky gripped his chin and lifted his head.

“Tell me, sweetheart,” he said gently. “Talk about it, that’s what helps, right?”

“Fine,” Steve snapped, he didn’t want to talk about it, he wanted to watch the movie and just ignore it, he’d already said it more than once to more than one person and each time was one time too many, he didn’t want to talk. “I was thinking that I was gonna die and go on and either go to hell or go to heaven, and either way, I’d get to see you again. End of the line. That’s what I was thinking.”
He’d once read that sometimes kids who were suicidal would go and pick fights with cops so they’d get shot. Sometimes those kids did it so they didn’t have to kill themselves themselves. It was still suicide, even if the method was through another hand. And if God wasn’t real to give him pity and a clean death, then a plane full of bombs put into the ocean was still suicide, then, even if it was to save lives. Intent was what mattered.

“Jesus,” Bucky breathed.

“Hail Mary,” Steve muttered stubbornly for his taking the Lord’s name in vain.

Bucky gripped his jaw again, forcing him to quit looking down and look him in the eye. Steve shut his eyes. Bucky made a frustrated noise, then crashed their lips together in a pained kiss. Steve went with it, and when Bucky let go of his jaw, he hid his face in his neck.

“Jesus, Steve,” Bucky sighed again.

“It was a month or two after you… fell, I guess,” Steve muttered.

Bucky whispered the Lord’s name once more. Did it really matter, Steve wondered, since God wasn’t there to care?

“You really meant it,” Bucky murmured.

“Meant what?” Steve grumbled.

“That you didn’t want to live without me. I thought… I thought you meant…”

“I meant it.”

Steve couldn’t tell just what Bucky had thought he meant, but that was the truth. He meant he would not live without him again, and he meant it. He meant that he hadn’t consented to being woken in the 21st-century without Bucky, he hadn’t wanted it and he meant it. Bucky clamped his arm over Steve’s shoulders, the stump of his left shoulder digging into his back, a lopsided embrace. Steve wished bitterly he had both arms, just so he could feel enveloped and safe; it was a selfish thought.

Steve said nothing. Bucky kissed his hair.

“‘Til the end of the line, for real,” he murmured.

“‘Til the end of the line,” Steve quietly repeated. You were supposed to echo each other’s marriage vows.

* [Living Through Personal Crisis: A Traumatic Loss ; Dr. Ann Kaiser Stearns, copyright 2010]*

“According to Edwin Schneidman, ‘Some losses are more stigmatizing or traumatic than others; murder, a loss resulting from the negligence of oneself or some other person, or suicide. Survivor-victims of such deaths are invaded by an unhealthy complex of disturbing emotions: shame, guilt, hatred, and perplexity.’ A similar onslaught of disturbing emotions usually invades the person who has been raped and the person who has witnessed a violent death. If you have experienced one of these losses, it’s important for you to know that your loss frequently leads to a need for professional help. So great is the trauma and so profound can become one’s preoccupation with violence or death or self-punishment, that receiving skillful caring from others often becomes a matter of urgency...”

* [locations scrambled; time zones scrambled]*

Brock waited for the webcam to make its connection. Rollins stood over his shoulder, a new kid called Ward in the corner of the room. They were pretty much all that was left of HYDRA’s top dogs in the States, but only one of them could take over for Pierce.

Six pixelated images appeared on the screen. Brock waited to be spoken to before he spoke.

“We are aware of the situation in your quarter,” Head Two said casually. English accent; Brock placed it somewhere from Wales.
“And of what you have misplaced,” Head Three added angrily. Russian. This was Lukin, then.

Brock wanted to defend himself. He had not lost the asset. Pierce had lost the asset. But with Pierce, the States’ Head, dead and buried, the blame fell on the top dogs. He remained silent.


“We have already decided who will replace Pierce,” Lukin said. “We reward loyalty, service, effort.”

Brock did not move. Rollins did not move. Ward did not move.

“I would congratulate you, Rumlow,” Strucker said tiredly, and Brock remained perfectly still, in case it was a bluff, “but I did not vote for you.”

“Congratulations,” Head Two said then.

Brock gave them a nod. “Thank you,” he spoke at last. His voice was rusty from disuse; they’d been waiting in this abandoned cabin for two days. “You won’t regret it.”

“Don’t bother kissing up,” Strucker told him, and Brock carefully arranged his features in a dark but respectful look; they could see him, after all. “What is your plan for retrieving the asset?”

“I have techs trying to activate trackers in the arm,” Brock started. “And my networks are sifting through any video, audio, or camera evidence from its last known location.”


“We’re trying to pinpoint the location of Captain America,” Brock added.
“You believe it will continue its mission?” Head Four asked.

“No, Rogers is the asset’s mate.”

There was silence across the six Heads. There was little motion as well. Finally:

“Did you know this, L?” Strucker snapped.

“Of course I did not know this,” Lukin shot back. “The asset’s former identity as Sergeant Barnes, yes, but Captain America is an Alpha, there was never any evidence to indicate he or Barnes were perverted in any way.”

“Captain America is an Omega,” Brock inserted. “So, faggots, but not perverted.”

The silence returned. Brock, now Head Five, did not worry that he had offended anyone. It didn’t matter if he had. They wouldn’t risk another Head so soon over something so petty.

“I assumed the news was false,” Head Six said finally. “His medical record is extensive, after all.”

“I figure it was faked,” Brock told them. “Either after he became Captain America or because of it. They had to know when they took him on, suppressants weren’t as good as they are now back then. Fuck knows why the Jew chose an Omega to become his super soldier.”

“Yes, well, Erskine was known for his sentimentality,” Strucker mused.

“Returning to the issue at hand,” Lukin interrupted. “If Rogers is indeed the asset’s mate, then find Rogers, you find the asset.”

“The longer the asset is out of our hands, the less valuable it becomes,” Head Five said. “You have four weeks to find the asset before Rollins replaces you.”

Brock nodded. Rollins nodded, too. Ward never moved from his corner.
“In the meantime,” Strucker said in a drawl, “we must consider our other options.”

“Not this again,” Head Six abruptly groaned.

“I have gained a method of recreating –”

"The witch is a complete and total myth!” Head Six cut in. “Let it go!”

“I have the sort of power reservoir necessary to create a new one!” Strucker snapped. “I have vessels, I have the ritual, I have the power. All I need is a vote.”

“What is the witch?” Brock asked before the vote could begin.

“A myth,” Head Six insisted.


“The stories of the witch are hearsay,” Head Four said. “They speak of magic, S, you are a man of science, surely you cannot believe them?”

“They speak of a power they did not understand!” Strucker insisted angrily. “A power which I now wield for the good of HYDRA. The vote.”

“Yay or nay,” Head Two sighed.

“Nay,” Head Six said immediately.

“Nay,” Head Four agreed.
“I think it worth the chance,” Head Two said. “Yay.”

“Yay,” Lukin said simply.

“To you, Rumlow,” Strucker said.

Brock still did not understand what the witch was meant to be, but Head Two was right.

“Yay,” he said.

“Motion carried,” Head Two announced calmly. Head Six spat something under his breath. “Complain later, E. S, report your progress when we meet again in four weeks. Signing off.”

Head Two’s pixelated picture disappeared. Six and Four vanished immediately, then One followed.

When only Lukin remained, Brock moved to end the call.

“Wait.”

He stopped.

Lukin’s image cleared. He glared fully at Brock.

“It was a great pain to me when I had to give the asset to you Americans,” he said. “Find it. It is time the asset returned to its true home.”

Lukin’s image vanished. Brock shut the laptop.

“Let’s go,” he said to Rollins and Ward. The laptop began to hiss; acid was melting its circuitry.
“We still have no clue if Rogers is alive or dead,” Ward said immediately.

“Quiet, rookie,” Brock snapped. Ward glared. “The Captain’s alive. The asset didn’t drag him out to that cabin in the middle of a rut to just kill him after.”

“Then where’s the paper trail?” Ward hissed. “Why haven’t the Avengers said anything?”

“We’ll find it,” Brock snapped again. “Now, shut your mouth. This ain’t a game no more, kid.”

Ward shut his mouth. Tight. Brock waved to Rollins, who followed without a word. Ward, after a minute, strung along behind them. They returned to their vehicles, rotating them, and drove their separate ways. They had their own missions now. Brock had an animal to catch.

Chapter End Notes

okay don't kill me i promise the angst will end good. eventually...
as always, please comment! tell me if you saw infinity war and if certain things happening at the end and certain people saying certain things as certain other things happened absolutely killed you the way it did me! i swear, half the things that happened i did not see coming, but the biggest was the fucking ringwraith looking dude turning out to be an old friend. fuck that guy, with a chainsaw, as per my notes say to do to pierce. feel free to message me on tumblr and we can rant. i hope you enjoyed this chapter, and, hey, if anything i had sam say to update bucky was insensitive or incorrect, please tell me, i am a sheltered white kid, and all of what sam had to say came from a mix of internet research and the people i've met at community college. if something i wrote is inaccurate or anything, tell me, and i will change it.
and fun fact, Living Through Personal Crisis is a real book, dr. stearns is a real person and she's cool i had to write an 8-page paper on her book and how i related to it and i got an a+ after writing it the evening before it was due and not even finishing the book. but i did skim through a lot of the book and doc is a great teacher so if you're interested you can check it out from various book-sellers.
animal, vegetable, or mineral

Chapter Summary

"animal, vegetable, or mineral?" "animal."

Chapter Notes

okay... i'm not late... there were finals. i swear i started editing this chapter on friday and then it was monday. sunday fucked me over. here's this chapter's playlist, pls leave a comment and yell at me for being mean to steve and bucky. i joined a small discord for writers recently and i keep getting yelled at for my cruel plotlines so y'all ain't alone.

edit: you can find the cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes
...Abnormally feral behavior is often seen in veterans and other victims of PTSD. Alphas, particularly, will become strict about who can enter their safe space and will often scent-mark their belongings. However, this can extend to romantic partners. Alphas who had served and seen combat returned home and behaved territorially with their partners. This study looks into said
At 13:00 hours, Steve’s phone rang. Steve twisted to pull it from his pocket, but Bucky pulled it out first. He answered it, pressing it to his ear, and Steve raised an eyebrow at him. Bucky shrugged once, then spoke into the phone.

“What?”

“What?”

“Who is this?” Bucky demanded.

“It’s Tony? Barnes?”

“Yes,” Bucky said. “What?”

Stark was quiet a second. Bucky repeated the *what*.

“Whatever. Helen’s here. The surgeon?”

Bucky looked at Steve, who held out his hand. He frowned, and Steve gestured for him to hand it over. Reluctantly, Bucky pressed the phone into Steve’s palm.

“Sorry, it’s Steve now,” Steve said.

“There you are! Helen’s here, she wants to see Buckaroo.”
Bucky wrinkled his nose and Steve raised both eyebrows, scowling lightly. “Alright. Come upstairs.”

“Will Barnes shoot at us?”

“If you shoot first,” Bucky snapped.

“Okay, well, we didn’t even look threatening at you the last few times.”

“Just come upstairs,” Steve said, and hung up. He looked at Bucky. “No shooting.”

Bucky scowled. He withdrew his hand from where it had been reaching for his gun. Steve gave him a look.

“You don’t need to pull your gun on everyone who comes upstairs,” he said.

Bucky scowled harder. Steve abruptly glanced at Sam.

“Did you pull a gun on him?”

“Had to make sure he was alone,” Bucky mumbled.

“Oh, my God,” Steve sighed, collapsing onto his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Sam.”

Sam shrugged. “Somehow I’ve gotten used to putting my hands in the air.”

“No more pulling guns on people,” Steve insisted.

“But—”
“No!”

Bucky rolled his eyes. Steve lifted his head to look at him, lips pursed and one eyebrow raised.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me,” he fussed.

“Don’t fuss at me,” Bucky countered.

Steve rolled his eyes. Bucky spluttered helplessly.

“How come you get to roll your eyes!”

“Cause I don’t pull guns on people,” Steve said haughtily.

“I gotta make sure they’re not bringing somebody with ‘em they shouldn’t!”

“If Stark installs cameras will you quit pulling guns?”

Bucky scowled. Steve gave him another look.

“Quit fussing,” he said, tapping Steve’s chin. Steve broke slightly, and Bucky did it again, smirking.

“Quit trying to distract me by being cute,” Steve said, and Bucky pointedly rolled his eyes. “You’re horrible.”

“Yep,” Bucky said, then stole a quick kiss. Steve huffed, deflating. Bucky smiled, pleased, and pulled Steve’s head down to his shoulder, leaning his cheek against Steve’s hair.

The elevator dinged. Steve started to get up, and Bucky followed, catching his waist before he could walk away. He opened his mouth and Steve exhaled heavily.
“Bucky, I’m answering the elevator,” he snapped. “Until you quit pointing guns at doors, I’m answering them.”

“Steve –”

“I’m answering the elevator,” he insisted. Bucky caught his wrist and jerked him back when he tried to pull away.

“Let me,” he said sharply.

Steve raised his eyebrows. He glanced at Sam, then back at him and raised his eyebrows even further.

“Let me,” Bucky repeated. “Please.”

“It’s just Stark and Cho –”

“You can’t know that,” Bucky hissed.

“Buck –”

“I’m answering the elevator,” Sam cut in. Bucky and Steve both looked at him. “You two… Figure that out.”

He made a vague gesture to them, standing up and heading for the elevator. Bucky pulled on Steve’s arm until he was standing between him and the elevator. Steve blew out his breath again.

“Bucky,” he said quietly, “you need to stop doing that.”

“I’m covering you,” Bucky answered.
Steve pressed his lips together, eyebrows flicking up, then shook his head. “There’s nothing to cover me from,” he said.

“You can’t know that,” Bucky said again.

Steve drew a hand over his face, then glanced over his shoulder and Bucky turned, keeping his body between Steve and whoever was coming, and reached for his gun.

His right hand remained firm on Steve’s wrist. His left hand wasn’t there to grab the gun. He forgot again.

Sam looked at Steve with an expression Bucky could not recall the meaning of and Stark waved. A woman followed behind him, dark hair, thin, monolided eyes, short, dressed in a skirt suit, upright posture, faint inward curving of the lumbar vertebrae –

Steve tugged his wrist in Bucky’s grasp. He tightened his fingers and looked back at him. Steve raised his eyebrows, then pulled on his wrist again. Bucky did not understand what he was trying to accomplish.


Bucky snapped his fingers open and jerked his hand away. Steve sighed, frustrated again, then reached out to touch his arm. Bucky held himself stiffly. Steve had said to stop touching, he wouldn’t touch him again until Steve said he could –

“Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes, Captain Rogers,” the woman announced, smiling at them. “It’s lovely to meet you both.”

“It’s good to meet you, Miss Cho,” Steve said, squeezing Bucky’s bicep and stepping away to hold out his hand. Bucky started, then restrained himself from catching hold of Steve’s wrist again. He had said to stop touching, so he wouldn’t touch again.

“Call me Helen, please,” Cho said, shaking his hand. Bucky clenched his hand into a fist, but he did not grab Steve back. Steve said to stop touching. Then she turned her smile on him, held out her
hand to him, and Bucky looked at it blankly.

Steve elbowed him. Bucky looked, and Steve flicked his eyes pointedly at her hand. Bucky looked back, then hesitantly held out his hand. He did not understand the purpose of handshakes.

Cho’s smile was tighter, but her grip was firm and brief shaking his hand. When she let go, Bucky pulled back into himself, longing to reach for Steve and scent-mark him again, but he held himself stiff.

“Shall we get straight to business?” Cho asked. Bucky was hardly listening. “I’ve looked at your X-Rays and at Tony’s design for your new arm, and I don’t think we need to plate your entire spinal column in titanium.”

“That’s good,” Steve said, sounding relieved. Bucky didn’t really care.

“I do think it would be good to replace your left clavicle,” Cho went on, “and I think several of your ribs could use some attention. They do appear to be porous, so plating them wouldn’t help matters much. Your spinal column isn’t bowed, thankfully, so we just need to address your clavicle and ribs. The new arm is much lighter…”

Bucky wasn’t listening anymore. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Steve, but he wasn’t looking back, and he looked down at the ground. From his peripheral vision, he checked the distance between each other person in the room and Steve. Sam was about three feet away, but he was within arm’s reach, and that posed danger. Cho was definitely too close, standing with less than two feet between her and Steve, and even though Stark was five feet away, there was no telling what kind of weaponry he had hidden under his jeans and shirt. His feet were bare again. Bucky could smash the glass of coffee table, but Steve was wearing only socks.

“Buck?”

He looked up. Steve was looking at him, eyebrows raised.

“What do you think?” he prompted.

Bucky blinked. Cho was standing too close, but he didn’t think Steve wanted to hear that.
“Were you listening?” Steve asked, then.

Bucky shrugged.

Steve glanced at Cho, then touched his elbow. Bucky jerked a little, about to push his arm around Steve’s waist, but held still.

“Are you okay?” Steve said quietly.

Bucky opened his mouth to say *functional* and caught sight of Sam looking at him with concern. He shut his mouth.

“Can you give us a second?” Steve said, glancing at Cho, then tugged on his elbow.

Bucky followed him out of the room, into Steve’s bedroom, and continued to hold himself stiffly.

“What’s the matter?” Steve whispered.

Bucky shrugged. He didn’t know. His jaw was clenched, he realized, but he couldn’t relax it. Steve’s gaze searched his, then he stepped closer and set both hands on his shoulders, squeezing lightly.

“Do you know where you are?” Steve asked.

“Stark Tower, Manhattan,” he answered.

“Do you know what year it is?”

“2014.”
“Did something Helen said trigger something?” Steve said, gaze searching again.

“Meaning unclear,” Bucky responded.

Steve squeezed his shoulders again. Bucky felt the urge to lurch forward, to grab Steve by the waist and hold tight to him, but Steve still hadn’t said he could touch again.

“Did something she said upset you?” Steve went on. “Or make you uncomfortable? Remind you of something bad?”

Bucky shook his head.

“Then what’s wrong?”

Bucky shook his head again. He wanted the door shut. He wanted them out. He wanted to grab Steve and hold tight.

Steve glanced down him, as if checking for injuries, then grabbed his hand and pulled it around his waist. “Bucky, if you feel like that, just touch me.”

Bucky jerked his arm all the way around Steve’s waist and locked him into his embrace as best he could. He pushed his face into his neck, dragging his cheeks over tendons, his shoulder, pushed his wrist under his shirt and started scent-marking his ribs and spine and stomach. Steve pushed his fingers into his hair, nails gently scraping his scalp, and Bucky inhaled carefully.

“Why didn’t you just touch me?” Steve murmured.

“You said stop,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve’s head tilted, as if to look down, but Bucky still held his face in the nape of his neck. He shifted, rubbing his nose over the bump of his throat, then started marking the other side of his neck.

“When I said let go?”
Bucky nodded. He rubbed his cheek over Steve’s shoulder, getting his clothes in the process and not caring.

“Buck, I just meant let go of my wrist. You were trapping me.”

“Was just holding you,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve sighed. “We really need to talk about this,” he said.

Bucky started to pull back and Steve pressed down on the back of his head. “No, I didn’t mean stop touching me, if I want you to stop touching me, I’ll say quit touching me, but I won’t ever mean for good, I’ll only mean for a second or two, Buck –”

“Need to keep you safe,” Bucky cut him off, starting to panic again. He’d been panicking. He remembered the symptoms now. Everything was too close, his chest was too tight, his heart beat painfully fast, his lungs couldn’t draw in air quick enough, and they were still too close. “Can’t do that not touching. Mine. Gotta keep you safe.”

“Buck, you are keeping me safe,” Steve sighed, like he was tired of having to say it. Bucky didn’t understand. “There’s no dangers right now.”

“Mine,” Bucky mumbled again, rubbing his face into Steve’s neck.

“Allright,” Steve said, sighing again. “Okay. Yes, I’m yours. Doesn’t mean you need to be holding my hand everywhere.”

“Meaning unclear,” Bucky said, because he didn’t understand.

“What part is unclear?” Steve said. He sounded frustrated again.

“All of it?” he said. He pushed his hand and wrist under the waistband of Steve’s pants, marking his hip, then dragged it up his side. “Mine. They was standing too close. Don’t like it. Mine.”
“Okay,” Steve exhaled. “We’re gonna talk about this later, okay? When you’ve calmed down.”

Bucky was fine with that. He didn’t get what was frustrating Steve. He kept scent-marking him.

“Are you calming down?” Steve murmured.

Bucky ducked around to the other side of his neck and kissed his scent gland. There should be a mark there, but as long as he rubbed his nose over it, it was fine. Mark didn’t stick because of the serum, they were still bonded, Steve was still his.

“Bucky?”

“’M fine,” he mumbled.

“No, you’re not, you’re still freaking out. What’s wrong now?”

The door was still open. They were still there. They were too close.

“Bucky, c’mon, talk to me. You can’t make a fuss about me talkin’ if you don’t talk.”

“Too close,” he muttered. Bucky rubbed his nose over the scent gland in Steve’s neck.

“Is it that they’re in your space?” Steve asked. “Do you want to go downstairs?”


“You’re not making sense,” Steve said.

Bucky growled, then bit into Steve’s scent gland. Steve hissed in a breath, stiffened and jerked back,
and Bucky hastily released him to jump backward. His chest heaved, he could hear his heartbeat in his ear, and Steve grabbed his hand and left shoulder, stopping him from pulling too far back.

“Bucky, hey, calm down, you’re alright, you just startled me –”

Bucky heaved in a breath. Steve pulled him back, pulled his arm around his waist, pushed his fingers through his hair.

“It’s fine,” Steve said.

“I shouldn’t do that?” Bucky mumbled.

“I mean, not outside of sex,” Steve whispered. He glanced toward the open door. “And not with other people around, seriously. That’s… It’s… You know.”

Bucky did not know. He was just trying to mark Steve.

Steve inhaled, then exhaled and shook his head once. “It’s arousing,” he muttered, not looking Bucky in the eye.

Bucky thought about it, confused, but nodded anyway. He couldn’t remember what arousing meant.

“Okay,” Steve said again. “We really do need to talk with Helen about your surgery, okay? Can you take some deep breaths for me? Calm down a little?”

Bucky inhaled sharply, then exhaled just as sharply. Steve caught his shoulder, then shook his head, smiling tightly.

“Breathe in slower,” he said.

Bucky inhaled sharply, but slower.
“Breathe with me,” Steve amended. He inhaled. Bucky inhaled. Steve was still inhaling. Bucky counted all the way to ten, and then Steve began to exhale. Again, Bucky could count to ten before Steve began to inhale again.

“That’s better,” Steve murmured three inhales and exhales later. “Keep breathing like that.”

Bucky inhaled for ten seconds, then exhaled for another ten. Steve nodded, smiling encouragingly. Bucky couldn’t hear his heartbeat anymore.

“Good,” Steve said after another minute. “How do you feel?”

Bucky kept inhaling and exhaling while he tried to answer Steve’s question. How did he feel? Feel what?

“Meaning unclear,” he said.

Steve swallowed, blinking, then reached up to push his fingers through his bangs. “Tightness in your chest?”

Bucky nodded.

“Heartbeat? Is it fast?”

“Slowing,” Bucky said.

Steve nodded again. “That’s better. Does anything hurt?”

Bucky kept breathing. “Lungs.”

“Slow down, then,” Steve said. “Seven seconds, okay?”
Bucky inhaled for seven seconds, then exhaled for seven seconds. His lungs strained less.

“Better?”

He shrugged. They were still there, just outside. Cho had touched Steve. He didn’t want people touching Steve.

“I don’t want people touching you,” he said, since that was probably the wrong Steve was looking for.

Steve’s eyebrows lifted up. “Okay,” he said. “Uh. We can talk about that, okay?”

“I don’t want people touching you,” he repeated firmly. “Mine.”

“We’ll talk about it,” Steve repeated just as firmly. “We need to talk about your surgery right now.”

“No, no, I don’t want people touching you, fuck surgery, I don’t want other people touching you, you’re mine –”

“Bucky, Bucky, hey, calm down –”

“You’re mine, nobody touches you, alright –”

“Bucky!”

Bucky snapped his mouth shut. Steve brushed at his hair again.

“Breathe,” he insisted.

Bucky inhaled for seven seconds, then exhaled.
“We need to talk about that,” Steve said. Bucky opened his mouth and Steve pressed a finger over it. “We need to talk about it, ‘cause that’s not really for you to say. But right now we gotta talk about your surgery, okay?”

Bucky glared at him. “Mine,” he mumbled against Steve’s finger.

Steve sighed. “Yes,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean you can say that I can’t shake hands with people, alright?”

He raised his eyebrows. Bucky didn’t understand.

“But…”

“Bucky, you don’t own me,” Steve insisted.

“I know.”

“So you can’t say I can’t touch other people!”

“But you’re mine.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t touch people,” Steve said, sounding angry now.

Bucky didn’t understand and he didn’t like it, Steve was his and he was not going to let other people just walk up and touch him whenever they wanted –

“Bucky,” Steve interrupted his thoughts. “What do you think it means to touch people?”

Bucky blinked. Steve pressed his lips together, looking annoyed. “Do you think that if other people touch me, they’re butting in on your territory?”
He said the word *territory* like it was a bad thing.

“’You’re mine,” Bucky muttered. How was that a bad thing?

“Me shaking hands with someone doesn’t change that,” Steve snapped. “I’m not your territory, okay —”

“I know —”

“Then stop acting like it!” Steve hissed.

Bucky did not understand. “I have to protect you.”

Steve sighed heavily, then dropped his forehead onto Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky lifted his hand and began to gently pet his hair, rubbing his wrist over the back of his neck.

“We need to talk about this,” Steve mumbled. “But right now we need to talk about your surgery. Okay?”

“You’re mine,” Bucky said back. He said it like a question.

Steve lifted his head and pressed their lips together. “Yes,” he said tiredly.

“Is that bad?” Bucky asked hesitantly.

“No, no, Buck, that’s not what I mean.” Steve drew in a breath, then shook his head. “I don’t really understand how you can say you know you don’t own me but you act like I’m just part of your territory. Yes, I’m your bondmate, I’m your Omega, just like you’re my Alpha, but I don’t belong to you, I’m not a thing.”

“I know,” Bucky said. Steve was a person. Bucky was the thing. Bucky belonged to Steve, his
purpose was to protect and care for him, and if other people could touch him whenever they wanted, how could Bucky ensure no one harmed Steve?

Steve sighed again. “We’re going to talk about it later, so we both understand each other, okay?”

“Okay,” Bucky mumbled. Steve kissed him again, then swept his wrist over the back of his neck.

“Are you feeling better now?” he asked.

“Define better,” Bucky said in response.

“Does anything hurt?” Steve asked again. He sounded tired.

“No.”

“Breathing?”

Bucky nodded.

“Heartbeat?”

“Normal range.”

Steve nodded, too. “Then you’re better, sort of,” he said, tiredly. “Can we go talk with Helen about your surgery now? Will you listen?”

Bucky shrugged. “Can I keep touching you?” he asked shyly.

“Yeah, of course,” Steve answered quickly.
Bucky hesitated again. “You’re not mad at me?”


“Good,” Bucky mumbled. He ducked his head into Steve’s neck again, then rubbed his nose over his scent gland. He didn’t kiss or bite into it, since he still didn’t remember what arousing meant and Steve had said not to do it around other people and they were still just outside the room. He rubbed his nose over it, then over the rest of Steve’s neck. “Good,” he repeated.

He felt better, sort of, at least. He still didn’t understand what Steve was frustrated about, but Steve was his and wasn’t mad at him.

“Let’s go talk with Helen,” Steve prompted.

Bucky nodded into Steve’s neck. Steve tugged gently on his waist, and Bucky pulled back, just far enough to turn Steve into his side. Steve squeezed his middle, giving him a smile, and Bucky felt better just for seeing it even if it was wearied and weak. They stepped back into the living room, but the living room was empty.

“Over here,” Sam called. They’d moved into the kitchen. Stark was sitting on the counter by the sink and Cho was sitting on a stool.

“Thanks,” Steve said as they walked back into the kitchen. “We’re good now.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. Steve shrugged.

“We’re good,” he repeated. “Sorry.”

“As long as y’all okay,” Sam mumbled. He glanced at Bucky, then offered him a thumb’s up and raised eyebrows. Bucky looked at it, then carefully lifted his hand off Steve’s waist to mimic the hand gesture. Sam nodded, seemingly satisfied, and sat on one of the stools.

“Okay,” Cho said. “Uh, well, shall we resume?”
“Yeah,” Steve said. He nudged Bucky. “Where did you clock out?”

“I don’t need my spine plated,” he answered. “New clavicle, something about ribs.”

“Your ribs are porous,” Cho said. Bucky nodded. “They have low density, probably due to the fact that you’ve had to compensate for the weight of the prosthetic so long. Natural diet and exercise could improve that over time, and I’m sure without the weight your body is already improving it, but you have expressed concerns about being unable to act in combat?”

Bucky nodded quickly. “I need to be able to defend Steve.”

She raised her eyebrows. Bucky did not understand why everyone kept getting confused about his defending Steve, but he didn’t care either.

“Well,” Cho said, when he ignored her raised eyebrows, “we can try some medications to improve it, but there’s no saying how soon it might improve.”

“Can he install the new arm while my ribs are porous?” Bucky asked, jerking his head towards Stark.

“If you wear a brace,” Cho said with a shrug. “My main concern is your clavicle.”

“It needs replacing,” Bucky repeated.

“Yes, but I don’t know how long it would take for you to heal from that,” she said. Bucky frowned, confused. “Well, there’s no precedent for a total bone replacement in a super soldier, because there’s only two of you and Captain Rogers has never needed to have a bone replaced.”

“Good,” Bucky mumbled under his breath.

“So, I can’t say for sure how long it would take your body to acclimate and heal,” Cho finished. “For one thing, there have only been a handful of complete claviculoplasties, total replacement of the
clavicle, done ever. I’d say let’s reinforce it and leave the bone itself, but even with Tony’s lighter arm, you’re going to need a very strong clavicle to withstand the weight.”

“It doesn’t cause pain,” Bucky said, wondering if that was helpful.

“From what I’ve heard, you’re not very good at registering pain,” Cho said. “And neither is Captain Rogers, so there’s precedent for that.”

Bucky glanced at Steve, eyebrows furrowed and lips parted, but he just waved his attention back to Cho.

“It’s part of the serum,” Cho said.

“Hmph,” Bucky said. He disliked the thought of Steve growing to ignore pain the way he had.

“So, your healing time could be anywhere from a week to a month,” Cho said. “I’d say, to be safe, we replace your clavicle, then give it at least two weeks before looking at installing the new prosthetic.”

Bucky’s jaw slipped open. “Two weeks?” he demanded. “I can’t be out of commission for two weeks!”

“Well, you’re going to have to be,” Cho said with a shrug. “I can’t say it would be safe for your new bone to put such weight on it right away.”

“Fuck,” Bucky muttered. He should never have let them take the arm off in the first damn place. “Fuck.”

“Bucky,” Steve said placatingly, “this is for your own good.”

“I’ve only got one arm!” Bucky hissed back. “How am I s’posed to fight with one arm?”

“You can keep my suit,” Stark threw in. Bucky glanced at him, then at the suit standing sentry in the
“Besides, not like you’re going much of anywhere for now. Steve here is on vacay until his death certificate is redacted, and after that, he’s just going to be dealing with Congress, so no bad guys to fight for now.”

“HYDRA is still out there,” Bucky snapped.

“They’re not getting in here,” Stark said, rolling his eyes.

“You can’t guarantee that!” Bucky said. Stark raised his eyebrows. “Nowhere is safe from them. Nowhere!”

“Bucky,” Steve cut in. Bucky looked at him, then inhaled for seven seconds at his raised eyebrows. “We’ll keep the suit, and you can keep yourself armed if that makes you feel safer, but –”

“It’s not me I’m worried about –”

“I’ll carry a gun,” Steve interrupted. Bucky paused, considering that. “We won’t go anywhere outside the Tower until you have your arm back, okay?”

Bucky hesitated, but Steve nodded at him. Finally, he blew out his breath and nodded, too.

“Fine,” he said. He still didn’t like it. But Steve wanted him to do this, so he’d do it. “Fine.”

“Good?” Cho said, like she didn’t quite get what had just happened. “We can do surgery tomorrow and you can start medication to improve your bone density after.”

Bucky nodded.

“One more thing,” Cho said, shifting in her seat. “I’m told you don’t want to be under anesthetic.”

“I need to be functional,” he said.
“This isn’t something you can do with local anesthetic,” Cho said, and Bucky scowled. “You need to be asleep for me to do this, otherwise it can go wrong.”

“I need to be functional,” he insisted.

“You won’t be functional anyway,” she said with a wave of her hand. “You’ll have to be on bedrest for a week after and it’s not like you can jump off the operating table while I’m replacing one of your bones to go fight HYDRA.”

Bucky glanced at Steve again, then at her, then around the room at nothing; he couldn’t be non-functional for a full week let alone a day –

“Bucky, hey, c’mon, look at me.”

He looked at Steve, swallowing hard.

“It’ll be okay,” he promised. “We’ll have the suit, we’ll be armed, we’ll just stay here while you’re on bedrest, won’t even leave the apartment.”

“Don’t leave my sight,” Bucky said. Like he was begging.

“I won’t,” Steve assured him, brushing at his bangs with a hand.

“Full anesthetic?” Cho asked.

“Where will you perform the surgery?” he countered.

“On the private medical floor here,” Cho answered.

Bucky licked at his lips, thinking, then looked at Sam. “Stay with Steve? While I’m under?”
“Sure,” Sam said with a light shrug.

Steve squeezed his hip. Bucky still didn’t like it, but Steve wanted him to do this.

“Fine,” he said. “Full anesthetic. But no morphine or whatever, nothing that impairs me after.”

“Just the Asgardian stuff,” Cho agreed. “You’re fine with that, right?”

Bucky shrugged. “If it’s not an IV all the time.”

“I’ll check that with Bruce,” Cho mused. “Alright. Give me time to work that out, then we’ll do the surgery tomorrow or the day after.”

Bucky gave a nod. Steve kissed his cheek, but he didn’t feel reassured. He still didn’t like this plan, but Steve wanted it. Whatever Steve wanted, he’d do.

*

[Signs of Domestic Abuse, House of Ruth.Org]

“Domestic abuse encompasses a range of controlling behaviors. Abuse may be physical, sexual, emotional, and/or financial. If you or a friend experience any of these forms of abuse, know that it is not your fault and there are people ready to help you. If you believe someone you know may be experiencing abuse, offer your non-judgmental support and help.

“Some “red flag” behaviors include…”

*

[september 29th, stark tower]

When Dr. Cho was done talking with Barnes, Sam figured it would be better to leave them alone for a while, so he followed Cho and Tony out. In the elevator, Cho raised her eyebrows at him and Tony both.
“What the hell was that?” she demanded.

Tony waved a hand. “Barnes is a little unstable, Sammy’s working on it.”

“A little?” Cho snapped. She glanced between them, then fixed her shocked expression on Sam. “What the actual hell is he doing to Rogers? Don’t think I didn’t notice that he freaked out after I shook Rogers’ hand!”

“He was freaking out before that,” Sam tried to defend, “Steve wanted to answer the elevator.”

Cho’s eyebrows raised higher. Sam winced a little. “I know this sounds bad –”

“This sounds more than bad,” she said. “This sounds dangerous. This sounds like Rogers is at risk! What the hell!”

“Steve’s fine,” Sam started, and Cho jabbed a finger in his face.

“Barnes is freaking out about people touching him,” she hissed. “That is highly concerning! He sounds like he’s feral!”

“He’s not feral,” Tony tried to say, and Cho waved an impatient hand at him.

“He’s unstable, yes,” Sam said, “but he’s most stable with Steve –”

“No, no, no,” Cho snapped, waving her finger in his face and glaring at him, “that kind of behavior is unacceptable, I don’t know how people acted back in the 40s, but Barnes has no right to act that way with his Omega.”

“What way?”

“Territorial like that! Angry about people just shaking hands with him! And did you see how he kept scenting him? He was doing it almost constantly!”
“Steve and I are working with him,” Sam tried to explain.

“I think it would be better if he were put into professional care,” Cho interrupted. She crossed her arms over her chest. “*Away* from Rogers.”

“Uh,” Tony said.

“It’s not a good idea,” Sam added.

“Does Rogers understand that Barnes’s behavior is abnormal?” she asked then. “Does he know that he doesn’t have to put up with that kind of stuff? Doesn’t he know –”

“They’re newly bonded,” Sam cut her off. “Of course they’re going to act touchy –”

“That wasn’t touchy, that was territorial!”

“Barnes is still trying to understand that *he* is a person!” Sam insisted.

“Rogers is his own person, too!”

“No, I mean Barnes has trouble understanding that he has to eat,” Sam snapped. Cho’s eyes widened. “Or sleep, or drink water. HYDRA conditioned him into *believing* that he was a thing, not a human being.”

Cho blinked. “But…” she muttered. She shook her head. “That still doesn’t make it okay for him to interrupt Rogers’ agency the way he is. You said he got angry because he wanted to answer the elevator?”

The elevator dinged, the doors opening. They stepped off onto the common floor, and Sam realized they hadn’t even announced a destination to JARVIS.

“He got worried,” Sam corrected. “He doesn’t feel safe here yet, he doesn’t want Steve in potentially risky situations.”
“Like answering elevators?” Cho demanded incredulously.

“In case someone dangerous was on it,” Sam said. She scoffed. “No, remember, he doesn’t feel like this place is safe yet, and he’s more concerned with Steve’s safety than anything else.”

“I’m concerned with his safety,” Cho snapped. “And Barnes acting like territorial like he’s in a rut all the time and trying to control him is not acceptable!”

“We’re working on it,” Sam hissed.

“He needs professional help –”

“I am professional help,” he cut her off. “I am a certified counselor for the VA, my specialty is the guys who come home and can’t feel safe around anyone, this is what I do.”

“He needs a psych ward,” Cho insisted.

“That is the last thing he needs!”

“Do you mind if I leave?” Tony interrupted. They looked at him. “Only, we need to talk with Bruce about a non-IV method of giving Barnes his pain meds. So, you guys keep arguing, I’ll just –”

“You’re the one keeping Barnes in custody,” Cho stopped him.

“Uh,” Tony said a second time.

“Don’t you see that his behavior is irrational?” she demanded. “Don’t you see that he’s putting Rogers at risk?”

“Barnes is not in custody,” Sam said sharply.
She waved a dismissive hand. “He can’t leave, can he –”

“No, he’s allowed to come and go as he pleases,” Tony said. Cho’s eyebrows shot up again. “He doesn’t want to,” Tony added, shrugging. “but he can.”

“He needs to be in a psych ward,” Cho insisted.

“Are you a psychotherapist?” Sam asked. “Or a trained psychologist? Have you any experience dealing with this?”

Cho shifted her weight. “No –”

“Then stop offering your unprofessional opinion,” he snapped. She drew herself up, looking at him with contempt. “Act as his surgeon, and let me handle his therapy, alright?”

“Maybe I ought to bring this to the authorities,” she retorted.

“They’ll just lock him up in prison!”

“Which would be better than leaving him where he is now!”

“Where he is now is adjusting! And do you even get what that would do to Steve ?”

“He’s clearly uncomfortable –”

“And expressing that,” Sam said. He held out a hand to her, a placating gesture. “He isn’t rolling over and letting Barnes do whatever he wants, he argued about going to get the elevator and he pulled him aside to talk to him about touch, besides, Barnes is already overly-cautious around Steve. He only does these things because he’s paranoid for Steve’s safety, and honestly, I totally get that, the man’s a walking hazard warning.”
“That’s not an excuse,” Cho said, dropping her fists onto her hips.

“He’s already hesitant as it is with Steve –”

“Would it help to know that Barnes at one point thought he raped Steve?” Tony said.

Sam and Cho stopped, then looked at him together.

“What?” Cho hissed.

Tony shrugged. “Something happened when they were kids and Barnes’s mother told him that he raped Steve. But it didn’t actually happen, apparently.”

Cho jabbed a finger at Sam, as if this proved her every point. “They should be separated.”

“No,” Sam said firmly. “Yes, that makes a hell of a lot more sense as to why he’s reluctant to touch Steve of his own accord, and did you notice that, Doctor?”

He snapped the last part to Cho, who glared, crossing her arms.

“Exactly,” he said. “Separating them would make Barnes’s situation worse, on top of that, it would also make Steve’s situation worse.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Cho demanded flippantly.

“He’s depressed,” Sam snapped. “What, do you think he went through an all-about face on designation, World War II, then losing his Alpha who wasn’t allowed to be his Alpha and wasn’t allowed to then grieve his Alpha without any side effects? And then getting launched seventy years in the future! Where he was still not permitted to grieve!”

Cho dropped her arms. Tony blinked.
“Did you notice that?” he added sharply.

Cho opened her mouth, then shut it.

Sam gave a nod. “He was unable to grieve Barnes’s death or vanishing or whatever in a healthy manner and to this day, he shows signs of major depression. Barnes is paranoid, Steve is depressed, both of them are classic cases of PTSD, and separating them would worsen both their conditions because they’ve rapidly become dependent on one another. So, thank you for your unprofessional opinion, Dr. Cho, but I am actually trying to help them both. Do you need any other proof that we’re working on their problems?”

Cho did not look pleased, but Sam didn’t really care.

“His behavior is still unacceptable,” she said.

“Which we’re working on,” Sam answered hotly.

“Make sure Rogers knows that it is,” she added. “Who knows the kinds of things he puts up with because he thinks it’s fine; clearly, Barnes won’t quit scenting him for one.”

“Scent-marking was a completely normal thing to them,” Sam said. When Cho opened her mouth, he held up a hand. “It was a completely normal thing for them when they were growing up and Steve is comfortable with it. We may think it inappropriate, but it comforts both of them. Steve scent-marks him in return and everything.”

Cho still did not look pleased, but she blew out her breath and shrugged. “Fine. I guess you’re right. But keep an eye on them. If Barnes freaks out because of people touching Steve again –”

“We are working on it,” Sam said emphatically.

Cho nodded sharply. She glanced at Tony, then waved him away. Sam let out a long breath, then headed back for the elevator. He tugged out his phone as he did, swiping to unlock the screen and typing in his code while he waited for the doors to open.
“Your floor, Sam?” JARVIS asked.

“Please,” he said, glancing up once. He opened his texts, then looked briefly through them for a conversation with Steve. After a second, he realized he hadn’t texted Steve before and had to draft a new message entirely.

_to Steve:

_hey man, you guys good?

When the elevator opened again and Steve hadn’t replied, Sam sighed and shoved the phone back into his pocket. He tried not to worry that Dr. Cho had a point. Barnes had answered Steve’s phone the last few times anyone had called him. He collapsed onto his couch, looked for the remote, then remembered he didn’t have one.

Sam wished Tony had old-man-proofed his apartment too, now that he thought about it.

“Hey, JARVIS,” he called out tiredly, “can you turn the TV on please?”

“Certainly.” The TV screen blinked on. “What channel do you wish to watch?”

“News,” Sam said.

“Which provider?”

“Who’s talking about Steve right now?” Sam asked, though he was reluctant.

“Currently, Fox News, ABC News, and the local news are discussing Project Insight and Captain America.”

Fox would probably just give him a headache.

“ABC,” he said.
The screen changed. Sam flopped sideways onto the sofa, shoving a pillow under his neck, and settled in to become disgruntled with the media.

“Welcome back,” newscaster number one said.

Since he didn’t know the newscasters names, he made up nicknames. There were three people on the screen, a white lady in a fuschia dress, a brother wearing a navy suit, and an older white guy with glasses and wiry, gray hair. Blondie, brother, and Old Dude, Sam decided. He didn’t want to bother being descriptive.

“Today we’re talking about Captain America,” brother said.

“Who isn’t?” blondie added with a laugh.

“We’ve got World War II expert, Dr. Grant, here today,” brother went on, pointing to Old Dude. Sam decided just to keep calling him Old Dude. “And joining us via video call in just a minute, we’ll have women’s rights activist Robin Morgan. Dr. Grant, anything you’d like to say to start us off?”

Old Dude sighed heavily. Sam was trying to figure out if he was supposed to represent the Captain America is a fraud side of the argument and therefore if he was going to dislike him.

“I’d like to start, I don’t like talking ill of the dead,” Old Dude said.

“But we’re not positive that Captain America is dead,” brother cut in.

Old Dude shrugged. “He fell over a hundred feet into a body of water from an exploding helicarrier and nobody’s seen him since. Sounds pretty dead to me.”

Sam picked up his phone and texted Natasha.

ABC news dude says steve’s probably dead
“Then let’s assume he’s at least out of commission for a while,” brother said. “Please, continue.”

Natasha started typing.

“Well, I don’t like talking ill of the dead or the possibly dead, either. But I have to say that I’m disappointed in Captain America; if it is true that he is an Omega, but he has been pretending to be an Alpha his whole life, then what really can we say of his accomplishments are real? What can we say of his character or the role model he’s been? If Captain America has been built on such a magnificent lie as this, what parts can we trust?”

from Natasha

that’s a good thing for now.

Sam dropped his phone.

“All valid questions,” brother agreed with a nod.

“Boo,” Sam said to the TV. “Blondie, defend your fellow Omega.”

Blondie only nodded thoughtfully.

“Ah, Robin’s ringing in,” brother said. The image shifted and a video call appeared on the screen; an older, gray-haired white woman sat at a desk, her hands folded on its surface. “Good afternoon, Robin, how are you?”

“Lovely, thank you,” she said.

“Lovely to have you here,” brother went on. “Well, let’s get started. By now, all our viewers will have heard the rumor that Captain America is secretly an Omega, despite having been described as an Alpha his whole life. The Smithsonian exhibit in DC even had pictures of him at an all-Alpha school in the 20s and 30s, and every record of him available to the public states that he’s an Alpha. Robin, what are your thoughts?”
“I think, firstly, that the question is not if Captain America is an Omega. The question is why has he pretended to be an Alpha his whole life and how did he get away with it.”

Brother nodded, agreeing. Sam booed the screen again.

“There are too many witness accounts from DC to prove that he is an Omega,” Robin continued, “and denying it is a weak move at this point. We can’t say for sure why he so abruptly stopped taking scent blockers, but it’s clear that he has and he is an Omega.”

“But couldn’t it be possible that he was somehow taking a different medication that altered his scent to make him appear as an Omega?” brother asked her.

“That’s a stupid ass question,” Sam scoffed.

“I think that’s not very possible,” Robin scoffed, too. “Firstly, why on earth would he willingly alter his scent to make him look like an Omega? There wouldn’t be any reason for him to do such a thing.”

“Possibly to confuse his enemies?” brother suggested.

Robin shook her head. “No, I don’t believe that would have any practical value in a combat situation. I mean, if he wanted to distract his opponents with an Omega’s scent, why didn’t Black Widow, an actual known Omega, artificially replicate heat pheromones? Why would Captain America chose to fake being an Omega for this one fight?”

“It doesn’t make sense tactically,” Old Dude agreed.

“Thank you,” Robin said.

“So there’s no question in your mind that Captain America is an Omega?” brother asked.

“He has a name,” Sam muttered.
“No question."

“Dr. Grant?"

“I’m hesitant to believe it,” Old Dude said. “So many things came out of the Black Widow’s info dump of S.H.I.E.L.D. intel that it was very easy for hoaxes to pop up. For example, the suggestion that a secret HYDRA assassin from Russia killed JFK.”

“That one’s true!” Sam exclaimed.

“Or that Captain America himself was a member of HYDRA,” Old Dude carried on, completely unaware that a secret HYDRA assassin had killed JFK. “Considering that he probably died stopping the launch of Insight, I doubt that.”

“Yes, that one’s a bit hard to swallow,” blondie said.

“But the witnesses,” Robin interjected. “There were dozens of witnesses on the bridge incident prior to the fall of the Insight helicarriers who smelled and identified Captain America as an Omega.”

“Witnesses who were probably scared to death,” Old Dude offered easily. Robin looked displeased. “And that whole fight lasted, what, ten minutes?”

“But let’s say for now that he is an Omega,” brother interrupted before Robin could reply. “What does this mean for America?”

“Well, for one, we need to ask what parts of the Captain America legacy are reliable,” Old Dude said. “And like Robin said, why did he lie and how did he get away with it?”

Sam sat up a little. The news broadcast went on, Robin Morgan and Dr. Grant discussing what motivations Captain America could have had to lie about his designation, and Sam frowned at the air. He picked up his phone again.

to Natasha
Natasha began typing, then the bubble vanished. Sam stared at his phone, waiting, then looked up.

“JARVIS, give me a summary of what people are asking about Steve.”

“Processing.”

Sam checked his phone again. Steve still hadn’t replied.

“Results found. The major three questions surrounding Captain America or Steve Rogers are, first: Is he really an Omega? Second: what caused him to lie about his gender? Third: Is he transgender?”

“What?” Sam burst out.

“Speculation suggests that he was born female and an Omega and Project Rebirth altered his gender and/or designation.”

Sam blinked several times, absolutely baffled. “Seriously? People can’t just deal with the idea of him being an Omega and a dude?”

“It appears so. Major media corporations such as The Washington Post, The Guardian, BBC News, Fox News, Huffington Post, and the Human Rights Association have all published content that in some way question Captain Rogers’ gender.”

His phone buzzed in his hand and he dropped his gaze.

from Natasha

damn it.

Sam set his phone aside, scrubbing at his face. For one thing, it was ludicrous that even modern people had such trouble wrapping their minds around the fact that male Omegas exist that they were
willing to believe that Project Rebirth had taken a woman and turned them into a man rather than that man was an Omega to begin with, but for another…

“But there’s no questions anywhere about Steve being forced to pretend to be an Alpha?”

“Processing.”

Sam held his breath.

“There are 328 results from all Internet, radio, print, or television sources matching your query.”

“328?” Sam muttered.

“There are 42 billion, 672 million, 463 thousand and 158 results matching your previous query.”

“Oh, boy,” Sam exhaled.

“Indeed,” JARVIS agreed.

from Natasha

rogers’ death certificate will be redacted in at least a week’s time. after that, he has to face congress. this is going to make defending him more difficult.

Sam muttered a curse. This was fucked up. Steve was going to have to defend his status as an Omega on trial before Congress. This whole damn nation was fucked up.

He grabbed his phone again, swiped through his contacts and dialed a friend from the hospital he’d gotten his certificate from. Barnes, with PTSD and dehumanization, dissociation, derealization, he knew how to help. But an Omega who had trust and touch issues and didn’t want to work out his emotions and lived with an Alpha who was potentially emotionally abusive or at the very least controlling? He didn’t have the right experience for that. He didn’t have the right experience for half of what Steve had gone through, and Dr. Cho was right, Steve and Barnes were unhealthily dependent on one another, and he was going to need a more professional-professional than he to deal
with sort of thing.

Steve still had yet to text him back.

* 

[Were Captain America and Agent Carter Really Involved? , Marianna de Cortez Huffington Post, 2008] 

“We all know the story: Boy meets girl, girl is a secret agent for the SSR, boy becomes the first super soldier in history. But where did boy falls in love with girl come along?

“The cartoons and comic books implied Agent Carter was flirting with Captain America even before he became Cap. But my grandfather was actually there, and from what he saw, Agent Carter was more interested in one of the nurses than Steve Rogers…”

“So why did history say they were an item? And the bigger question: All those photos of Cap’s doe eyes, who was he really looking at?”

* 

[september 30th, stark tower]

Natasha was brooding. And when she was brooding, that spelled trouble for Clint’s everything. Least of all was their sex life, which was very non-existent since the Boogeyman came to life, and he’d been in Latveria for a month prior to that, even.

But Natasha was brooding, which meant that she was fidgety and snappish and kept forgetting to brush her teeth. Plus, she was ignoring Lucky, which meant that the dog was pouting, too. Clint really hated Congress.

“Nat,” he yelled from the kitchen, “hey, I made food!”

“Kay,” she called back from the office. He sighed. She also kept forgetting to eat, and there were enough Russian ex-assassins with unhealthy eating habits to go around the Tower.

Now, the food he’d made was really just heated up chili from a few days ago, so he ladled some into a bowl, grabbed a spoon, and headed for the office. She didn’t even look up when he walked up
behind her, though she knew he was there.

“Nat,” he repeated. He put the bowl next to her laptop, on top of a stack of files. She made a disgruntled noise and shifted it out of reach and away from her files. “Nat!”

“I’m busy!”

“Eat the fucking chili, will you?”

“In a bit,” she said. Clint looked over the desk, then spotted in the sea of files the eggs and toast he’d brought her for breakfast sitting by the lamp, untouched.

“Nat!” he groaned, dropping his weight to lean on her chair and duck his head down to her level. “Have you eaten at all today?”

“I drank the coffee,” she said, pointing to her empty mug.

He made a face. “That does not count, babe.”

She waved a hand in his face; he just barely recoiled in time to avoid getting ink on his nose from the pen in her grip. “In a minute.”

“You said that when I brought you the eggs and toast,” he pointed out. Natasha shrugged, flicking through her files. She’d been flicking through the files most of the day. “What are you even doing?”

“Hunting through old records.”

“Why?”

She sighed, then, and dropped against the back of her chair to look at the files with frustrated eyes. Clint set his hands on her shoulders and started to work the tension from them.
“Media reception to Cap being an Omega is shitty,” she said. “And I’ve only just barely managed to keep Congress from starting on that while we’re talking about all the shit that’s happened, but when the gates do open, I’m betting they’re going to try and pin it all on him.”

“Pin what on him?” Clint asked gently.

She dropped her head against his stomach. He bend and kissed the top of her head, and she exhaled heavily.

“The lie,” she said, sounding tired. “That he’s not actually an Alpha. He’s got enough on his plate, but once he gets wind of this –”

She broke off, blowing out her breath again. Clint worked his hands up the back of her neck, then into her hair to loosen it from its braid. She relaxed under his hands, her eyes falling shut.

“Take a break, okay?” he said gently. “Eat your breakfast, then your lunch, and then you can go back to work.”

“I have to go to DC tomorrow,” she muttered instead of reaching for her plate.

Clint rested his chin on the top of her head. “Do you want me to come?”

She shrugged. She got like that sometimes. Craved space, the feeling that she was independent. But sometimes, she craved space because she needed a lack of it, and it was difficult for her to register the difference.

“I’ll come,” he said. At the very least, he could make sure she ate more than espresso. “Come on,” he added, reaching for the plate himself. “Come sit in the living room to eat. We’ll watch something stupid, like Friends.”

“Friends isn’t stupid,” she mumbled, but stood up from her chair. He grabbed the bowl and walked behind her into the living room, setting the dishes on the coffee table and dropping onto a corner of the sofa. She put her feet in his lap and picked up the bowl of chili, and he grabbed the remote off the floor.
After two episodes of Friends, Natasha vanished back into the office. He let her go, but brought her water after another half hour just to check on her. She barely acknowledged him, even when he rubbed at the taut muscles of her shoulders for five minutes before kissing her cheek and walking out. He let her be a while longer, but around five, brought her more chili.

“Thanks,” she said, but didn’t lift her head from the files.

At seven, he went back in.

“Sun set,” he announced. “Work day’s over. Come on, quitting time.”

“Shit,” Natasha said, throwing down her pen. “I don’t know what to do.”

He walked up behind her and started working on her shoulders. She deflated, her posture dropping into a slouch.

“Nothing,” she said, pointing around her. “I scoured every office, medical practice, damn courthouse that’s been open since 1918 in the whole damn state of New York for nothing.”

“What’s not there?” he asked.

“Steve isn’t!” she snapped. “There is not a single record of his existence before Project Rebirth.”

“Well, what about his birth certificate?”

Natasha dug through the piles, then opened a folder bearing the seal of the New York City Vital Records Office and laid it on the desk. “That’s his parents’ marriage license.” She tapped a tab labeled children. “Nothing.”

“He doesn’t have a birth certificate?” Clint said disbelievingly. He reached for the file, but all that was in it was the marriage license, then Sarah Rogers’ death certificate. Joseph Rogers didn’t even have a death certificate.
“It wasn’t that uncommon,” she sighed. “There’s no record of Sarah before her marriage license either, so it’s possible she was undocumented.”

Clint looked over the sea of papers. “These are all possible matches?”

She nodded. “Any file drawer I could get my hands on, any file that could potentially be him. None of them.”

“He can’t not exist,” Clint muttered. “He was supposed to be sickly before the serum, what about doctors –”

She shook her head. “My guess,” she whispered. “They existed at one point.”

He looked down at her, and she blinked wearily at the papers.

“You’re suggesting he had records,” Clint said slowly, horrified, in utter disbelief, “and they were destroyed?”

She nodded. “Easier than altering them.”

Clint exhaled a heavy breath. “Wow.”

She nodded a second time. He returned his hands to her shoulders, squeezing, then dropped his hand to her wrist and pulled her up. “Come on,” he said. “Quitting time, remember?”

“I feel exhausted,” Natasha grumbled. She dropped her head onto his shoulder, and, fuck, she had to be worn out if she was leaning on him. “I’m just gonna sleep.”

“Eat something first,” he said, lifting the untouched bowl of chili from two hours ago. “And brush your teeth.”

She really had to be worn out, because she only muttered vague complaints under her breath and followed him into the kitchen. He watched her eat, then followed her while she got ready for bed,
just to make sure she did actually brush her teeth. When she dropped onto the bed, he pulled out a brush and a hair tie, then knelt behind her to brush out her hair and braid it. It was difficult while she was lying down, but she fell asleep faster for it. When she was, Clint grabbed his tablet and spent a few mindless hours playing Farmville until his own eyes began to itch, then folded himself behind her, pressing their backs together.

He woke briefly when she rolled over and flung her arm over his waist. Only briefly. He then returned to snoring.

He woke up again when her arm withdrew.

“C’mon,” she muttered in his ear, “get up. Got to hit the road.”

Clint groaned and rolled over to bury his face in his pillow. “Already?”

“It’s six o’clock, Barton, get your ass out of bed.”

“Six?” he just about squeaked. He jerked his head up to check the clock, but it was still 5:43. He rolled back over to make a face at her. “Six?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “I’m rounding,” she said. She flicked his nose. “Get up.”

“You owe me coffee at this point,” he grumbled, but got out of bed. “Fuck Congress.”

“Yes, dear,” Natasha called back sarcastically.

Chapter End Notes

i have nothing to make you feel better. there's just more sad coming up, but it's also sweet? does that make sense? if you enjoyed this lemme know what you liked y'all make my day by commenting it's literally the nicest thing you can ever do to a fic writer. pls consume some fluff after this, i recommend introducing mister and mister united states, it's top notch content some dank memes and vines included. (this has been a shameless self-promo.) see you in a week!
morning glories putting down roots

Chapter Notes

Aight prepare yourselves for the sadness ahead. I mean, there's a lot of sweet, but it's mostly sad. Find fluff to read when you've finished this. I have fluff. Find my fluff and read it pls. Find some sort of fluff to cure you of any feels this chapter may create. You have been warned.

You can find the playlist here. Enjoy the sad!

Edit: You can find the cover art on my tumblr here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“...The fear of touch in northern, Anglophone countries is deep-seated. In Victorian England and 19th century America, people took to the language of flowers, or florigraphy, to fly feelings that
could not otherwise have flown. In a book on child rearing, first published in 1928, the eminent and influential American psychologist John B. Watson (he of Little Albert fame) advised: Never hug and kiss [your children], never let them sit on your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say goodnight... In a week’s time you will find how easy it is to be perfectly objective with your child and at the same time kindly. You will be utterly ashamed at the mawkish, sentimental way you have been handling it.

“Still today, many people flinch if the person returning their change accidentally brushes their hand. Generally speaking, the fear of touch is much greater in men. Touch is seen as soft and effeminate, and many men are keen to appear macho or at least masculine. With women, they worry that their touch will be interpreted as a sexual advance. With other men, they fear that it will raise questions about their sexuality, or that it will feel awkward, or that it will be rejected, or that they might enjoy it a little too much. With children, with many schools now operating a strict no-touch policy, they fear that it might raise suspicions of paedophilia. So with the exception of handshakes and the occasional awkward ‘man hug’, men must forego touch, especially warm, intimate touch, simply to reassure everyone, and perhaps also themselves, that they are decent, manly men...”

[september 30th, stark tower]

Steve sat in the waiting room of the medical floor, Sam next to him and reading something on his phone, waiting. Dr. Cho had brought Bucky back for prep four hours ago, something she’d said Steve couldn’t accompany. The surgery was only supposed to take four hours, it was nearing sunset and he was still waiting.

“You doing okay there, bud?” Sam asked. He’d asked eleven times in the past four hours.

Steve only nodded. He’d nodded eleven times in the past four hours.

But honestly, he was not okay. He was on edge, tense, anxious and kept thinking about the ways things could go wrong. Dr. Cho was supposed to be one of the best, sure, but what if she messed something up? Or if the anesthetic lost its touch and Bucky woke up and didn’t know where he was? If he moved while under her knife, he could seriously hurt himself. Worse, she was dangerously close to his neck. That knife went just a few inches up, Cho could accidentally stab him and he’d bleed out; serum or no serum, a scalpel to the throat was still lethal.

What if she did it intentionally? He knew she didn’t trust Bucky, her wary gaze yesterday had been enough –

“Steve?” Sam spoke. “Do you know you’re cracking the chair?”
He looked down. His fingers had been gripping the wooden arm of the chair, and a long split had
gone down it under the center of his palm. He let go, bringing his elbows onto his knees and resting
his chin on his fists.

Bucky really would never do something like Cho was clearly worried about, and while he was trying
to make Steve’s decisions for him, Steve trusted that it was because he forgot that he wasn’t some
little kid who could hardly carry his own books to school. He really was just trying to protect him.
The thing about shaking Cho’s hand; Bucky was already on edge, he hadn’t ever gotten upset about
that sort of thing before. And they were going to talk about it, when Bucky wasn’t stressed about not
having two arms.

To be honest, Steve didn’t really care all that much. He was fine with not touching anybody. From
waking up in 2011 to just a week ago, the most physical contact he’d initiated outside of fights was
handshakes to introduce himself. With anyone. He honestly hated it when people touched him; even
smiling fans asking for a quick hug or other vets who clapped him on the shoulder, he hated it. He’d
hated touch since he was too young to remember why. It never failed to make his throat gum up and
his skin crawl, and it had really only ever been his ma or Bucky that hadn’t set his teeth on edge. It
was mainly the fact that Bucky was protesting to a handshake and Steve hated being rude just as
much.

Though at the moment, he hated the silence just as much.

“Got something on your mind?” Sam asked then.

Steve just shook his head. He hadn’t said anything since telling Bucky he loved him before Cho took
him back.

“Okay,” Sam said quietly.

Sam let him be. Steve kept his gaze on the doors.

Another hour passed, then the doors shifted. Steve jumped up as they parted, and Cho walked out
with Bucky just behind her. He was wearing the hospital gown again, and underneath it, Steve could
see the wrappings covering his shoulder. He didn’t look happy but made a beeline for Steve. As he
was often doing these days, Bucky crowded into his space, pushing his arm around his waist and
tucking his head into his neck. Steve locked his arms around Bucky’s waist, wrists hanging at the
small of his back, and breathed.
He hated the touch of strangers. He craved Bucky’s touch. Maybe it was another thing that had been
socialized into him or maybe he’d gotten used to touch hurting from doctors and nurses and bullies,
but the only touch he really wanted anymore was Bucky’s.

“Well,” Cho’s voice reached his ears. “He’s done. He’s on pain medications for the next two weeks,
and he can’t do anything that might strain his shoulder for a week.”

“Thank you,” he said to her, lifting his cheek from Bucky’s hair to look at her. “Thank you very
much.”

She nodded, then lifted the paper in her hands. She set it on the round desk, then started back for the
doors. “That’s a full detail of his care needs for the next month. I expect that the stitches can come
out in a few days, so that’s when I’ll check back in.”

She vanished. Steve turned his face toward Bucky.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly.

Bucky grunted into his neck. He began nosing at his scent gland, and Steve had to take a deep breath
not to react.

“Let’s go upstairs,” he said.

Bucky nodded, then withdrew. Steve had half-expected him to be handsy again, with the cocktail of
pain medications and Asgardian morphine in his system, but he just looked tired. Steve wondered if
that was a good thing or not.

“Want me to help you get him up?” Sam asked, holding out the paper to Steve.

Bucky abruptly growled, and Steve shook his head, taking the paper quickly. Sam nodded, backing
off, and Steve shifted in Bucky’s grip, to guide him toward the elevator.
“Do you want to sleep when we get upstairs?” he asked as they stepped into the elevator.

Bucky shook his head.

“How about we just lay down?” Steve suggested. The elevator began to move without them needing to say to JARVIS what they needed.

Bucky made a non-committal noise. He hung on Steve’s body, eyes blinking lethargically, his head remaining on his shoulder. Steve held him up, practically. When the elevator opened, he had to nudge Bucky’s feet into moving.

He led him back to the master bedroom. Bucky sat when Steve guided him onto the mattress, blinking slowly still. Steve glanced over the paper, then reached behind him to untie the gown. When he’d pulled it off, he lifted Bucky’s knees, until his Alpha shifted his legs onto the bed and lay down. Steve gently pulled the blankets out from under him, the sheets fresh, then pulled them over him. Bucky blinked at the ceiling. He kept blinking while Steve undressed and lay down beside him. Steve pulled Bucky’s arm up, then curled against his side. Bucky kept blinking.

Steve pressed closer, but Bucky’s lethargy stirred anxiety in him anyway. He rubbed his wrist over Bucky’s abdomen, then reached back to take Bucky’s hand and marked his own hip with it. After a second, Bucky began to repeat the action with absent movements and Steve tried to settle again. He draped his arm over Bucky’s stomach, nose pressed into the crook of his neck, and focused on slowing his breathing.

“Y’okay, baby?” Bucky mumbled above him.

“’M fine,” Steve said quietly.

Bucky hummed lightly. Steve wasn’t fine, he felt just as on edge as he’d been when Bucky had been in surgery and he couldn’t figure out why. Bucky continued to lazily mark his hip, the same spot, and Steve threw a leg over Bucky’s thighs, still trying to get closer.

“’S the matter?” Bucky slurred, and Steve shrugged. Bucky’s hand drifted up his spine, fingers sliding over each vertebra, and Steve shrugged again. “We’re okay,” he murmured, kissing his hair. “Gun under the pillow.”
Steve lifted his head, then reached under the pillow. He found cold metal under his fingers and wasn’t any reassured for it. He dropped back, though gently with Bucky’s wrapped shoulder, and pressed his nose into Bucky’s neck.


Bucky’s one and two-word sentences didn’t reassure him, but his fingers slowly petting his side did. Steve inhaled carefully, drawing in Bucky’s scent; permeating his lungs with woodsmoke and the faint scent of antiseptic. Bucky rested his hand on the crest of his hip, fingers drawing slow circles, and Steve exhaled.


Steve nodded. He felt almost as tired; exhausted, even, the past five or six hours sitting rigid in the waiting room crashing down on him.

“Take a nap,” Bucky said quietly. “Gotchu, baby. Be right here.”

“Sleep if you wanna,” Steve reminded him gently.

“Keep watch,” Bucky said anyway. “Y’take a nap.”

His fingers continued to run over the crest of his hip. Steve drew in another breath, then his consciousness slipped.

He slid back and forth from waking and dreaming; the gentle confusion of sleep outside a normal pattern, where his dreams felt as coherent as conscious thought until he’d risen from them and they vanished without trace. Bucky’s hand resting at his hip, arm draped over his ribs, felt heavy and grounding. He slept, until the slide to and fro began to taper off, he became more aware of Bucky breathing, his pulse under Steve’s lips, the light sweeping of his fingertips over his skin. One moment, he felt the deep settlement of sleep in his bones, the next, he was blinking.

“Y’awake, baby?”
Steve nodded, though he shut his eyes again.

Bucky trailed his fingers over his hip, palm cupping the crest. Steve slid back into sleep for a second, then drew in a sharp breath, clearing his nose, and shifted to lay more on his stomach than his side, his arm curled underneath him.

“Better?”

“Mhmm,” was all Steve felt awake enough to manage. He felt more than heard Bucky rumble a gentle noise, then lifted a hand to reach for his hair.

He twisted a lock around his fingers, thumb rubbing the ends smooth, then pushed his hand further, so that the gaps between his fingers felt cool from the press of Bucky’s hair. Even past the ends, it felt rough under his hands, like it hadn’t been treated well for a long time, and when he lifted his hand to comb it with his fingers, a strand or two broke and came with it.

“Gonna get you conditioner,” he mumbled.

“’S that?” Bucky asked, yawning halfway through.

“’S for hair. Makes it soft, strong.”

“Soft and strong?”

“Mhmm,” Steve repeated. He combed through more of it, pulling it away from Bucky’s neck and layering it over the pillow. “Like you.”

“Like you,” Bucky countered, prodding him gently in the stomach. There was a little give under his finger, not much as he was almost entirely muscle, but a mile more than there’d ever been before the war, or even during.

Steve smiled gently against his neck. He’d get a little give under Bucky’s skin soon enough, too. Seventy years had been plenty of time for back pay and interest, so he had a mile more resources now compared to before the war.
“‘S a good thing,” Bucky said a second later. “Case you worried.”

“I know,” Steve answered. He pressed a lazy kiss to the meeting of his neck and his shoulder, then pushed himself up onto his elbow. “Speaking of. Food.”

Bucky yawned again, then nodded. “Y’got coffee?” he mumbled.

Steve nodded, too, then reached across him for the paper on the bedside. “Says you should stick to clear fluids for a while.”

Bucky screwed up his nose. “Need caffeine,” he said.

“Sleep,” Steve said, leaning down to kiss him. “I’m gonna go get food. I’ll be back in a minute.”

When he went to crawl off the bed, Bucky started to sit up.

“Careful,” he warned. “You gotta stay there.”

Bucky scowled at that, but Steve leaned back to kiss the corner of it. When he pulled back, it was still there.

“What?” he asked, frowning now, too.

“Don’t want you out of my sight,” Bucky muttered, looking at his hand. He was picking at a bit of frayed skin around the nail of his thumb with his index. “Can’t react if I can’t see you. Not safe.”

“I’ll only be a minute,” Steve promised.

Bucky’s scowl didn’t abate. Steve caught his lower lip between his teeth and worked his jaw, thinking, then blew it out and dropped back onto the bed.
“Do you want me to get a robot to do it?” he asked. “So I can stay in here with you?”

Bucky nodded. Steve leaned in, cupping his jaw to press a kiss to the side of his face, then went searching for his phone. He grabbed fresh boxers for him and Bucky since they were both naked on the way, putting them on the bed while he dug his phone out from his jeans. He sat on the edge of the bed while he went looking for the number to contact JARVIS, and felt Bucky shifting to lean against his back, hooking his chin over his shoulder.

When Steve reached for the boxers, Bucky caught his hand.

“Come back to bed,” he murmured.

“Can I put underwear on?” Steve laughed, but shifted backwards until he was settled next to Bucky again. Bucky pushed his arm behind his back, curling it around his hip again, and ducked his head into his shoulder. Steve lifted his phone and texted JARVIS about robots who could cook.

“I remember yarn,” Bucky said abruptly.

Steve looked up. Bucky reached up and pushed his fingers into his hair, combing through it, and Steve pressed into the touch, his eyes falling shut.

“What about yarn?” he murmured.

“Rolling it,” Bucky said. “Unravelling the skein to make it into a ball. I remember wrapping it around my finger ‘til I could wrap it around itself.”

Steve stayed quiet, thinking that Bucky had more memory to voice, but Bucky said nothing further. Bucky continued combing his hair, and Steve half forgot that he needed to summon a robot to get them dinner.

“Why do I remember yarn?” Bucky mumbled, lips brushing his bare shoulder.
“Why?” Steve repeated, opening his eyes.

“Why,” Bucky repeated. “What’s special about yarn?”

“What made you remember it?” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged. “Nothing did. I’ve always remembered that.”

Steve tilted his head, looking down at Bucky, and found he couldn’t believe it.

“You always remembered it?”

“Yeah. Yarn, fucking yarn, what’s special about yarn?”

Steve couldn’t believe that he had always remembered rolling yarn but hadn’t remembered him.

“Your ma sewed and crocheted for a living,” he said quietly, tone level. “She used to have us sit and roll yarn for her after supper.”

Bucky said nothing to that. Steve couldn’t believe that somehow rolling balls of yarn for his mother had remained in his mind when his name hadn’t. When his own name hadn’t, when his home and the fact that food was necessary, but something about his fucking mother had stuck in his mind.

Steve had been bitter towards Winifred Barnes from the second Bucky told him why he never came home onward. She had died after he woke up in the future, at a hundred and eleven, and he had received an invitation to her funeral. He had burned it.

Bucky twisted Steve’s hair around his finger like he would roll yarn.

“I can remember that,” Bucky whispered. “Pretty in the firelight.”
“What was?” Steve asked, probably a little sharp.

“You,” Bucky said, and Steve deflated. Bucky kissed his shoulder almost absently. “Made your hair shine, like gold.”

Steve fell silent.

“Pretty eyes, firelight made ‘em look purple. You fell asleep on me once, I carried you upstairs.”

Steve remembered that. He’d been ten, nearly eleven. He had given up on rolling the yarn ‘cause his knuckles ached from rheumatic fever the summer before, and had fallen asleep to the sound of the radio and Mrs. Barnes talking with Mr. Barnes, Becca and Bucky arguing about something he didn’t remember. He’d fallen over sideways, slumped on Bucky’s shoulder, and had woken up in the morning in Bucky’s room. He had assumed that Bucky’s father had carried him up.

“Think I kissed you goodnight,” Bucky mumbled. Steve shut his eyes, leaning into his palm combing his hair. “When I got you to bed. Kissed your cheek.”

Bucky had only been twelve. He’d never known Bucky thought of him as less of a brother, more of a bondmate, that early on.

“My pretty,” Bucky mumbled. Steve exhaled lightly. “Always been my pretty, huh?”

“Yeah,” Steve said softly. Bucky kissed his shoulder again, with more intent, then the nape of his neck, where their bondmark ought to have been.

If remembering rolling yarn brought forth memories of him, then maybe Steve didn’t mind it so much. Besides, by now Bucky remembered more about Steve, about their time together, than he did about his mother, and the most of it was that she had lied and said he’d raped him.

He still hated her. He wouldn’t talk ill of the dead, but he’d think ill of her.

Bucky mouthed lazily at his scent gland and Steve let his head fall to the side to indulge him. He lifted his phone again, finding that JARVIS had replied that Unit 47 would be arriving in the elevator
with take-out in the next thirty to fifty minutes, then locked and dropped the phone to curl into Bucky’s touch.

“Robot’s bringing us take-out,” he said quietly.

“Take-out?”

“Take-out food. You place a digital order, a restaurant makes it, somebody delivers it, a robot’ll bring it to us but normally you have to get it from the delivery person yourself.”

Bucky nodded a little, his face resting in the gape of Steve’s neck and shoulder, his right arm curling around his waist to splay his palm over his stomach.

“Wha’ kinda food?” Bucky mumbled then.

Steve reached for his phone again, unlocking it and checking the chat with JARVIS.

“Thai,” he answered. “Like Chinese.”

“I don’t remember what Chinese food is,” Bucky said.

“You’ll find out,” Steve told him. “It’s different than the Chinese food we had growing up, anyway.”

Bucky nodded again. “Guessin’ most everything is.”

Steve nodded as well, putting aside his phone again. “Money’s worth less. Food’s usually better, but half of it’s full up on chemicals and artificial flavors. People eat more at McDonald’s than at home.”

“Dunno what that is neither,” Bucky muttered.

“Fast food restaurant,” Steve said. He tipped his head back, leaning back against the headboard, and
Bucky followed the curve of his neck, curling into his side and slipping a knee over his thighs. Steve locked his arms around Bucky’s back, his left hand clamped over his right wrist, the inside of his right wrist pressing tight enough to Bucky’s skin to stimulate the gland under his skin and let his scent seep into the oils of his skin and then into Bucky’s by transfer.

“Future’s weird,” he said quietly.

Bucky said nothing. He nosed gently at the cords of his neck. There was a sense of lethargy in him still, lethargy that was bleeding over to Steve. He didn’t feel like sleeping. He didn’t feel much like eating anymore, either. It felt like nothing.

It was familiar.

In the lethargy, time passed but neither of them noticed. In the lethargy, the familiarity of nothing prompted worry. In the lethargy, Steve couldn’t know if it was the drugs in Bucky’s system affecting them both or somehow he still had those long nights that made him sit in silence until the sun came up somewhere in the back of his head.

Was it Lady Macbeth’s witches in the shadows of back alleys brandishing wrinkled dollar bills, was it faceless agents saying Comply, soldier, or a mixture of everything bearing down on them because why would they be given peace? There was no peace in this place. There was nothing. There was only the nothing.

His phone dinged somewhere in the folds of the blankets. The robot with the food. Distantly, he was aware that right now the last thing he needed to do was lie there and sink further down into the nothing, but he wasn’t hungry. Bucky lay curled protectively into his side, breathing deeply like he was asleep, but he hadn’t slept in several days. His phone dinged again, as though JARVIS was trying to be helpful and remind him that he had a text, and Bucky shifted. He moved his knee off of Steve’s legs, then slipped his arm out from behind him and reached for the phone. In the lethargy, Steve only slipped further back into the pillows.

“Food’s waiting,” Bucky said. His voice was barely above a whisper, but it echoed in the permeating silence.

“I’ll go get it,” Steve answered. He didn’t move.

Bucky put the phone down and reached up to brush through his hair. Steve shut his eyes, feeling
heavy. The nothing had long fingers, long and gentle, like a mother’s embrace. It was enticing, promising an imitation of the peace and quiet they’d dreamed about in the trenches. It pressed down on his eyelids and cooed reassurances that sleep would soon come and he could just lie there, in the peace and quiet, until kingdom come and the book of Revelations played its course. Its long and gentle fingers reached into his chest and closed over his heart and squeezed, so its beat slowed. Over his lungs and squeezed, so his breathing stilled. Reached deep and cooled his blood. Little crystals of ice began to spread in the fingers of the nothing.

Bucky’s fingers pushed through his hair. Steve opened his eyes, then blinked and sat up. “I’ll go get it,” he repeated. “Stay here.”

He put on the boxers, then took sweatpants and a shirt from a drawer and stepped into them. He didn’t want to greet even a robot naked.

At the door, he glanced back at Bucky, sitting with a knee drawn up and an arm resting on it, looking at the bedspread with a furrow to his brow. Steve exhaled, then stepped back and picked up the gun sitting on the nightstand.

He kissed Bucky’s temple, and a bit of the furrow eased from his forehead at the sight of the gun in his hand. Steve hadn’t thought a gun could ever make anyone reassured, but he took it with him anyway.

He answered the elevator, and a squat robot held out two paper bags to him in its clamps. “Thank you,” he said, taking them, and the robot made a series of beeps before shuffling back into the elevator. The doors shut, Steve turned around and walked back to the bedroom. Bucky sat up, then smiled as Steve entered. He looked around, then figured Bucky could stand to move to the living room.

“Let’s go eat in there,” he said, inclining his head. “I don’t really want to spill on the bed.”

Bucky nodded, then stood. Steve carried the bags of food to the living room, setting them on the coffee table, then walked back to make sure Bucky was standing alright.

“You wanna get dressed?” he asked, picking up the second pair of boxers from the end of the bed.

Bucky tilted his head from side to side, the wrappings on his shoulder perhaps reminding him not to shrug it. Steve handed him the boxers anyway, then grabbed another pair of sweatpants for him.
Bucky glanced down his body, then half lifted a foot before putting it back down. Steve moved to him without being asked, taking the boxers and kneeling down to help him dress.

Bucky hesitated, then put a hand on his shoulder and lifted his foot. Steve guided him into each leg of the boxers, pulled them up and reached for the sweatpants to repeat the process. He straightened up, then wrapped an arm around his waist to hold him steady. Bucky’s expression was tight, his jaw clenched and forehead creased, but tucked his arm around Steve’s back and let him help him walk. They moved slowly, three-legged and shaky, into the living room where Steve held onto his arm until he could drop onto the end of the sofa.

“Let’s watch a movie,” Steve said. Something to distract them from the nothing.

Bucky just nodded. Steve grabbed remotes, switched on the TV and loaded JARVIS’s movie database, and started unpacking the food while it loaded. He moved slowly. Sluggishly. He felt a little stiff and sore from sleep still, or it could just be nothing’s long fingers curling into the strands of his muscles.

To make everything better, Bucky sat behind him and blinked, lethargic from the drugs still. Which, according to the paper Dr. Cho had given him, he would have to take again in a few hours time. There was a pill bottle on the kitchen counter with his name on it.

Steve picked the first Disney movie that wasn’t Bambi and let it play.

Only, Meet the Robinsons featured an orphan, a kid who lost his mother, and the nothing’s claws could reach everything, it seemed. Bucky was moving more on his own, with less lethargy, but Steve was feeling the nothing’s maw open wider.

“I’m gonna spend some time in the gym,” he announced.

Bucky blinked a couple of times at him.

“That one, right down there,” Steve added, pointing, as if that would make Bucky feel better about him being out of his sight. “Call me if you need me, okay?”

When he stood up, Bucky did, too.
“No, Buck, stay here,” Steve tried to say, “keep watching movies –”

“No, no, ‘s not safe,” Bucky cut him off in a mumble. “Can’t see you. Not safe.”

“It is safe, Buck, I’ll just be down the hall –”

Bucky latched onto his wrist and his left shoulder jerked.

“Hey,” Steve said, stepping closer just so he’d quit freaking out, “careful, don’t strain your shoulder.”

Bucky blinked, then looked down at it. “Wha’s wrong with it?” he muttered.

At that, Steve found himself wishing he could hold onto the nothing. Because at that, everything crashed back into him and he couldn’t breathe with the rush of it all.

“Helen replaced your clavicle this morning,” Steve reminded him. He was blinking rapidly now, too, trying to control his breathing and get the new emotions under his grip. “Remember?”

Bucky slowly shook his head.

“You got your clavicle replaced,” he said again. “So you gotta keep your shoulder still while it heals.”

Bucky blinked slowly. Steve needed to move. He felt an old itch under his skin, he’d been still too long and the jerk of emotion back into him hurt like shit and he couldn’t stay still any longer.

“You just sit here,” he tried to insist, “relax, okay?”

“Gotta keep you safe,” Bucky mumbled.
“Bucky,” Steve sighed.

Bucky pushed his only arm around Steve’s waist, pressing his face into the nap of his neck and scent-marking him lightly. Steve started to sink into his embrace, then mentally shook himself.

“You need to rest.”

“Need to keep you safe.”

Steve dropped his head back to look up and dry up his tear ducts and Bucky just kissed his throat. He needed to move, he needed to exhaust himself so he could feel human. He needed to exhaust himself so his head would just shut up.

“Fine,” he said. “Fine. I’ll bring your chair into the gym, you can watch me work out and rest there, okay?”

Bucky nuzzled his neck, not letting go. Steve mouthed a curse.

“Bucky,” he tried to say gently, “can you let go for a –”

Bucky jerked back. Steve hissed the curse aloud and grabbed his hand.

“Careful!” he snapped. “Move slow, okay, you’re gonna hurt your shoulder!”

Bucky swallowed, body stiff.

“Just for a second,” Steve sighed, finishing the sentence. “I only needed you to let go for a second. So I can move your chair into the gym. Can you wait here for a minute? I’ll be back, I swear.”

“Not safe,” Bucky only mumbled.
“Will you sit down for me?” Steve said finally, reluctantly. Manipulating him into doing something for his own good under the guise of pleasing Steve. He hated this, but Bucky didn’t seem to notice. “I’d like you to sit down. Gentle.”

Bucky swallowed, then lowered himself onto the sofa. Steve swept a hand through his hair. “Relax for me,” he asked again, and some of the tension that would put stress on his new clavicle fled from Bucky’s shoulders. “I’ll be right back. Just wait here for me.”

Bucky nodded jerkily. Steve let go, then moved away. He picked up the armchair, feeling the strain of muscles that hadn’t been used in too long, then carried it down the hall and put it in the gym. Someplace that Bucky would be able to see the whole room and the door at the same time. He walked back out, grabbed something for Bucky to put his feet up on and a pillow, put them by the chair and returned to the living room.

Bucky half lifted his hand, then snatched it back close to his body. Steve’s chest contracted painfully and he dropped onto the sofa next to him.

“You can touch me again,” he prompted. Bucky jerked his arm around his waist, burying his face in his neck. Steve had to look up again, blinking, then put an arm around his waist and squeezed. “Let’s go down the hall. You can sit in the corner and rest while I exercise, okay?”

Bucky shrugged.

“Don’t move your shoulder,” Steve reminded him tiredly.

Bucky went still. Steve squeezed his waist, then pulled him to his feet. A gentle tug at his waist and Bucky was following him down the hall. Steve guided him into the gym, into the chair and put the pillow behind his back, then the stool in front of the chair and lifted his feet. Bucky’s hand closed on his wrist again as he straightened up.

“Wait here,” Steve said. Bucky didn’t let go. Steve blew out his breath as he tried to figure out a way to make Bucky let go without making him think he wasn’t allowed to touch him again. Bucky stared at nothing, his hand gripping his wrist. “Will you wait here, please? So I can use the gym?”

Bucky nodded. But he didn’t release his wrist.
“I’ll need you to let my wrist go,” Steve said, as gently as he could.

Bucky dropped it immediately.

“That doesn’t mean that you can’t touch me,” Steve said, but Bucky held himself stiff. “You need to relax, Buck.”

“Meaning unclear,” Bucky said raspily.

Steve knelt down in front of him. “Relax your muscles. Stop tensing.”

Bucky blinked.

“Meaning unclear.”

“Do you remember how?” Steve asked, disbelieving.

“Reasoning.”

Now Steve blinked. “Reasoning?”

“Behind command, stop tensing. Benefit?”

Steve dropped his head onto Bucky’s knee, feeling a lot like he was about to explode or he’d been run over or both.

“That wasn’t a command,” he whispered. “It’s because you’ll hurt your new clavicle if you’re tense.”

He prayed that Bucky would lift his hand and settle it into his hair, that he’d seek out some method of comfort. He didn’t. Steve lifted his head, lifted his hands and took Bucky’s in both of them and
squeezed lightly.


Bucky’s eyes were lifeless and distant. Most of all, they weren’t looking at him. Steve squeezed his hands again.

“You’re with your Omega,” he tried again. “I’m yours, remember? You’re my Alpha, I’m your Omega. Bucky…”

Bucky didn’t even blink anymore.

“Please,” Steve whispered. “Do you remember?”

“Meaning unclear,” Bucky answered.

Steve was the only one blinking, and he was blinking away tears. He let go of Bucky’s hand with one of his and reached up to rub his wrist over Bucky’s cheek, hoping that by scenting him, he could trigger some part of Bucky’s brain into recognizing him.

Bucky half turned his head, then jerked it back to stare at the wall.

“Bucky, c’mon,” Steve murmured, marking him again with his wrist again. “I’m your Omega. Please?”

“Meaning unclear,” Bucky said.

Steve pulled his hand back to swipe the tears off his face, then pushed his wrist up to Bucky’s mouth, pressing it to his lips. Bucky did nothing.

“Suck on it,” Steve said in a dead and tired tone.
Bucky’s lips parted and he started to suck on his wrist. Steve, as fucked up as he was feeling, wasn’t very affected by it, either comforted or aroused, but it put his scent on Bucky’s tongue. As fucked up as he was feeling, it was made worse by how easily Bucky obeyed the command suck on it. Steve didn’t want to think about that.

Bucky blinked. His suckling slowed, then stopped, then resumed. He blinked again. Steve squeezed his hand.

“Bucky?” he tried. He tried not to feel too hopeful.

Bucky blinked a third time. He dropped his gaze from whatever he’d been staring at, to Steve’s wrist by his face, then stopped sucking entirely to kiss the inside of his wrist. Steve let all the air out of his lungs. He brushed at his hair, then dropped his hand onto Bucky’s right shoulder.

“Hey,” he whispered. “You back?”

Bucky looked at him and blinked. “Back?”

Steve tried to smile. Bucky let go of his hand and reached up to cup his chin, thumbing at his mouth and the false smile on it.

“Don’t fake,” he said quietly.

Steve had already stopped faking it. “You spaced out for a minute there.”

Bucky frowned at him, thumb caressing his lower lip. “Sorry,” he said, sounding genuine.

“Not your fault,” Steve said. It was probably his, and he felt even worse that he still had the itch to get up and move. He felt too small for his body and his head felt too loud and everything was too close on him. “Don’t be sorry for things that ain’t your fault,” he reminded Bucky.

Bucky shrugged, and he shrugged only his right shoulder. Steve reached up and brushed at his hair
“You okay if I go work out?”

Bucky shrugged his right shoulder. “In here?”

Steve nodded. Bucky looked around, then swallowed, clenching his jaw.

“Gun?” Bucky asked.

Steve pulled it from his waistband. He held it out to Bucky, who took it and wrapped his fingers around the handle. His index rested just outside the trigger hold, then flicked the safety off.

Steve didn’t have the heart to tell him that wasn’t a good idea. He got up, leaned in and kissed his forehead, then turned away. He went to the treadmill, in bare feet, but he’d forgotten to put on socks and shoes and he didn’t want to leave Bucky’s sight again. He glanced over at Bucky, just to see him sitting there, then powered on the machine and started adjusting settings.

He knew he should start slow. But he set the incline to its max and just started the tread, increasing the speed immediately. He kept his finger on the button to up the speed until it quit going up and he was sprinting, the soles of his feet burning as they hit the rubber, already muscles starting to strain and protest. Steve didn’t look at Bucky.

He knew he should have warmed up. But he also knew that if he didn’t, he’d get sore all over and everything would hurt for at least a few hours. If he was sore, then he wouldn’t be feeling nothing. If he was sore, he couldn’t feel anything else. He couldn’t think about anything else.

It only took twenty minutes for the burn to spread from the soles of his feet upward. It only took the first twenty minutes for his muscles to start cramping and aching and jerking, but Steve kept at the punishing incline and speed for two hours, maybe three. And he only stopped because the machine was smarter than most he’d used and had slowly dropped incline without him noticing and then the speed before flashing a warning that he needed to take a break. Then it stopped, and he couldn’t get it to turn back on. So he switched to a rowing machine. Those didn’t have computers, at least, he thought, until half an hour had gone by and the machine he was using locked up on him, too.

“You okay if I go work out?”

“Stevie?”

Steve jerked his head up. Bucky, in the corner, was tilting his head with concern.

“I’m fine,” he lied, “just – just wait there. I’ll be done soon.”

Bucky had trouble comprehending time. Steve could be done soon and in a few hours, when his body started locking up on him, too.

“Don’t lie,” Bucky said, however.

Steve swept his tongue over his teeth, slumping in the seat of the rowing machine and not looking at Bucky. He barely felt the shame of being caught.

“What’s wrong? What are you even doing?”

“Nothing,” Steve said. Lying again. “Don’t worry about me, Buck, just rest, okay? For me?”

Bucky fell silent. Steve couldn’t look at him. He got up from the rowing machine and moved to the racks of dumbbells and barbells, the weights that had no electronic processes of any kind and couldn’t force him to stop when he should. He started in a middle range, then moved on to heavier barbells sooner than he really should. He was shaking with the strain, he was already exhausted, but it wasn’t enough.

“Hey!”

The barbell lifted off his shoulders suddenly and Steve jerked, startled, finding Bucky putting it down.

“You’re supposed to be resting, Buck, what –”
“I called your name ten times,” Bucky snapped. “What the hell are you doing?”

Steve faltered. His muscles were still trembling from strain, even just holding himself upright hurt. “I’m – I’m working out –” he started, then changed tactics, trying to deflect, “Bucky, you need to be resting, you really shouldn’t be –”

“Cho said that I’d be fine to move around a little in a few hours,” Bucky interrupted. “What the hell are you doing, Steve? You’re killing yourself out here. You think I can’t tell that?”

“I’m not –”

Bucky glared at him. “Don’t lie to me,” he said, sharp, and Steve felt the distant urge to obey. For a second, he barely reacted. Bucky had only used a command on him once before and it took him a second to recognize it.

“Bucky,” Steve started, carefully, hesitantly, stalling for time, “do you know you just used an Alpha tone on me?”

“Don’t change the subject,” Bucky answered.

“Do you?” Steve insisted.

Bucky’s glare flickered, he glanced down and away, then shrugged his right shoulder only and shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t even know what that means, I just – You’re overdoing it, you’re hurting yourself.”

“I can handle it,” Steve said, and Bucky’s glare returned in greater power.

“Don’t give me that shit,” he said, but it wasn’t with the command that don’t lie to me had behind it. “You ain’t Superman, you ain’t Jesus, don’t try to pull that shit with me. What the hell are you really doing?”

Steve tried to find words and couldn’t look at him. He made half-formed sounds, looking around helplessly, and Bucky pressed a palm to his cheek. Steve still didn’t look at him and Bucky gripped
his jaw, turning his face toward him. Steve fixed his gaze on the floor.

“Stevie,” Bucky said softly, sweetly, and Steve avoided his gaze, feeling shame. “Sweetheart. What’re you doing?”

Steve shrugged. He knew what he was doing and voicing it would only make it real.

“What’s goin’ on in your head, doll?” Bucky murmured. "You tryin’ to escape somethin’, is that it?”

“‘M just working out,” Steve muttered. “Haven’t for a while. Need to get back into the habit.”

“What’d I say? Don’t pull that on me, I ain’t buying it.”

Steve blew out his breath and Bucky brushed the pad of his thumb over his cheek, caressing. His muscles were trembling just at the strain of holding up his limbs, but he couldn’t put his weight on Bucky anymore. Bucky had to hold himself up and it wasn’t fair to him to make him hold both their weights.

“What’s going on, sweetheart?”

Steve opened his mouth to lie.

“If I’m sore, I can’t think.”

With the command of don’t lie still in his head, the truth came out instead.

Bucky was quiet a minute, then his hand dropped to his shoulder and snaked around his neck, drawing him in. Steve, however, held up his own weight.

“Let me help,” Bucky said.
“I’ll be okay,” Steve said, because that was half of a truth and could slip past the command. “Don’t worry about me, Buck. You need to rest.”

“Steve, c’mon, you know that ain’t gonna work, I’m always gonna worry about you –”

“You need to rest,” Steve insisted. “Seriously, you got more you gotta be worryin’ about than me –”

“Tough shit,” Bucky interrupted him again. “C’mon, let me take care of you.”

Steve blew out his breath, sharp, and tired, and pulled back. “Maybe you should go lie down,” he said, looking at his sore feet. His heels still burned from the rubber of the treadmill. “You need to take some pain meds, anyway.”

“I’m not hurting,” Bucky said, holding on to his shoulder. Steve didn’t want to tell him to let go. “Honest, it doesn’t hurt.”

“Still,” Steve said, trying to find ways of getting him to let go without scaring him, “you’re probably just tolerant of it. I know I got used to pain after a while –”

At the flash of indignation in Bucky’s eyes, Steve huffed and looked up at the ceiling. “Bucky, just go lay down, or at least sit down, for me, please –”

“Why are you arguing with me?” Bucky demanded, interrupting again, and Steve clenched his jaw, still avoiding his gaze. “I been resting all day, you been in here for four or five hours, Steve, it’s past midnight!”

“I’m not arguing with you,” Steve said through gritted teeth, “I just don’t need you to worry about me, okay, just – Relax, okay, just, let me deal with my shit my way and –”

“I’m gonna worry about you anyway!”

“Will you quit interrupting?” Steve snapped.
Bucky shut his mouth. He looked a little shameful, but he didn’t back off any. “I’m gonna worry about you anyway,” he repeated sharply. “Let me help, at least.”

“You got enough to worry about,” Steve insisted. “I’m fine, I swear, I’m coping and I can handle myself, okay? You got enough to deal with.”

“But you don’t have to,” Bucky retorted. “Why won’t you just let me help?”

“You don’t have to,” Steve tried to stress.

“Fuck yes, I have to!” Bucky countered, Steve looked away again and Bucky grasped him by the chin, trying to pull him back in. “I’m your Alpha, ‘course I gotta take care of you!”

“Let go,” Steve said tiredly.

Bucky did not let go. Steve blinked, waiting for him to drop his chin and jerk back, but he didn’t.

“Let go,” Steve repeated. Bucky dropped his chin, only to grab him by the shoulder and try to pull him closer. Steve resisted, pulling back, but it was weak with his exhausted body. “Bucky, I swear, I’m fine, you don’t need to –”

“Will you stop fighting me?” Bucky snarled.

“I –”

Steve couldn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t know how to respond to that.

“Stop fighting me,” Bucky said again, gentler this time. Begging. “Please. Let me help. Let me take care of you.”

“You don’t gotta take care of me all the time,” Steve muttered. There was little heat to it.
Bucky clenched his jaw, then cupped his cheek and moved closer himself, until there was barely an inch between them and Steve could feel the heat of his body sinking into his tired muscles.

“Yeah, I do,” he snapped angrily and Steve deflated in shame. Bucky glared at him. “I have to do it,” he said, "'cause you ain’t doin’ it yourself.”

Steve had no response to that either, because, frankly, he was right.

“C’mon, Stevie,” Bucky murmured. He swept his thumb over the crest of his cheek. “Stop fighting me, okay?”

“Buck,” Steve sighed.

“Please?”

Steve exhaled deeply. “Okay,” he muttered. Bucky pressed their lips together for a second, then Steve pulled back some. “But on one condition, okay?”

“What?” Bucky asked.

“You have to sleep,” Steve said, and his voice started wavering, rising in volume then cracking then falling low. “Every night, or at least every day. For a full eight hours, Bucky, and every day. You don’t gotta sleep with me but you have to sleep somewhere, sometime, okay?”

“Okay,” Bucky said, quickly, cutting into the last bit of his sentence, “okay, we’ll sleep, okay?”

Steve finally crumpled. Bucky caught him, with only one arm, held tight to him and cupped the back of his neck to cradle him to his body. Steve felt the full weight of exhaustion, long before he would have finally given in normally, and Bucky held on tight. He was murmuring something quiet, but Steve hardly heard. He was still trembling.

“C’mon, baby, let’s go get a bath, okay? Get some food and water, then a bath and then we’ll sleep, okay?”
His feet moved when Bucky pulled on him. Steve followed, like he had guided Bucky into the room, Bucky guided him out. Bucky guided him out, to the living room and onto the sofa. Steve dropped onto it, wanting to just crash and burn out there, but then Bucky was pulling on his shoulder to make him sit up against the arm of the couch. Then he was holding a glass of water to his lips.

“Drink for me, doll, drink some water, sweetheart.”

Steve tried to take the glass with trembling and boneless fingers, but Bucky held onto it. “I got it,” he said, “just drink, okay?”

He tried to take it anyway.

“Hey, quit fighting, remember?” Bucky prompted him. “Let me.”

Steve dropped his hand. It fell with a thud, limp with exhaustion. He part ed his lips and Bucky tipped the glass, pouring the water into his mouth. He swallowed gulps, having not realized how thirsty he was, until the glass was empty. Bucky only held another glass to his lips.

“Drink a little more, baby. You sweated a lot in there, you’re dehydrated.”

Steve drank, somewhere questioning how Bucky remembered what dehydration was if he didn’t know he had to drink water at all a few days ago.

He drained the glass again, and Bucky held a third to his lips.

“One more,” he said. “Just one more, then some food.”

“Fine,” Steve muttered. He let Bucky press the glass to his lips and gulped it down.

Finally, Bucky stopped pressing glasses of water to his lips. Instead, he pressed something soft but solid to his mouth.
“Chicken,” Bucky said. “Eat a bit for me, doll.”

Steve exhaled but ate it, hardly registering the flavor. Bucky was feeding him by hand, and Steve had already agreed to quit fighting or he would have tried to say he could eat like a normal person. Bucky pressed more chicken, chunks of tofu, noodles and vegetables to his lips, and Steve ate it, chewing and swallowing with the one group of muscles in his body that wasn’t pushed past its limit. Bucky’s fingers would touch his lips and Steve found himself licking the sauce off his fingertips.

“There you go,” Bucky murmured. He kissed the side of his face. “You’re doin’ real good for me, doll. A little more.”

Steve was slumped against the arm of the couch, bonelessly exhausted, chewing and swallowing on Bucky’s request as he hand-fed him. His brain was starting to shut off, and he assumed it was the exhaustion.

“See, you’re purring, babydoll,” Bucky said. “Just a little more, then we’re gonna take a bath.”

Steve wasn’t purring, or he wasn’t doing it on purpose. He was going mindless, just trusting Bucky’s gentle instructions and praise.

“That’s it,” Bucky said finally. “That’s enough for now.”

Steve licked his fingers clean, however. Bucky kissed his temple again.

“I need you to get up, okay?”

He wrinkled his nose, but forced his consciousness to return to his body. Steve sat up, his core and shoulders and back and arms and legs and everything protesting in pain. He was sore all over, but he wasn’t as sore as he would have been if nothing had stopped him.

Bucky wrapped an arm around his waist as he stood up. He guided him again, through the bedroom and into the bathroom.

“Sit on the toilet, baby.”
Steve sat on the toilet lid, dropping onto it with a clunk of the porcelain, then yawned. Bucky kissed the top of his head, then started doing something off to the side. Steve leaned back on the toilet, resting his head on the rack above it, shut his eyes and tried not to fall asleep. If he focused on the ache of his body, it wasn’t so difficult.

“Alright, c’mere, baby, up you get.”

Bucky’s hand pulled under his arms. Steve forced himself to his feet, staggering a little, only for Bucky to take his weight and pull him to the right.

“I’m gonna take your clothes off, okay?”

“Sure,” Steve murmured. He felt the hem of his shirt lift, raised his arms and let Bucky tug it over his head, then the drawstring of his sweats, the waistband of his boxers. Bucky pulled him a little further in, stepping out of his clothes.

“Lift your foot, a little higher, you’re gettin’ in the bath, doll.”

His foot, which had lifted on Bucky’s request, sank into warm water. It was then that he registered the white noise of water running, having missed it sitting on the toilet lid.

“Now the other one, hold on to me, okay?”

Steve’s fingers closed on the back of Bucky’s shirt, his leg sinking in water up to his knee, and the other foot raised to step into the bath.

“Sit down, sweetheart. Hold on to me, I got you.”

His eyes were still shut. Steve forced them open to look where he was sitting, then grabbed on to the edge of the tub to put his weight on it and not Bucky.

“Hold on to me, baby, I said hold on to me.”
“I got it.” Steve muttered.

“Not what I told you to do. You gotta let me, okay?”

“I got it,” Steve tried to say again. Bucky’s fingers dug into his back.

“Thought we said you’d quit fighting,” Bucky said. Steve ducked his gaze.

“’M not fighting,” he grumbled. He leaned on the edge of the bathtub, dropping into the water and causing it to splash over the sides.

“Baby, you gotta listen to me, alright? You gotta just do what I tell you, quit tryna do it yourself.”

Steve sank into the hot water, however, stubbornly dunking his ears under so he couldn’t listen to Bucky. He was capable of getting in a bathtub without help. He could take care of himself.

“Bullshit,” Bucky said, and not even the water could keep his voice from reaching his ears. Apparently, he’d said that aloud. “You been doin’ a piss poor job if it so far, remember? Jumpin’ out airplanes with no parachutes, throwin’ yourself into work twenty-four seven, not taking the right caution to even exercise. I call bullshit.”

“Did fine,” Steve mumbled defensively.

“Yeah, sure, ‘cause workin’ yourself to death just so you can quit thinking for a while is fine. You wanna quit thinkin’, quit thinkin’. Just listen to me, okay?”

Steve shut his eyes, sinking into the water up to his temples. The tub was long and wide enough that he could stretch out his toes and let his arms float at his sides comfortably.

“Tilt your head back, keep your nose above the water.”
Bucky’s hand pressed to his forehead. Steve tilted his head back, lifting his chin, and Bucky pushed
his bangs back so the water could soak into the roots of his hair.

“There you go, good, doll, keep your nose up, alright?”

Steve nodded faintly. Bucky worked his fingers through his hair, into the water, his nails scraping
against his scalp. It had been only been a day since Bucky had washed it last, since it had last been
washed at all, but the sensation was calming. Steve was tempted by sleep, and jerked his
consciousness higher in his head to keep from slipping.

“Relax,” Bucky murmured. He barely heard it through the water. “Let go, okay?”

“M letting go,” Steve answered absently.

“I know what you need, doll, I remember doing this.”

Steve lifted his face from the water, until the surface of it cupped his hair and jaw and he could open
his eyes.

“Nah, you relax,” Bucky said, sweeping a hand over his forehead. “Don’t keep your eyes open,
sweetheart.”

“What’d’you mean?” Steve whispered anyway. He kept looking at Bucky. His vision slid in and out
of focus in his weariness.

“Takin’ care of you,” Bucky said. He swept his fingers over his forehead again. “I remember doin’ it
now. And I remember what headspace it got you in. You let go, alright? I’m here to catch you.”

Steve shook his head, shutting his eyes, because even he could barely remember what Bucky was
talking about. The chances they’d had to stop or even slow down when they were adults were so
rare that whatever headspace Bucky wanted him to let go into had probably only come once or
twice, and he didn’t know what it was let alone how to get there.

“You ain’t gon’ fall asleep,” Bucky told him. “That feelin’ you got, it ain’t sleepiness, baby. Let go. I
“Let go of what?” Steve muttered hopelessly. There was stress rising in him yet again, despite the gentle touches and the warmth around his body, he hurt just to hold his face out of the water and he didn’t know what Bucky was trying to get him to do.

“Thinking, control, somethin’, just stop trying so hard. Just listen to me, I’ll tell you what to do if you need to do somethin’. You don’t gotta think no more, baby.”

Steve shook his head again. He fought to keep his head straight, not trusting Bucky’s unreliable memory to know that if he surrendered all control, it wouldn’t just result in Bucky having to haul him out of the water to keep him from drowning. He heard Bucky sigh.

“Sit up a little, doll. Put your back on the tub.”

Steve stretched out his toes, until he could give his body a push and float backwards. His core screamed to lift his head and shoulders from the water, but he put his back to the edge of the tub.

“I’m gonna wash your hair.”

Steve nodded. His head lolled against the rim of the bathtub. He lifted his arms from the water, his muscles aching and shaking, to drop them on the edges of the tub and secure his body from slipping.

Shampoo poured into his hair. Bucky’s hand started to lather it up.

“Put your hands back in the water,” Bucky said.

“They’re fine,” Steve mumbled.

“Stevie, if you ain’t gonna listen, this ain’t gonna work. Put your hands in the water.”

Steve exhaled heavily, then, leaving his elbows on the tub edge, dropped his hands.
“Your whole arms, Steve.”

Steve grudgingly dropped his arms back into the water, causing a splash and the water to slosh up the sides of the tub.

“You gotta listen,” Bucky said, for maybe the fifth time and Steve was getting tired of it. “Why don’t you wanna listen?”

“’M not an infant,” Steve grunted out. Bucky’s hand kept working the soap through his hair, and his eyes were falling shut and the water’s heat was working its fingers into his sore muscles to push aside the pain and make room for its comfort.

“I know that,” Bucky told him. “I ain’t tryin’ treat you like one. You see a lil’ tub ’round here for me to stick you in in six inches of water so you couldn’t drown if you tried?”

Steve said nothing.


“What’re you trying to do?” Steve murmured exhaustedly.

“I’m tryin’ get you to where you wanna be. You wanna get out of your head, right?”

Steve opened his eyes, blinked at the distant ceiling.

“That’s why you work yourself to the bone, so you can’t feel nothin’ but tired, so you can just drop off to sleep and sleep with no dreams for days and days. You been there before, I got you there before, I wanna get you there again. So you can let go. So you don’t have to stand up when it hurts to hold up your head no more.”

Steve swallowed roughly, drew in a sharp breath. His lungs shook with it.
“Nothin’ to think about,” Bucky said quietly. His nails scratched at his scalp, massaging his skull down to the center cortexes of his brain. “Nothin’ to worry ‘bout. Just you an’ me.”

He was right. He worked his body until it shut down so his head would shut up and he felt like he fit in his skin. He hadn’t remembered, in his lonely, that Bucky could do the exact same thing, only lighter. Less pain, more comfort, less tired, more love.

It had been the marble bathroom, in that abandoned hotel in France. With hot water for the first time in months, with quiet for the first time in months, with a full night’s sleep for the first time in months. There had been candles and not gas lamps, real soap not from rations, Steve had lain down in the water turned silver by the swirls of black in the white stone, and rested between Bucky’s knees so he could slowly wash out his hair. He had lain there, enveloped and feeling safe for the first time in months, until he’d been someplace that felt like dreaming, it was so deep inside his head he wasn’t even there anymore. He was above it. It had been so long ago, and only lasted for the time they lay in the water, he’d forgotten.


Steve let his body go boneless in the water. Bucky was asking him to trust him, offering the place far out of his head without all the pain and exhaustion he normally to go through to get there, and Steve wanted to trust him, he wanted to go there. He wanted to let go.


There was something in him slowly cracking. Like an old building left to time and God’s hands, there were morning glories putting roots in the stone of his limbs. He drew in another shuddering breath, then another. Then he was sobbing and turning in the water to reach for him, and Bucky was right there, drawing him in despite the soap in his hair, nails digging into his back, blood caked cuticles and all. He half lifted out of the water to cling to him. There were morning glories putting roots in the stone of his whole self, cracking the shell around his head so he could let go and sink, but it hurt. He felt like he was sinking to the floor of a tent somewhere in Italy with ten years absence forcing him to crumple, and Bucky was there to catch him. He felt like his jagged edges were locking into Bucky’s broken parts and they were blurring together to make one whole mosaic; no, they were burning, fusing together, being soldered into one whole being instead of two busted toy soldiers.

He felt like Jesus was cradling him, up out of the water so Bucky could hold his weight with only one arm.
“I got you, sweetheart,” Bucky was whispering, “I’m here, I’m gonna take care’a you. You’re my babydoll, my sweetheart, always gonna be mine, always gonna be here to give you what you need. I got you.”

Steve shuddered, sobbed, trembled with exhaustion and the weight of his own body. Bucky’s fingers dug into his back. Steve sucked in one more breath, then went limp in his grip.

Bucky slowly lowered him back into the water. Steve let his eyes fall shut and his head loll back, and the tub was wide enough that he could float. Bucky began rinsing the soap from his hair, then there was a rag dragging over his skin, washing away sweat. Bucky even scraped under his nails. Steve floated in the water, but he was floating in his head, too. He let go.

“Put your arms around my neck.”

Steve lifted his arms and the heat from the water went with them. He locked them around Bucky’s neck, eyes still shut.

“Put your feet flat on the tub floor.”

He put his feet flat.

“Sit up. There you go, sweetheart, there you go. Push up, stand up, now. Lean on me.”

His body was moving but he was barely aware of it.

“Lift your left leg, up high, bring your knee up, step out. Lean on me, now, okay? Right foot now. There you go.”

A towel dragged over his skin, his hair. Steve left his arms around Bucky’s neck, sagging against his right side.

“Drop your left arm, doll. We’re gonna walk now. I’m sorry, I can’t carry you. Can you walk?”
Steve nodded, his feet already beginning to move with Bucky’s slow stride.

“Here you go, just a little further, here’s the bed. Lie down.”

Steve sank into the mattress, feeling cool sheets under his body. His skin was still hot from the water and his eyes were still shut.

“Lie here a minute. I’m gonna go get some water, I’ll be right back. Can you count to 60 for me? Count to 60 and I’ll be back before you get to 60.”


He was sinking slowly into the mattress, the coolness of it refreshing after the heat of the bath. He felt a hand trail down his arm and leave.

“Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen…”

Distantly, he heard footsteps, the tap running.

“Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six…”

He barely felt anything now, his lips formed forty, forty-one, forty-two and on without his head having to provide what came next.

“Fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five…”


“There you go,” Bucky whispered, kissing his forehead.

Steve shifted, his limbs heavy and numb, wanting more contact. A weight settled over his hips, a
shadow passed over his face. Lips pressed to his nose, his cheek, his jaw and the tip of his chin. His head sank back, his throat baring itself. Lips pressed to the scent gland in his neck, and a soft sigh passed his lips.

“There’s my angel,” Bucky murmured. He kissed his pulse. “I’m gonna put some pillows behind your back and you’re gonna drink some more water for me. Not a lot, just a few gulps.”

An arm pushed under his waist and lifted, then his weight was falling on something soft and cool glass was pressing to his lips. Steve opened his mouth and accepted the water. It was only a few mouthfuls, then Bucky was pulling it away.

“Hold on to me,” Bucky said, and Steve put his heavy arms around his waist. He rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder, linking his wrists, then Bucky’s hand pressed to the small of his back. “Lean back.”

Steve let go, then sank back into the mattress. Bucky followed, his shadow covering his face, then kissed his lips. Steve parted them, and Bucky’s tongue slipped into his mouth. He hummed, content, as Bucky licked into his mouth, like he was drinking up the traces of water on Steve’s tongue and cheeks.

Then he was lifting up, a hand brushing at his hair.

“I’m gonna do a check, okay? Count to sixty again and I’ll be back.”

Steve mouthed the word one, as air hardly passed his lips. Bucky’s weight lifted off his body.

At fifty-nine, Bucky kissed his forehead.

“Start again,” he said.

“One,” Steve exhaled. He mouthed two on his inhale. Bucky brushed his wrist over his forehead and his presence retreated.

At forty-seven, Bucky returned again. He kissed his cheek, then settled his weight on either side of
his hips, then lay down beside him. His arm pushed under his body and Steve turned into him, tucking his head under Bucky’s chin.

“There,” Bucky whispered, “there, see? You’re there. Ain’t all up in your head no more.”

Steve was breathing deep. His brain was shut off but for vague consciousness.

“There’s my baby,” Bucky said, kissing the top of his head. “There’s my angel. We’re gonna sleep now, sleep ’til you wake up on your own. No windows in here, sun can’t wake you up. No alarm, you’re just gonna sleep ’til you wake up. I’m gonna sleep too, right? Like you asked me to.”

Steve could only exhale deeper. He pressed his lips to Bucky’s throat, settling into the bed and his one-armed grip.

“Love you so much, babydoll. You’re mine, always gonna be mine. My baby, my sweetheart, my angel.”

It was so much nicer here without pain, when he felt safe instead of exhausted.

“I love you, Stevie, always. ’Til death do us part, right?”

“’Til the end of the line,” Steve whispered. His brain didn’t need to put those words on his tongue. His heart did it for him.

Chapter End Notes

see, the fluff is necessary. feel free to yell at me in the comments, i take great joy in hearing complaints of how i'm being mean to steve. and while you may feel the desire to hug him, pls note that he probably would prefer a sympathetic smile and either way bucky will be glaring at you the entire time. no tocar nada. go, i release you to read the fluff. i'll see you next week! with more sad! (i apologize, but only bc the winter soldier is holding a gun to my head.(
Chapter Summary

Bucky’s fingers and the heel of his palm fit in the cut of his traps, squeezed them together, but what good would that do when Steve was slowly being pushed up the cracks between Atlas’s fingers?

Chapter Notes

hello hello, i have more feels for you. but not only that, guess what? i now have betas! they're collectively known as lexi². you can thank irl_americachavez aka lexi #1 for helping me with this chapter, she fixed a few word choices where my brain thought "ooh this word is pretty" and didn't bother checking definitions. i'll also have the help of lexi #2 with grammar and spelling soon so i'll be able to say goodbye to the shitty bot grammerly which so far has done nothing but yell at me about my comma usage. everybody thank the lexi squad for saving me from grammarly, personally i'm on bended knee praising the lord for their presences in my life. so pls enjoy this beta'd chapter, you can find the playlist here. i hope you guys enjoy!
edit: you can find the cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes
When we’re talking about “subspace,” we’re talking about the specific psychological state of mind that the submissive partner (or “sub”) enters into during a scene with a dominant partner. To enter this subspace, the sub must be completely comfortable with the dominant partner, as they completely
give up control to the “top” or “Dom/Domme” partner.

“In many ways, getting into a subspace follows many of the same steps of practicing basic mindfulness, and is not nearly as strange as it may sound. Like with mindfulness, you have to be 100 percent present with your partner and in the moment. Many performers, musicians, and athletes use similar techniques to “get in the zone,” where nothing exists except the experience itself.

“Ever had a book you couldn’t put down or a TV series you just had to finish, even if it meant an hours-long episode marathon? Subspace is the same. It’s that feeling of utter presence, when all of your senses are heightened and your mind and emotions are totally wrapped up in the suspense of the moment. For the sub, entering subspace is an experience that melts away all their worries and fears. They don’t have to think about anything or make any tough decisions.

“All they need to do is obey and go with the flow…”

*


He woke slowly, to a warm and secure embrace. He woke a little more, and he wasn’t quite as enveloped as he wanted to be. There was only one arm wrapped around his waist.

“You wakin’ up, sweetheart?”

He shook his head, ducking his nose closer into the line of a throat. Inhaling filled his head with the smell of home. Exhaling cleared his brain.

A second shoulder pressed into his chest, like there was an incorporeal left arm wrapped around him and he couldn’t feel it. Lips pressed to his hair. He hummed lightly, curling further into the warm body covering him.

“You sleep good? Been out a while.”

He sighed, accepting the fact that he wasn’t going to fall asleep again. Steve opened his eyes, yawned and smacked his lips, feeling his dry mouth. He tried to sit up and a hand lifted from his hip to touch his shoulder.
Steve sat up a little, the hand lifted, and a glass of water appeared in it in the corner of his vision. So he sat up a little more and reached out for it, because the arm was on his right side and the body was on his left and Bucky couldn’t feed him the water for now, and it seemed he realized it because Bucky didn’t tell him to quit trying to do it himself.

He gulped down half of what was in the glass, which wasn’t much to begin with and left perhaps half a cup clinging to the sides when he set it down. Then he flopped back against Bucky’s right shoulder and curled into his collarbone. He felt small and tired and worn out still, despite having slept – For however long it had been. There wasn’t a clock in the bedroom and his phone was somewhere that wasn’t there. He didn’t even know what time he’d fallen asleep. It had been past midnight, at least. He felt small and worn out, and that was the point.

He felt small, and he wanted Bucky’s arms, plural, to pull him in and have him whisper reassurances into his hair. He felt vulnerable and unsure and shaky, he felt like a child who’d lost his mother in a public place, he felt sore and stiff despite the hot water working the kinks from his overworked body, he felt rather like shit. He resented Bucky’s left arm for stopping at the shoulder and he felt even more guilty than he already was for it.

Bucky’s fingers, only five of them with only one arm, dug into his back. “Hey, hey, sweetheart, you’re okay,” he was saying, and Steve’s face felt both hot and cold and prickly. He was crying. Abruptly, he felt anger swell in him, because he was fucking crying and he’d fucking cried a thousand times in the past few days or week or weeks, he’d managed a whole three years never shedding more than one tear at a time and now he was bawling 24/7 like a child.

“You’re alright, sweetheart, I got you, I love you, I promise.”

Steve buried his face in Bucky’s collar and bit hard on his lip. He felt like screaming but that wouldn’t do him any good. It would probably just scare Bucky, as what he could feel besides the shit and the rage and the vulnerable was terrified, and it wasn’t his terrified.

He wanted something to blame, so he blamed the onslaught of hormones his body was getting now that he was off suppressants. He wanted to get up and go running until he’d sweated out all the hormones causing the shit and the small and the fucked up, but Bucky’s five fingers were digging into his back and his left shoulder was straining as if an incorporeal left arm was trying to reach around him.
“What’s the matter, baby? C’mon, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head, because there was nothing fucking wrong with him. He couldn’t control his emotions. That much was wrong with him. They hurt and they wouldn’t listen to rational thought or reason, he felt like they were hitting him like a tsunami, slamming over and over right into his face so he couldn’t catch his breath and it fucking hurt. He fucking hurt.

“You’re safe, baby, you’re okay here, I’m here, I got you, what’s wrong?”

Steve just shook his head again. There was nothing wrong. There was no reason for him to feel small, other than the fact that he ought to be small. Yet he felt smaller than even that. He felt like he was being squeezed steadily like Atlas had gotten bored of holding the Earth on his shoulders and had decided the quality entertainment he needed was picking him up and squishing him between his palms until he squelched out the cracks of his fingers and between his knuckles. Only Atlas had decided to pick on him for no damn reason, because Bucky had been so kind and gentle and sweet with him last night and he should be fucking fine, but he wasn’t.

Bucky’s right arm strained on him. Then he was being shoved, a bit ungracefully, from the mattress onto Bucky’s chest. Steve curled his arms behind Bucky’s back and squeezed, as hard as Atlas was squeezing him, as if it would somehow make him feel better.

“Babydoll, you gotta talk to me, I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s goin’ on, what’s wrong?”

Nothing. Couldn’t Bucky understand that? There was nothing wrong with him, he was just going to have suck it up and deal with it, only he felt too small and weak and infantile to do that just yet and all he could do was grab tight to his Alpha and squeeze. Maybe he could squeeze some of the life out of him and leech off it. He was doing a hell of a good job at using up Bucky’s energy so far.

“Steve, c’mon, you’re scaring me!”

“I’m fine,” he forced out at last. His voice sounded just as shitty as he felt.

“Bullshit,” Bucky answered immediately. “What’s goin’ through your head?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Steve spat it, actually. “I’m fine. Just… Just let me… For a second…”
Bucky’s hand pressed against the back of his neck, pressing him into the nape of his neck, and Steve clung harder. Then it lifted, despite the whimper that ungracefully tore itself from Steve’s throat, reached for something, and Steve just clung on harder. Bucky’s arm returned to his back, but not his hand, his wrist pressed against his spine and rubbed a few times, then went still. Steve bit hard on his lip, tasted blood and bit harder, with Bucky getting tired of scent-marking him all the time. Was he that disturbing? Did he trigger bad memories? Was Bucky finally getting tired of having to pretend it was okay Steve had betrayed him?

Something heavy dropped to the bed beside him and Bucky’s hand pressed flat to his back, ran up his spine and gripped the back of his neck. His fingers squeezed, holding possessively, but it wasn’t whatever enough to dent the shit piling up or crack Atlas’s palms still squeezing. Tolkien’s trolls trying to make jelly out of him. The cartoon evil villain wringing his hands and cackling maniacally as Steve found it harder and harder to breathe. Bucky’s fingers and the heel of his palm fit in the cut of his traps, squeezed them together, but what good would that do when Steve was slowly being pushed up the cracks between Atlas’s fingers?

The door opened. The door opened, but Bucky was lying beneath him, so the door opened and someone else came in. Steve tensed, suddenly aware of where the air was hitting his bare skin and the sheet was draped low over his waist, and someone else walked in and Bucky wasn’t drawing a gun to defend them, to defend him.

“Hey, Steve,” the someone else said. Sam. Sam had entered the room. “What’s up, man?”

Steve ground his teeth together and still wanted to scream, only now it would scare Sam and Bucky both. He wanted to spit out what the fuck, Bucky and demand that Sam just piss off and let him work his way out from between Atlas’s palms.

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” Bucky said. “He was okay last night. Well, no, he wasn’t okay, but I got him down, he fell asleep alright, he’s been sleeping all day, I don’t know what happened.”

Steve ground his teeth together. Maybe he was having a nightmare. Maybe if he pretended none of this was happening he’d wake up and Bucky would draw him in and hold on to him with both hands. Maybe the past several years had been a nightmare and he’d wake up cocooned in both of Bucky’s arms half his height and weight and neither of them will have ever gone to war at all.

“He was okay last night. Well, no, he wasn’t okay, but I got him down, he fell asleep alright, he’s been sleeping all day, I don’t know what happened.”

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“Why don’t you start with what happened? Steve, you wanna tell us what happened?”

He clenched his teeth harder, felt an old ache in a back molar flare up. He’d cracked that molar in the Vita-Ray machine. It had healed right away, but at times like these, when he ground his teeth
together, it would ache like it was about to crack again. Sometimes he wished it would. It would give him something concrete to blame for his pain.

“He said nothing was wrong,” Bucky said, and he was clearly panicking.

Steve tried to muster up guilt for worrying him, only he was too pissed that he’d called Sam and exposed Steve’s vulnerability. Steve was fucking naked, wearing nothing more than a sheet for God’s sake, why the hell had Bucky called someone into the room while Steve was naked?

“He wouldn’t talk to me.”

“Alright. What did you do last night?”

“He was exercising. Overdoing it, so he’d exhaust himself and he wouldn’t have to think. So I fed him, made him take a bath, got him to quit thinking, made him go to sleep, and he woke up like this.”

“Like, you got him to subspace?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

Steve just wanted Sam to fucking leave, but if he opened his mouth he probably would just scream.

“You fed him, like hand-fed him?”

“Yeah. And made him take a bath.”

“And he quit thinking?”

“Yeah. Got him out of his head.”

“That sounds like subspace. What did you do after?”
“Made him go to sleep.”

“And you were holding him, right? Cuddling and stuff?”

“Yeah, o’course.”

Couldn’t Bucky tell that Steve wanted Sam to leave? Why the fuck had he called him in the first place?

“Okay. Steve? You wanna say anything?”

He shook his head jerkily. He’d probably just scream for Sam to get the fuck out.

“Okay. Shit. Okay. What can you tell me, Barnes? What’s he feeling, that you can tell?”

“I don’t know, it’s just – He’s crying, I don’t know what to do –”

“Okay, hey, hey, calm down, these things happen, Barnes, he’s gonna be okay –”

“But he’s crying –”

“You just gotta work him out of it, alright?”

Steve was working himself out of it, fuck it, there was nothing to work himself out of; he was fucking fine, there wasn’t a fucking thing wrong with him –

“Steve, I know you don’t want to, but can you please talk to your Alpha? Tell him what’s going on?”
He ground his teeth. He, frankly, growled in opposition. Bucky’s fingers dug harder into his neck.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, no, there’s nothing wrong – this is okay, Steve, this is perfectly okay, you don’t need to feel guilty or angry for what you’re feeling, it’s normal, alright? This is a normal thing that happens to normal people, all the time, what you’re feeling isn’t proof that you’re weak or you can’t deal with things –”

“Shut up!” Steve finally screamed.

He heard Sam’s jaw snap shut. It sounded violent, like a neck cracking in the otherwise muffling silence. Bucky’s chest under him was rising and falling so fast it almost made him motion sick.

“It’s okay to feel like this,” Sam said.

“No, it’s not,” Steve spat. “I’m fine!”

“You’re not fine,” Sam offered gently.

“Nothing is wrong!” Steve hissed. He jerked up, out of Bucky’s grip, to grab the sheet and yank it over his back. In the process of lifting up, though, it slipped down his waist almost to his ass, and Steve jerked it back up. Over his shoulders, over his chest, all the way over his head, feeling twice as naked and exposed as he was and like his knees were wet from rain-soaked pavement. His mouth tasted bitter and his skin crawled, so he dug his fingers into the sheets and tried to wipe them clean, only the sweat and skin cells and semen was stuck so far under his nails that it was growing in the beds of them. He wanted Sam to leave, he half wanted Bucky to leave, he just wanted to be given a fucking second so he could breathe and wrangle his emotions under control so they didn’t fucking hurt so damn much. He needed to wash his hands.

Bucky wriggled under the sheet with him and forced his arm under his waist to draw him flush against his chest. Steve grabbed a handful of the sheet and started scrubbing at his hands, until Bucky grabbed them with his one hand and pinned them against his chest. He could hear Sam talking, he could hear him breathing, somewhere on the other side of the room but still there, still in the room, still watching him and trying to convince him that it was okay. He wasn’t fucking okay and it was clearly not okay.
Bucky was crooning into his ear but he hardly heard it. He fought to get his hands away, they weren’t clean, he needed to wash them. Only Sam was in the room. He couldn’t get up to run into the bathroom and slam the door, run the water until it was scalding and burn the dead layers of skin off so he could get the spunk out of his lower dermis. Bucky was whispering in his ear but it did no fucking good if he couldn’t wash his hands. He was cooing in his ear and trying to pin down his hands, but Steve couldn’t let him touch him with the filth of other people on his skin. He let out a wretched sob, wretched, feeling his wretched spine bending with the strain of holding up his own head. His wretched knees were aching from kneeling. He had the wretched feel of sitting in a church built for people who were born and raised in truly wretched places, in truly wretched situations, wretched people who still managed to believe and sing praise and there he’d been singing his doubts to high Heaven so they clouded up their beautiful choir and put their praises out of harmony. It didn’t matter one fucking bit if God was real or not because he was distorting their harmonies with his sins and his doubts. He just needed to wash his hands.

He couldn’t let Bucky touch him with filth on his hands, so he tried to fight, to get away, and Bucky only rolled on top of him to pin him in place. Steve tried to fight harder, he’d roll right out from under him and onto the floor, except Sam was in the room and Bucky hadn’t thought to cover his nakedness before he invited a stranger to come into their bedroom and tell Steve that it was perfectly okay to feel like shit even though he’d been treated with nothing but kindness. He was trapped. Not by Bucky’s weight, he could throw Bucky easy enough; thanks to his oversized body and overdone strength, he could get away from Bucky. He was trapped by the sheet, the only covering from a stranger’s eyes he had.

Bucky’s hand gripped the back of his neck, squeezed hard, while his mouth locked onto Steve’s scent gland and he bit down harder. Not enough to break the skin, but enough to flash stillness over his body. Steve choked on a sob, his eyes flew open and fluttered shut, and he slowly went limp.

Bucky licked apologetically at his scent gland. He kissed up his neck, kissed his cheek, his nose, then both eyelids.

“Sam left,” he said hoarsely.

Steve sagged into the mattress. “Get off,” he said, and Bucky rolled off him.

Steve clutched the sheet to his chest, checked that the room was really empty, that the door was shut and no one could see him but Bucky, then shoved himself out of the bed and made a beeline for the bathroom. His skin itched. It prickled. There was still spunk caked on his hands, trapped between his teeth, lodged in the cracks of his gums. He went for the sink, ran the water hot and pumped soap into his palms. There were toothbrushes, which he grabbed with his hands still soaped up, and toothpaste, and he was glad for the mint where several years ago he would have just washed his mouth out with soap and replaced one foul taste with another. It was up his arms, down his back, on his stomach and chest. He used to bruise easy. His knees used to constantly be purple from kneeling and he had to tell
anyone who asked that he’d been praying for the souls of their boys overseas. Now his skin cleared in hours rather than weeks, but his knees still felt swollen and tender like they were bruised.

He looked up at a sound and found his Alpha in the mirror.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky demanded.

“Nothing,” Steve said. His voice was hoarse. His throat felt raw. He spat into the sink, loaded up his toothbrush again because his mouth still tasted bitter.

“Something is clearly wrong, Steve!”

“Nothing should be wrong!” Steve snapped. He scrubbed hard at his teeth, but his hands still had soap on them and some got in his mouth. He scrubbed anyway, and when he spat next into the sink, he spat blood out from breaking his gums. The white toothpaste and soap made it pink where they slowly swirled together from the momentum of his spitting and the slope of the marble, but the white toothpaste and soap only looked like complementary bodily fluids to the blood. He rinsed the soap from his hands, rinsed his mouth, pumped more soap into his palm, used his nails to scratch the caked on fluids from his skin and left gouges several inches long down his arms.

Bucky grabbed his hand, only his right hand, and yanked him away from the sink. Steve jerked out of his grip, not wanting to touch him with the filth on his skin, and Bucky simply grabbed him again. He grabbed him by the arm, yanked him in and pinned him against his chest.

“Stop fighting me!” Bucky sobbed, and Steve froze, hands raised in fists where he’d been prepared to beat on his chest until he let go. “Please,” Bucky croaked out, “baby, stop hurting yourself. Stop fighting me.”

Bucky’s fingers dug into the skin of his neck. Steve pushed his fists around Bucky’s neck and tangled them in his hair. They were still covered in pink soap. He got soap and blood in his hair, but Bucky didn’t seem to care. He seemed relieved, though Steve couldn’t find it in him to guess what the hell for.

“What’s going on, Steve?” he said, and he sounded like he was begging him for an answer. “What’s the matter?”
“Nothing is,” Steve said stubbornly.

“Then what’s wrong that shouldn’t be?” Bucky asked, and Steve bit hard on his lip to keep the prickle in his nose from spreading into a sob. “C’mon, please, tell me so I can fix it, let me try, let me help.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve mumbled, then hid his face in his neck. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, don’t be sorry, sweetheart, just tell me what’s wrong, just let me help.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, and Bucky held on tighter. “I’m sorry, you got enough and I’m just adding to it, I’m sorry –”

“Steve, Stevie, you’re not adding to nothing, doll, it’s okay –”

“I did fine holding myself up without you, I should be fucking fine now I got you –”

“It’s okay, Steve, you don’t gotta do that –”

“It’s not okay, I’m a mess –”

“Steve, will you please just listen?”

He sounded desperate. Steve shut his mouth.

Bucky began to comb through his hair with his fingers. “I don’t know exactly what to do to fix us, okay? But I’ll try my damnedest.”

“You got enough shit to fix on your end,” Steve mumbled.

“Don’t worry about me, baby, okay? You’re my priority.”
Steve pulled back. Bucky tried to hold on and Steve pulled back anyway.

“I can’t be your priority, Buck,” he said, voice raw and throat. “You need to put your needs first.”

Bucky looked like he wanted to argue, but a distant knock interrupted him. Steve shrunk away from it, trying to hide his body with Bucky’s even though the door was shut and Sam didn’t have X-Ray vision. Far as he knew, no one did.

“Just a minute,” Bucky called, then ran a hand down his back. “Let’s rinse your hands, okay?” he said softly. Steve pulled back, grabbed a towel so Bucky could get the soap out of his hair, then rinsed his hands. The skin barely felt raw. He hardly felt clean. He wanted to take a shower, but didn’t feel comfortable doing it with Sam just outside the door.

So he went in search of clothes. He grabbed the baggiest shirt and loosest drawstring sweats he could find and tugged them on, but they were still snug on his massive frame. He crawled back into the bed for good measure, drawing the sheets and blankets around his body and hiding in them. Bucky tugged on pants, then opened the door and headed back to the bed to join him. Steve pressed into his side, trying to hide in his shadow cast by the light from the open door.

Sam entered the room again, but only a few steps in. He had his hands stuck in his pockets, a worried expression on his face. Steve dropped his gaze, feeling shameful.

“Sorry I yelled at you,” he mumbled.

“You’re fine,” Sam said quickly. “I’m sorry I tried to make you talk when you weren’t ready.”

Steve blinked. “Okay,” he said, because he hadn’t expected that, nor did he think he was ready to forgive it yet. He still wanted Sam to leave.

“Do you think you want to tell us some of what you’re feeling?” Sam probed gently.

Steve shrugged. He pulled the blanket over his shoulders, tried to fit himself in the gap under Bucky’s arm and found his legs stuck out awkwardly. He was too big.
“Could you explain what these feelings are doing to you?” Sam tried again.

Steve looked at his hands, thinking. His nails had left superficial marks, hardly abrasions. The skin felt stiff, now, dehydrated and rough. The skin over his knuckles would split eventually from being dried out. Looking at his hands, he was struck, not for the first time, how wide they were. Like paddles. His knuckles were broad and thick, his fingers now proportionally sized where before they had been too long and skinny, his knuckles sticking out and his hands thin and bony. There was meat to the heels of his palms now, that was calloused and hard. He worked the fingers of his left hand over his right knuckles, rubbing at the skin so it would crack and begin to bleed.

“Steve?” Bucky whispered.

His legs stuck out, his wide shoulders meant that Bucky’s elbow hung between his deltoid and trapezius muscles, not around the socket like it would have if Steve had been the proper size, his hands were larger than Bucky’s. He took Bucky’s hand and pressed their palms together, and his hand was larger.

He felt smaller than he should be, but the confliction was that he was much larger than he should be.

“Can I tell you a story?” Sam said.

Steve blinked once. He looked up from his hands, but only so far as Sam’s knees. He shrugged.

Sam was leaning against the doorframe. He was probably uncomfortable in their bedroom. Steve felt uncomfortable with him in their bedroom, even just standing in the doorway.

“I had this friend in college,” Sam started. “She was about a year older than me, quiet, didn’t much like hanging around Alphas unless they were girls. Beta guys, she was okay with, but it took her a while to warm up to us. I knew her about a year, when she did this open mic at a coffee shop, read this poem she did herself. It was about how her gym teacher in high school got fired for inappropriate behavior with students. There was only the one student who came forward, so just proof for the one girl, and she said that she’d consented at first, so the guy only got a slap on the wrist. It’s a different charge for statutory rape than molestation, see.”

Steve shrank farther into Bucky’s side under his arm. Bucky’s fingers were digging into his ribs now. He didn’t like this story.
“You okay?” Sam asked. Steve nodded jerkily. “You sure?”

“Just go on,” Steve snapped.

Sam waited a few seconds before starting again. “Well. Turns out that the one girl was her, but there were probably other girls, maybe even a few boys. The poem, she was talking about how she’d thought she’d consented to it, but as she grew up she found that she hadn’t really. She didn’t say no, but she never said yes, either.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Steve interrupted. He didn’t like where this story was going.

“I think you’d benefit from seeing a different therapist,” Sam said.

Steve jerked his gaze up. “I’m not even seeing a therapist,” he said immediately.

Sam shrugged. “Then you’d definitely benefit from seeing one. One who has experience counseling Omegas who’ve been through what you’ve been through.”

“What have I been through?” Steve snapped tiredly. “Same stuff Buck has. You’re not asking him to see a therapist.”

“I took his case,” Sam said, and Steve dropped his gaze again.

“I have a case?” Bucky muttered.

“I’m helping you,” Sam amended.

“So why can’t you help me?” Steve snapped.

“I can,” Sam said gently, “but I think you would benefit more from this other lady’s help. Her name’s Larah Madini. She works at an Omega shelter. I’ve been getting her advice on how to help
you since you told me about what you did before the war, without mentioning your name –” he said quickly as Steve jerked upright in horror “– and she agrees you could use her help more than mine. She doesn’t know who you are.”

“I –” Steve said, and stopped.

“I don’t want to push you,” Sam said, “but a lot like my friend from college, you sound like you had problems with guys before. With Alphas. It took my friend years to come to terms with the fact that just because she didn’t say no, it didn’t mean she ever said yes.”

Steve shut his eyes against Sam’s emphatic words. He only wanted to help. Sam just wanted to help him, but Steve didn’t know where to start.

“It’s not shameful to want help,” Sam said, as if he could read Steve’s mind. “And you deserve the help.”

Bucky’s fingers reached farther around his ribs, his head coming to rest on Steve’s shoulder covered by the sheet, and his left shoulder twitched. Steve, belatedly realizing, reached up and set his hand on it to hold it still.

“Don’t strain your clavicle,” he mumbled.

Bucky nosed at his neck. There was distress in him still, loud enough to compound the shitty feeling overwhelming Steve. He mumbled something, barely moving his lips, and Steve tilted his head to look at him. He hadn’t heard hardly a sound from his lips, but he could guess.

“I was never raped, Buck,” he said, and Bucky clung to him harder. Steve felt half like apologizing.

“I hate to ask,” Sam said quietly, catching his attention again. He was grimacing, looking at the ground with a fist in front of his mouth. “What do you think… What d’you think counts?”

Steve blinked.

“As… rape,” Sam muttered.
“What’d’you mean?”

“Assault,” Sam said. He dropped his fist to his hip and shrugged. “Sexual assault definitions have changed since the 40s. What do you think counts?”

Steve opened his mouth, shut it, flushed and looked down. Bucky lifted his head and kissed Steve’s cheek, grabbed the back of his neck and pulled his head down into his neck, and Steve let him. He was incredibly uncomfortable, with Sam standing in his bedroom and having to address his emotions and this question in particular.

“Penetration?” he said reluctantly.

Sam half winced and Steve curled closer to Bucky, wanting to be half his size so he could hide in his arms, plural. He didn’t want to know now, he didn’t know and he didn’t want to know what the future and feminists had decided counted as rape, because maybe then it would have happened to him and he didn’t think he could take that right then.

“Any sexual act that you didn’t consent to counts as rape,” Sam said, and Steve half wilted in relief, because at the very least, the fact that he had asked and received payment for it all counted as clear consent. “Any invasive act that you didn’t consent to is assault.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Steve said, and the relief was gone. He couldn’t count the number of times he’d been shoved against a wall by drunk or angry or stilted Alphas who wanted more out of him than he was willing to give. He’d been kissed by dozens or maybe even hundreds of guys who hadn’t stopped to ask first and had to spit on the ground after they’d turned their backs. More than few had shoved their hands down his pants, the front or back, while Steve had been servicing them, just to cop a feel. Did that count? Could modern feminists define his whole damn life as non-consensual?

“It’s alright that you don’t,” Sam said, but it didn’t reassure him any. “Any time somebody got in your personal space without asking and without you wanting them to is an invasive act.”

Steve shrank. Sam looked disheartened, and Steve fully wanted to apologize now.

“I really think you would benefit from talking to Larah, Steve.”
“I don’t want to,” he mumbled under his breath. He inhaled sharply, trying not to let his lower lip wobble or water bead on his lashes. Bucky squeezed his waist.

“Seven seconds,” he muttered, and Steve felt his nose prickling and hot tears welling over his lashes.

“You don’t have to,” Sam said. “Just know that the option is there.”

Steve said nothing more. He didn’t want to keep talking, and he never wanted to start talking in the first place. For all he trusted Sam, he didn’t want him in his bedroom anymore. He hadn’t wanted him in his bedroom in the first place.

“Can you go?” he asked quietly. “I’m sorry. Just – I’d like to be left alone.”

“Yeah, I can go,” Sam said, stepping back.

But Bucky drew away, too. Steve caught his shoulder and held on tight, though.

“I didn’t mean you,” he said hastily, and after a second, Bucky pressed against him tight again.

“I’ll catch y’all later,” Sam said, hand on the doorknob. “Anytime you feel like you want to talk to me, just call me up.”

He half pulled the door shut, paused, and stuck his head back in once more. “Chocolate,” he said.

“What?” Bucky answered.


With that, he shut the door. Steve crumpled into Bucky’s shoulder, arms tight around him, and shook
Bucky rubbed his hand up and down his back, making quiet shushing noises, whispering *I got you, sweetheart, and I love you, baby,* and Steve continued to shake. He was sobbing, silently, because he still felt like screaming for his tears.

Then he drew back and hit Bucky on the thigh with as little strength as he could while still intending to make it hurt. Bucky yelped and Steve jerked back to hugging him, not as silent now.

“What was that for?” Bucky hissed, and Steve sucked in a breath, hiccupping.

“Why did you call Sam?” he demanded sharply. He hid his face in Bucky’s neck, not wanting to look him in the eye for this. “Why’d you have to do that? I was fine!”

“You weren’t fine, Steve! You still aren’t! I was scared, I didn’t know what to do –”

“You didn’t have to call anybody!” Steve spat. “Why would you – Why’d you have to – I was –”

“I didn’t know what to do!” Bucky repeated insistently. “You were crying, you needed help and I didn’t know how to help you!”

Steve sucked in another breath. Bucky squeezed his waist.

“Seven seconds,” he said again, quietly, and Steve half choked.

Bucky kissed the side of his face, his hair, his neck, rubbing his wrist into his spine. Steve stopped his diaphragm, swallowed, then carefully expanded his lungs. For seven seconds. Bucky kissed his temple.


All the things that Steve had been saying to Bucky. He half choked and swallowed again, then carefully inhaled.
“Why was it bad I called Sam?” Bucky asked quietly.

Maybe he was learning from Sam, because before, Bucky wouldn’t have asked a question like that. He just would have let Steve hit him and rubbed the sore spot for a second before tugging him in for a kiss and it would have been over. Maybe he would’ve complained a bit about it, but he wouldn’t have asked why. Bucky wasn’t rubbing at the sore spot, now, though. His only hand was pressed to Steve’s back and hadn’t pulled away at all.

Steve hiccuped again, drew in a breath for seven seconds, because Bucky did deserve an answer. And who was to say he wouldn’t do it again if Steve didn’t tell him?

“I was naked,” he murmured. His voice sounded pitiful. He hated it.

Bucky exhaled quietly.

“I was naked and I was feeling like shit,” he went on, trying to sound braver but only making his voice shakier. “I don’t want anybody seeing me like that.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky murmured. “I won’t do it again, okay? And I wasn’t thrilled about you bein’ naked neither, but I didn’t think about that until he was already here. It won’t happen again.”

“Won’t call Sam like that again or you won’t do it if I’m naked?” Steve demanded, sensing the difference.

Bucky hesitated and Steve knew he was right to ask. He scowled into Bucky’s neck.

“You needed help,” Bucky said eventually. “I didn’t know how to give it to you. We trust Sam, right?”

Steve said nothing. He was trying to figure out a way to insist that he didn’t need help without lying to Bucky. Honestly, he probably did need it. He just didn’t want it.
“I think there’s chocolate in the cupboards,” Bucky said after a long silence. “You feel up to some?”

Steve didn’t feel like his skin was itching any longer, but he still felt dirty. His face felt puffy from crying, at the least.

“I wanna shower,” he mumbled.

“Oh, you wanna shower,” Bucky said. “Let’s shower, okay?”

Steve sat up, then shook his head. Bucky’s face fell. “You can’t get your arm wet,” he said quietly, regretfully.

“I’ll sit in the bathroom with you,” Bucky said immediately, and Steve just shrugged.

He got up from the bed and tugged his shirt over his head. He left it on the bed, then his sweats, and headed for the bathroom. At the door, he paused to look back, and Bucky was still sitting on the bed, looking at his hand.

“Are you coming?” he asked.

Bucky glanced up once, then down. Away from him. Steve tried not to feel like his throat was closing.

“What?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“You said…” Bucky started, then shrugged. “You’re… You don’t want people to see you…”

He gestured vaguely towards him. Toward him and his bare skin. Steve swallowed through his constricted throat, then walked back over to the bed. He crawled onto it on his knees, coming to kneel in front of Bucky, thighs parted and spine curved back, and pressed both palms to his cheeks. Steve lifted his face, but not so Bucky was looking him in the eye.

He knelt in front of him like an offering and tilted his face up to make sure he saw all of him.
“I didn’t mean you,” Steve said firmly. Bucky swallowed visibly. “You’re s’posed to be the only person who ever sees me naked.”

Supposed to be. His nakedness was supposed to be something that only Bucky could and would uncover. His body was supposed to have been a gift that Bucky alone received. A gift that Bucky alone was supposed to have enjoyed. Supposed to have been. Certainly, his nakedness had been a gift that Bucky alone had ever cherished, but there were other parts to the marriage vows that weren’t true. To have, to hold. Supposed to be.

But Bucky raised his hand and pressed it to his waist, then dragged his palm and wrist up his chest to wrap around the back of his neck. He drew him in and pressed their lips together gently. Certainly, Steve felt cherished, but it was weighed down by the guilt he felt for the other aspects of the vows he hadn’t respected.

“Okay,” Bucky murmured against his mouth. “I know, doll.”

Steve tilted his head to the side and pressed their lips together again. Bucky squeezed the back of his neck, and Steve leaned their foreheads together, so they breathed the same air. Bucky needed to brush his teeth, too, he thought a little petulantly.

When he pulled back, Bucky kissed his forehead and squeezed the back of his neck again. “But your ma was s’posed to see you naked, too, considering you were born that way,” he added, and Steve blinked for a full second before he laughed.

“I guess so,” he mumbled. Bucky flashed him a smile, and Steve had to admit that the laugh did him good. “But only when I was little. And you’re not my ma.”

“Hell, no,” Bucky said, dropping his hand to cup his palm over his chest. He squeezed, grinning. “And thank God for that.”

Steve grinned foolishly, too, feeling less like shit now, but still small. Not as small, not as compressed. Too small for his body, at least.

“Come on,” he said. He took Bucky’s hand off his chest, squeezed it and pulled him gently off the bed. “I’ll only be five minutes.”
“Then chocolate,” Bucky insisted. “And a movie, okay? And we’ll cuddle.”

Steve nodded, smiling a little. “I’d like that,” he said quietly, and Bucky caught him by the waist to kiss his cheek.

In the bathroom, Steve didn’t bother with the opaque curtain covering the clear glass doors. He turned the water on hot, all the way and with no cold, but just before he got in Bucky stuck his hand in to check the temperature and turned the cold on some. Steve didn’t feel up to protesting. He got in, lathered up the loofah, and scrubbed at his skin for longer than necessary. Bucky sat on the edge of the bathtub, watching him, and Steve felt too self-conscious to scrub his skin raw the way he wanted to. After five minutes, he rinsed off and turned the water off, opened the door and Bucky stood up, holding a towel.

For a second, Steve stood dripping on the mat, as Bucky waited for his consent. For a second, Steve stood there, dripping, biting his lip while he wrestled with his own head. He wasn’t fragile. He wasn’t an infant. He could, and probably should, dry himself off.

But he wanted Bucky to do it.

Bucky waited, until Steve stopped biting his lip and nodded. He wanted to let Bucky take care of him, if he was honest. He still felt vulnerable and small. He wanted that gentle affection, wanted to feel safe and looked after, even if he could do it himself. He wanted to feel like he was a gift that had been only offered to Bucky alone. He wanted to feel cherished, to feel had, to feel held. And Bucky wanted to do it, so he let him.

So he nodded, and Bucky stepped forward with the towel to gently dry the water from his body. He dropped light kisses onto his shoulder, his chest, stomach, and thighs as he did, and Steve wanted to sink into his sweet affection. Bucky straightened up from drying his calves, Steve held out his arms, and Bucky drew him in to kiss his damp hair and Steve sank into his affection.

He let himself lean on Bucky a little when they walked out. He put his sweatpants back on, but not his shirt, so Bucky could still touch his bare skin. He leaned on Bucky, just a little, to walk into the living room and aim for the kitchen. There they parted, Steve leaned on the counter and Bucky went digging through the cupboards.

He came out with a yellow bag of Nestle chocolate chips.
“Semi-sweet?” he said questioningly.

Steve stuck out his hand and just said: “Gimme.”

Bucky shrugged and handed him the bag. Steve ripped it open, careful like, and shook a few out before popping them into his mouth. He smiled, and it was somewhat genuine. Bucky came back to his side and kissed his cheek, then turned him around and steered him to the couch. He flopped down and Bucky tucked himself behind him, a leg hooking over his hip as Steve shook out more of the chocolate and popped them into his mouth like peanuts.

Bucky reached over his shoulder for the chocolate and Steve half whined, hugging the bag protectively to his chest. Bucky laughed softly, the sound right in his ear, and it managed to hit something low in the back of his brain. Steve sighed and went limp. Bucky kissed his ear and he smiled lightly. He felt vulnerable and worn out, but having Bucky’s gentle and sweet affection was helping.

Plus chocolate. It made perfect sense that chocolate was nature’s antidepressant.

“What kinda movie you wanna watch?” Bucky asked, picking up the remote.

Steve half shrugged. To be honest, he only wanted to sink into Bucky’s chest and eat the whole damn bag of chocolate chips. He was going to eat the whole damn bag of chocolate. Fuck it, he would. He had the metabolism of a monster, he could eat a whole damn bag of chocolate chips if he wanted to.

Bucky poked at the bag, however. Steve sighed and gave him a single chip. He’d eat the whole damn bag minus that one piece.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured, kissing his ear, and Steve sank a little further into his warmth. Maybe he’d share a little more. Only a little.

“What about Lilo and Stitch?”

“Sure,” Steve mumbled, having no clue what the plot of Lilo and Stitch might entail and caring even less. He was satisfied just to have Bucky and chocolate. He was still going to blame the lack of suppressants, though.
He ate most of the bag. He ended up sharing more than a few handfuls with Bucky, but when the bag was finished, Bucky rolled him onto his back and kissed him long and slow and sweet-tasting like the chocolate, so that was nice. *Lilo and Stitch* was nice. Agent Bubbles reminded Steve of Director Fury and he was definitely going to make a remark of that sort the next time he saw Fury. By the time the movie was over and the chocolate chips were gone, he only felt worn out and ready to fall asleep in his Alpha’s arms.

Arm. His Alpha only had one arm. But that was okay.

He tried to think, at least.

* [Omegas and Betas in the Pre-war US, Alice G. Tiller, University of Chicago, 2009]

“The right to vote was granted to male Betas in 1870 with the 14th Amendment. It is no secret that the 14th Amendment was really written to grant African-American men the right to vote, nor was it ever any coincidence that Betas were knocked down the social hierarchy after the African slave trade, enslaving the people with the highest rates of Betas on the planet, began in full…

“In 1902, the state of Missouri passed a law criminalizing the marriages of Betas and Alphas or Omegas, and it was never any secret that it was written to prevent African-Americans and white Americans from marrying each other. By 1917, 42 of the then 48 states had copied Missouri’s Beta-Omega/Alpha marriage laws…”

“…In December of 1932, Congress quietly passed a bill defining marriage in the United States that prevented Betas from marrying outside their designation and in the process both stopped and dissolved the barely legal marriages of same-sex Alphas and Omegas…”

[Omegas and Betas in the Pre-war US, Alice G. Tiller, University of Chicago, 2009]

The Omega was slowly inhaling, slowly exhaling, and quietly snoring as he did. He lay on his side in the wide bed, the blanket pulled past his shoulders, and even in sleep, he looked distressed. The lines of his body were taut.

The asset sat upright with its hip pressed to Target Gingerbread’s back, a heavy pistol in its only hand. The prosthetic arm was gone. The asset could not recall what circumstances had lead to the
removal of the arm. There were stitches put in place over the asset’s left shoulder, the skin still pink and tender and freshly healed, the mounting for the arm remained in place but covered in plastic and tape. The asset could not recall what circumstances had led it to this place, to lying in this bed next to Target Gingerbread. The asset had opened its eyes to the dark ceiling, found a weapon in its hand and the Omega next to him, and had immediately assumed sentry position.

Target Gingerbread was sleeping, that much was clear. The asset kept its breathing silent, did not move a muscle, so as not to disturb the Omega. He smelled like exhaustion, even asleep. Whatever had led the asset to this place, the Omega’s safety and health took all priority. Potential conflict: Presence of the asset. Override: *Fuck…*

And even in his sleep, Target Gingerbread looked distressed. The asset had the urge to lie back and press its chest to the Omega’s back, to drape its flesh arm over the Omega’s body and hold him close, however, the asset had somehow lost its prosthetic arm and could not risk having to release the gun. He could not risk placing the gun anywhere near Target Gingerbread, either. If by some freak accident or cognition error the gun went off, Target Gingerbread could be harmed. This location was presumably unsafe; the asset could smell the heavy and sweet odor of the Omega, but distantly, in the other rooms, there remained the mixed scents of others. If the Omega was asleep, then this place must have been safe enough that the asset had permitted him to render himself unconscious, but the scents of others indicated their presence. There was no telling who or what lingered just outside the door.

Even the scent of an unknown Beta male was on the door of this very room. The asset kept the gun in hand.

The asset kept watch overnight. There were no timekeeping devices in this room, but the door was parted slightly and the asset could see lights pouring over the adjacent room from a window – *Fucking shit, fucking hate windows, damn glass is a complete liability* – that would soon indicate the dawn. The lights were unnatural, most likely the lights of a city. The asset did its best to keep track of time until then.

Five hours, then the traces of golden light replaced the artificial glow of the outside city. Then the asset had gained consciousness at approximately 0:00-1:00 hours. Why the asset had been unconscious, it could not say. It remained on sentry duty until the Omega stirred.

He took another four hours to wake. The asset was feeling stiff from remaining still; it was of no consequence. At approximately 9:00 hours, the Omega finally moved. The asset heard him yawn, then felt him shifting, rolling over, then he flung an arm over the asset’s legs.

“What’re you doing?” Target Gingerbread said. He mumbled it. *He’s cute when he’s sleepy* – Override, inconsequential. Override denied: *HE’S FUCKIN’ CUTE THAT’S FUCKING*
Yet the asset did not answer Target Gingerbread. The Omega yawned again, then sat up on an elbow to squint up at him. The asset kept its gaze trained on the half-open door.

“Bucky?” Target Gingerbread asked.

The asset did not understand the meaning of the question, so it said nothing. Target Gingerbread glanced up and down his body, then looked at the gun in his grip, and lifted a hand to touch it and push down. The asset stiffened its muscles to maintain its aim.

“Buck, you okay?” Target Gingerbread asked again.

“Status, funktsional'nei,” the asset replied.

Target Gingerbread inhaled sharply. The asset maintained its aim at the door.

“Buck?” Target Gingerbread repeated. Meaning unclear, adjective use of buck. “What’s the date?”

“Neizvestnyy,” the asset answered.

“I don’t know what that means.”

The asset could not answer that, so it said nothing.

“It’s October,” Target Gingerbread told him. “Um. The second, I think.”

He looked around. The asset remained stationary while Target Gingerbread leaned away and grabbed something off the side table. The Omega dropped against its hip again, nudging his head against its chest. The asset became aware that it was not wearing a shirt let alone armor, because Target Gingerbread’s hair tickled. Error, sensation inconsequential. Sensation mildly distressing. The asset twitched, and Target Gingerbread looked up, dropping what was in his hand to touch its abdomen. His palm was warm where it curved over the asset’s body. The asset half shut its eyes,
lured into a moment of some strange new feeling by the touch. Then it wrenched its eyes opened and willed its penis to cease its reactions.

“You okay?” he said a second time.

“Funktsional'nei,” the asset answered a second time.

“Hang on,” Target Gingerbread said, picking up the something that he had grabbed; a cellular device. “Say that again?”

The asset flicked its gaze downward; Target Gingerbread held the cellular device just below its chin.

“Can you repeat that word?” Target Gingerbread asked.

He sounded distressed. He looked distressed. His scent was turning sour; the sweetness of gingerbread dough being interrupted by poorly distilled vanilla extract, too much cheap vodka and vanilla beans that weren’t fresh, fermented and spoiled. The asset swallowed, the sour scent of the Omega’s upset triggering unease in itself.

“Funktsional'nei,” the asset repeated. Error. The Omega was in distress. The asset scanned for threats and found none immediate besides itself.

Target Gingerbread pulled the cellular device away and the asset moved jerkily. It crawled off the bed, training the muzzle of the gun on the floor, and the scent of distress spiked abruptly.

“Wait, where are you going?” Target Gingerbread said, lunging out to grab the asset’s arm. The asset did not have a left arm for him to grab. His fingers ended up fistig in the side of the pants the asset wore.

“Tekushchaya ugroza,” the asset answered, but it froze in place. “Vy rasstroyen. Ya vas pugayu.”

“Don’t go,” Target Gingerbread said. Begged. The scent of distress was cloyingly strong. “Please?”
The asset hesitated. The asset did not hesitate. But standing there, rendered anxious and confused by the strong scent of his Omega’s distress, the asset hesitated. The asset hesitated. His Omega? His? His or its?

Target Gingerbread tugged on the fabric of the asset’s pants. The asset followed his tugging and returned to the bed. Target Gingerbread grabbed him around the waist with both arms, holding tightly, and the asset’s hand dropped the gun to press to the back of his Omega’s neck without proper authorization. Override –

“Shh, shh.” His lips formed sounds without proper authorization. “Vy v poryadke, milen’kiy. Shh…”

Error, usage of moniker milen’kiy, sweetheart in English, unauthorized. Error, his? Not its?

The Omega was shaking. The asset should be maintaining its sentry position, but its hand remained on the back of Target Gingerbread’s head, slowly petting his hair and occasionally squeezing the back of his neck. The asset’s lips continued to form sounds without authorization, quiet whispers of endearments that were as unauthorized as milen’kiy. Kukla, sakhar, moy angel. Slowly, the scent of distress decreased.

Target Gingerbread lifted his face from where he had been hiding it in the nape of the asset’s neck, took the asset’s hand and pressed it to his face. He nuzzled into it, rubbing his cheekbone against the asset’s wrist.

A faint sensation like sparkling, light and bubbly and delightful, came from the rubbing motion Target Gingerbread made. The asset, in a moment of foolishness, took over the motion to rub its wrist down Target Gingerbread’s face to his neck, over his shoulders and arms and back up. Target Gingerbread relaxed further.

The asset stopped, wrist pressed to the hollow of the Omega’s throat. Target Gingerbread tipped his head back, resting it against the asset’s shoulder, and bared his throat.

The asset jerked away. First the hand, which was dangerously close to constricting the Omega’s airways, then the whole body. Target Gingerbread fell, catching himself on the mattress, and the asset sprawled onto the floor, breathing heavily and panicking. The scent of bad vanilla spiked again, Target Gingerbread reaching for the asset, and it scrambled backward.
“Bucky, what’s the matter, come back –”


“Come back,” Target Gingerbread pleaded, but the asset shook its head, crawling backward until its back hit a wall. “Please, I don’t speak Russian, come back!”

“Vy nebezopasny,” the asset insisted.

“I don’t know what that means,” Target Gingerbread argued. His ears and nose were tinging red, there were tears welling in his eyes. The asset snatched a handful of its hair and yanked hard; he’d made his Omega cry, shit, shit, shit, shit shit shit –

“Stop that,” Target Gingerbread snapped; he swung off the mattress and dropped onto the floor, crawling forward on his knees to approach the asset. The asset shrank back. “Bucky, please?”

His Omega reached for him. His sour scent of distress overpowered every other scent in the room. The asset should leave, but his Omega was reaching for him. His body moved without authorization, taking Target Gingerbread’s hand and drawing him close to rest between his legs. Target Gingerbread locked his arms around the asset’s neck, pressing his face into the nape of it.

“Prosti, milen’kiy,” the asset whispered, “ya ne khotel pugat’ toboy, prosti.”

Target Gingerbread hiccuped. It was cute, or would have been if the asset hadn’t been terrified. It was a strange feeling, terror.

“Can you speak in English?” Target Gingerbread mumbled after a while.

The asset did not answer. It did not know the answer. The asset comprehended English, that much was evident.

“Net?” the asset said hesitantly.
“Okay,” Target Gingerbread said. He sat up, grabbing the asset’s hand. “I’ll use my phone to translate what you’re saying, okay?”

The asset tugged on his hand, though, and kissed the back of it. It was an instinct, and as Target Gingerbread’s shoulders softened, the lines around his eyes becoming less prominent, the asset knew that this was an appropriate course of action. The asset kissed his Omega’s hand again.

“Can we get back on the bed?” Target Gingerbread asked.

The asset nodded. The asset was still a high threat, but somehow the Omega’s distress heightened if the asset tried to pull away, and the smell of bad vanilla was nerve-wracking. Target Gingerbread and the asset stood up, Target Gingerbread crawled back onto the bed and the asset sat beside him. It – He? – picked up the gun again, aiming it for the door.

Target Gingerbread leaned on its shoulder, holding up his phone.

“You know who I am?”

“Vy moy,” the asset answered instantly. That much, the asset knew for certain.

Target Gingerbread lowered the phone slightly. “You’re mine?” he said. “That’s what vy moy means?”

The asset nodded in affirmation.

Target Gingerbread seemed to sag in relief. He pressed his lips to the asset’s cheek before putting his head back on its shoulder.

“I’m yours,” he said quietly.

“Moy,” the asset echoed.
“Do you know who you are?” Target Gingerbread then asked.

The asset was not a person. “Ya prizrak,” it said, however. As it had been taught to answer.

Target Gingerbread lowered the phone again. A second later, he kissed the crest of the asset’s shoulder.

“You’re not a ghost,” he said softly.

The asset did not answer.

“Your name is James Buchanan Barnes,” Target Gingerbread told him.

The asset did not have a name. Did it? Did he?

“You were born in March, 1917,” Target Gingerbread kept going. The asset could still smell bad vanilla, though it was not as strong as before. “You have a younger sister, her name is Rebecca, your mother’s name was Winifred, your father’s name was George.”

The asset had a mother?

“You met me when you were two,” Target Gingerbread said. “I wasn’t a year old yet. It’s okay if you can’t remember that, people don’t remember being two.”

The asset was a person? The asset had a mother, the asset had been born and not made, the asset was a person?

“You’re a person,” Target Gingerbread said, as if he had heard the asset’s silent confusion.

“Ya prizrak,” the asset mumbled quietly.
“You’re alive,” Target Gingerbread said.

The asset said nothing further. Target Gingerbread hugged him, arms squeezing tightly, as the asset watched the door.

It was like having the wind knocked out of him, yet he showed no reaction. Bucky’s lungs stopped functioning, his brain shorted out for half a second from the lack of oxygen, and he sucked in a breath. He dropped the gun, turned and grabbed Steve in return. Steve’s fingers dug into him as Bucky clung to him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, “I’m so sorry, Stevie, I didn’t mean to scare you, I’m sorry.”

“You’re back,” Steve said. His voice was choked. “Oh, thank God.”

Bucky shifted his only hand to cup Steve’s cheek, pulled him in for a hard kiss, then tucked his face into his neck. He ran his wrist down Steve’s spine, over his hip and pant leg, over his arms, every part of him he could reach. Steve trembled as he did.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asked. He was shaking, too. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what happened, I just woke up and – Are you okay?”

“‘M fine,” Steve mumbled into the skin of his neck.

Bucky didn’t know why he had bothered asking. He’d known Steve would lie.

So he kissed the top of his head, hooked his hand under one of Steve’s thighs and tugged until Steve moved into his lap, and wrapped his arm securely around his back.

“You’re not okay,” he said quietly.

Steve shook his head.

“But that’s okay,” Bucky added. “You don’t have to be okay all the time, sweetheart.”
Steve said nothing, and Bucky kissed his temple.


Steve continued to shake silently. Bucky continued to cling to him. They weren’t okay. But that was okay. They were together, so they would be okay.

Chapter End Notes

tell me what you think! im like that rihanna song, i don't wanna give you the wrong impression, i need comments and reviews. again, thanks to lexi #1 for helping me with this chapter. i'll see y'all next week
edit 8/29/18: thanks to minittytea for pointing out that Funktsional'naya is the feminine form and correcting it to Funktsional'nei.
okay, so, when my beta was binge-reading this fic (she hadn't had time to read all of it before helping me with the last chapter), she said one thing to me that i think sums up a lot of my writing style. she said, i quote, "MOONY, I MEAN THIS LOVINGLY, BUT YOU BITCH." the point of this story? you may or may not have the same or similar things to say at the end of this chapter. hopefully lovingly.

thanks to the ever amazing lexi#1 for helping me with this chapter, you're a godsend. y'all can find this chapter's playlist here and i hope you don't feel the need to strangle me when this is over. enjoy!

edit: you can find the cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“...Bartholdi based his design of a female figure in neoclassical style on Libertas, the Roman goddess of freedom, similar to Thomas Crawford's "Statue of Freedom" (1863) which crowns the dome of the United States Capitol Building. The idea originated in the late 1860s in Bartholdi’s...
proposal to build a lighthouse at the northern entrance to the Suez Canal, in the form of a robed female figure bearing a torch (symbolizing progress). A drawing and various models were made but nothing came of the idea.

“Bartholdi originally wanted Libertas to wear a pileus - the cap given to emancipated slaves in ancient Rome - but settled on a crown instead, to avoid controversy…”

* 

[october 7th, stark tower]

Steve and Bucky had spent the past few days continuing their Disney marathon, and throughout it all, never strayed farther than two feet from each other. Dr. Cho had returned to remove the stitches on Bucky’s shoulder, and after an X-Ray from Stark’s prototype declared him well on his way to recovery. He was healing twice as fast as they had expected, twice as fast as Steve would have done. Steve tried not to put too much thought into that. Dr. Cho had given Bucky barely a few days before it would be safe for Stark to install the new arm, and Stark had gleefully rubbed his hands together in a way that had made Steve mildly suspicious as to what he’d done to it while it was in his care. Sam visited once a day, usually to join them for a movie, and never once asked if they wanted to try talking again. Steve was grateful for it. He didn’t want to talk anymore.

But it clearly couldn’t last.

Steve had received a text from Natasha around nine, asking if she could come see him, and he had said yes after making sure Bucky was okay with it. He let her in at the elevator and lead her to the kitchen. Bucky stood by the fridge, watching her.

“Something to drink?” Steve offered.

“Anything alcoholic,” Natasha answered. She dropped onto the stool at the counter and shot Bucky one brief look before covering her eyes with a hand.

“I will look,” Steve told her, though he doubted he had anything stronger than vanilla extract. “What’s up?”

“You need to come to DC tomorrow.”

Steve froze, hand halfway to a cupboard. He turned around, and Natasha nodded tiredly.
“I tried to keep Congress off your back for as long as I could,” she told him. “But they want to talk to you, and I had to tell them you were alive.”

“Oh,” Steve said.

Bucky moved closer, pushing behind him to press against his back. He wound his arm around Steve’s waist, pushing his wrist against the fabric of his shirt. Natasha looked away, pale.

“Sorry,” she said then.

“No, no, you did your best,” Steve told her. He put both hands over Bucky’s, leaning against his chest some. “Tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” she exhaled. “We might stay overnight, depends on how long they keep us. It might wind up not being worth it to make the commute back.”

“We’ll be flying, right?” Steve asked hastily.

She nodded. Steve did too, biting the inside of his cheek and thinking.

Bucky couldn’t come.

“Just you and me?” Steve said.

She nodded. “Clint might come, to help out.”

“And me,” Bucky interjected.

Steve bit harder on the inside of his cheek. Natasha looked at Bucky with unreadable eyes.
“No,” she said.

“Yes,” Bucky argued.

“No,” Steve muttered.

Bucky’s grip tightened. “Yes,” he insisted. “You’re not going without me.”

“You have to stay here,” Steve said, abruptly glad that Bucky was behind him so he wouldn’t have to look him in the eye. “You’re…”

He trailed off, not sure how to put it.

“You’re dangerous,” Natasha said bluntly, and Steve winced at it. “It’s too risky.”

“He’s not going without me,” Bucky snapped at her.

“He has to go,” Natasha replied calmly. Her hands had curled into fists, her knuckles white.

“She’s right,” Steve added. “I have to go and it’s too risky for you to come.”

“No,” Bucky growled. “I don’t go, you don’t go.”

Natasha’s expression cracked into something incredulous. Steve blinked once, then twisted in Bucky’s grip to look him in the eye, just as incredulous as Natasha.

“I’m sorry?” he said quietly.

“You’re not going if I can’t come,” Bucky insisted.
Steve blinked once again. “I’m going,” he said. “I have to go, Buck. And you can’t say I can’t.”

Bucky glowered at him. “It’s not safe,” he muttered.

“I won’t be going unprotected,” Steve told him. Arguing that he was capable of protecting himself wasn’t what would assure Bucky. “It’s the Senate building, for crying out loud!”

Bucky’s scowl deepened, his grip tightening; it cinched down so abruptly, Steve found himself being yanked flush against Bucky’s torso.

“It’s not safe,” he growled yet again.

“It is,” Steve said, trying not to get frustrated with him.

“You can’t go,” Bucky said.

“You can’t tell me I can’t,” Steve snapped.

Bucky blinked once, but his glare didn’t let up or even twitch. “I can’t protect you if I’m not with you,” he hissed.

“You’re not the only person who can protect me!” Steve replied sharply.

Bucky growled again, gaze flicking over Steve’s shoulder. Steve let out a heavy groan of frustration and dropped his forehead onto Bucky’s shoulder.

“You’re not the only person who can protect me!” Steve replied sharply.

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“Do you two need a minute?” Natasha asked, her tone audibly a warning.

Audibly a warning to say no. Steve gritted his teeth.

“Yes,” he said, and he could tell Natasha was scowling at him without needing to look. Fuck the
future and its assumptions. Steve didn’t need protection against his own Alpha. Bucky wasn’t trying
to isolate or possess him. Fuck the future’s assumptions.

“Steve –”

“We’ll be right back,” Steve interrupted, breaking Bucky’s grip on his waist to snatch his hand and
tug him away. He marched Bucky out of the kitchen, leaving Natasha tight-jawed and wary behind
them, into their bedroom and shut the door.

He put his hands on his hips and rounded on Bucky. Bucky responded by pushing into his space and
hugging him. Steve sighed, dropping his hands to put them around Bucky’s neck, but kept a few
inches between them.

“Why are you trying to dictate my choices?” he demanded.

Bucky blinked, then frowned. “Dictate?”

“Decide for me,” Steve elaborated.

Bucky continued to frown. Steve scowled at him and Bucky’s frown only deepened.

“I’m protecting you,” he said.

“You’re trying to control me,” Steve argued.

“I can’t protect you if I’m not with you,” Bucky argued in return.

Steve forced himself to pause and take a breath before snapping that he didn’t need Bucky to
protect him, because he knew it would only make Bucky jump to the wrong conclusions. He needed
to be level-headed here, since Bucky clearly wasn’t.

“By telling me I can’t do something without your permission, you’re taking away my choice in the
situation,” Steve said carefully.
He didn’t want to say that that was exactly what HYDRA had done to Bucky. He prayed Bucky understood before he had to point that out.

But Bucky continued to frown. “Permission?”

“I’m not a child and you’re not my parent,” Steve tried. “You can’t say I need your permission to do something.”

Bucky dropped his gaze a little, his brow deeply creased by his frown. Steve reached up and brushed a lock of hair from his face. Bucky’s intentions were based in paranoia, he knew that. Like the man Sam knew who had checked his wife’s car for bombs every morning after returning from war, Bucky was simply afraid.

Steve understood that. The thought of leaving Bucky made his chest tighten with anxiety. What if he wasn’t there when Steve got back?

“Can we discuss this?” Steve tried, ignoring his own fears. “Find a way that you can feel comfortable about me going?”

Bucky’s frown shifted into a slight scowl. “You’re going to go?” he said instead.

“I’m going,” Steve said. “I don’t want to, but I have to.”

He didn’t want to. Fuck, he didn’t want to leave Bucky for even a second. But he had to.

“Tracker,” Bucky muttered.

Steve raised his eyebrows.

“Comms,” Bucky added, still muttering. “Gerber, the tanto, switchblade, throwing tomahawk, boot knives, plenty of those, karambits, Beretta, SIG P220, 226 —”
“What?” Steve interrupted.

Bucky paused, looking up. “Arsenal,” he said.

Steve exhaled forcefully. “Arsenal,” he repeated.

Bucky nodded.

“They’re not gonna let me into the Senate with an arsenal,” Steve said carefully.

Bucky’s scowl returned in full force. “Dammit,” he muttered.

He worked his jaw, scrunching up his nose, then dropped his hand to Steve’s hip. “Just knives, then. Wear a thigh holster. And strap one to your tits.”

Steve flushed at the last bit, but shook his head. “They’ve got metal detectors.”

“Ceramic knives,” Bucky countered.

Steve made a face of displeasure. “Ceramic knives?” he repeated skeptically.

“In a thigh holster,” Bucky said. But then he frowned. “But if it’s under your clothes… Cut a hole in your pocket so you can reach them.”

Steve pressed a hand to his forehead, sighing. “Okay,” he agreed, just to pacify him. Steve was just pacifying him. Bucky’s motivations were based in primitive paranoia, the desire for proximity a base protective measure, fear for Steve and his life, so he just needed to pacify him. “I’ll get some ceramic knives and a thigh holster.”

“And one for your chest,” Bucky added, moving his hand to cup his pec. He squeezed briefly and Steve swallowed, refocusing where the gesture had distracted him. “Can’t do ceramic guns. Stark’ll have non-metal weapons?”
“We’ll ask,” Steve said. He just hoped Natasha had ceramic knives.

“And an earpiece,” Bucky went on.

“What’s the earpiece for?” Steve said, confused.

Bucky squeezed his chest again and Steve had to swallow a noise of pleasure. “So I can keep an ear on you, jackass,” Bucky said, and Steve snorted, leaning his weight onto Bucky’s frame. Bucky shifted his arm to curl around him, squeezing.

“Okay,” he said. “Stark should have a comm that’ll reach that far. And Nat will have the knives and holsters.”

“And you need a tracker of some kind,” Bucky added. “But not one HYDRA can hack. In case you get captured and I have to come get you.”

“I’m not going to get kidnapped straight out of the Senate,” Steve assured him.

“Can’t guarantee,” Bucky muttered. “I need a phone. Call me? Every thirty minutes.”

“I will text every hour,” Steve proposed. Bucky grimaced. “And call every two hours. It’s just a day, Buck.”

“The baba yaga said it could be overnight,” Bucky mumbled, displeased.

Steve blinked. “What?”

“What?” Bucky echoed.

“The what?” Steve said, half laughing. “Baba yaga? You mean Natasha?”
Bucky just frowned, shrugging. “Her codename,” he said.

“Her codename is Black Widow,” Steve told him.

Bucky shrugged again. “I remember Baba Yaga.”

Steve copied the movement, shaking his head. He’d ask her later. Then he stopped, his expression falling.

“You remember?” he repeated quietly. “You knew her?”

Bucky looked away a little, his face going puzzled. “Maybe?” he said. “I remember… Girls? It was a group, three girls. She was there. She had to be there, she’s Baba Yaga.”

“How do you know?” Steve asked carefully.

Bucky just shrugged a third time. “I don’t know. I don’t remember a lot about it.”

Steve watched him frown, his own expression clouded with confusion, and resolved to ask Natasha later. He raised his palms to cup Bucky’s face, kissed him, and leaned their foreheads together.

“Are we good now?” he asked softly.

Bucky nodded. “I don’t like it,” he said. “But yeah.”

“I don’t really like it either,” Steve admitted. “But I have to go.”

“Why?” Bucky asked with a sigh.
Steve shrugged a second time. “It’s the right thing to do.”


“Nah,” he said though, “but you can fuck me later.”

Bucky grinned abruptly and Steve kissed it quickly. “C’mon, let’s go tell Nat.”

When he turned around, Bucky smacked him on the ass. He half jumped, flushed brightly, and Bucky laughed at him, catching him by the waist and kissing his cheek.

“Love it when you blush,” he murmured in his ear.

Steve definitely blushed again. Bucky kissed his cheek a second time, patting his ass. Steve cleared his throat, turned and adjusted his jeans, and Bucky laughed again.

“Shuddup,” he grumbled, walking out.

Natasha had her back to the counter, looking at her phone. She looked up as they re-entered and put the phone down. Steve saw that the screen was blank.

“We’re good,” he said before she could ask.

She raised an eyebrow. Steve was likely still pink in the face. Natasha looked suspicious still, and maybe she thought Steve’s cheeks were pink from blunt force trauma, but he didn’t care. Bucky’s hand rested at the small of his back, protective, not punishing.

“Good?” she repeated dryly.

“Yeah,” Steve said. He stopped by the end of the counter and Bucky came to stand on his left side, putting his arm around his waist. “We’re compromising. Do you have ceramic knives?”
“Yes,” Natasha said, sounding offended at the suggestion that she didn’t. “He’s staying?”

“Yeah,” Steve repeated. “I need to bring ceramic knives, so they don’t get detected by metal detectors, and a comm link that can reach DC. Bucky needs a phone, too. And something to track me with.”

Natasha’s eyes narrowed. “A tracker?” she repeated.

“In case we’re attacked and captured,” Steve said. He crossed his arms over his chest, daring her to question it.

Her eyes remained narrowed, but she didn’t question it. She sighed and swiveled on the stool. “Fine. You won’t need a comm link, then, just bring a BlueTooth and stay on the phone all day, it’ll be more reliable than comms. Unless you’re worried about it being intercepted?”

“We are,” Steve said.

Natasha eyed him, like she figured it was really Bucky who was worried about it being intercepted.

“Fine,” she said again. “I’ll get you some long distance comms.”

Steve nodded firmly. “Thank you,” he said.

She nodded, then slid off the stool. “Want to come pick out your knives now?”

“Sure,” he said. Natasha pushed her phone into her pocket, heading for the elevator, and when Bucky followed Steve with her, she shot him a glance.

“Do you mind if he comes?” Steve asked.

“No,” she said instantly.
Steve called the elevator, then looked at Bucky. Bucky raised an eyebrow in question, and Steve made a face at him that said he wasn’t going to like what Steve was about to say. Natasha was lying, and he didn’t want to make her uncomfortable.

“Do you mind waiting up here?” he asked Bucky.

Bucky scowled. He didn’t like what Steve had to say.

“He’s fine,” Natasha said, and Steve raised his eyebrows at her. She gave him a look, shrugging a shoulder, and Steve raised his eyebrows further. He’d learned how to read her, and she wasn’t as guarded in his presence. Natasha scowled, clearly realizing that and crossing her arms as she looked away. “Dammit,” she mumbled.

“Fine,” Bucky said, however. He glowered, clearly unhappy about it, but didn’t protest. “Don’t take too long, or I’ll eat all the chocolate.”

“Don’t you dare,” Steve said jokingly and Bucky cracked a smile. Steve kissed his cheek as the elevator doors parted, and Bucky caught him by the waist to catch his lips in a proper but brief kiss.

“Love you,” he murmured.


“He could’ve come,” Natasha grumbled.

“How did you meet?” Steve said instead.

Natasha glanced at him, arms still crossed and expression still primarily neutral with a hint of murderous intent. “How do you mean?”

“He knew you,” Steve said.
Natasha fully looked at him. “He remembers,” she said, and it wasn’t a question. Steve nodded anyway. Natasha huffed, working her jaw with her lips parted, then shook her head to look at the ground. She leaned against the wall of the elevator, just as it stopped and opened again.

“The Red Room introduced us,” Natasha answered finally, stepping out. Steve followed. “It was a scare tactic. When he left, two of us were dead.”

“Leaving just you?” Steve asked.

She shook her head, leading him into the apartment. It was similar in build to Steve’s floor, but differently decorated. The main difference was Clint sprawled on one of the sofas and snoring. Natasha knocked one of his legs off the armrest as she passed, going into what was a guest room on Steve’s floor, and Clint just continued to snore.

“There were seven of us left,” Natasha answered, opening the second of the two right-hand doors. Steve frowned.

“Bucky said he only remembered three?”

She glanced over her shoulder, then shook her head. “There were nine left in my group when Lukin brought him in, and like I said, seven when he left.”

Steve frowned on. Natasha moved to a vast cabinet, opening a drawer.

“Do I have ceramic knives,” she muttered under her breath. She gestured to it grandly. “Take your pick.”

Steve looked into the drawer, seeing perhaps thirty or forty varieties of ceramic weaponry, but was still focused on where Natasha’s story contradicted Bucky’s.

“He called you a Baba Yaga,” Steve voiced.
Natasha jerked her gaze to him, her expression floored. Steve glanced up, then said: “What?”

“Baba Yaga?” Natasha repeated hoarsely.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “What does that mean?”

“The three sisters that started the Widow program,” Natasha answered quietly. “The woman who trained us, all of us. The original Widows.”

Steve glanced down, frowning, but she wasn’t done.

“Her codename changed to Widow less than five years after their start, after Madame B killed her two sisters. In 1947.”

Steve took a moment to think. He licked his lips, looking away, drawing in a breath and sweeping a hand over his face. “Okay,” he said. “Okay. So he remembers three Russian women; he thinks you're one of them, so what?”

“Steve,” Natasha said, and abruptly her tone was cautious, “in 1947 he was in the hands of the Red Room. They kept him under control in a different method than the Americans.”

He looked at her, waiting for her to finish.

“They chemically induced a rut,” she said. Steve’s mouth went dry. “It unbalanced him, made him more susceptible to suggestion, more violent, harder to take down. And they kept him in it.”

“For how long?” he asked hoarsely.

“A guess?” Natasha started. She lifted a shoulder and looked at him with pity in her eyes. “The whole twenty years they had him before the Americans bought him.”

Steve’s whole throat went dry. “Shit,” he whispered.
Twenty years in an artificially induced rut? The thought of Bucky a day in a chemical rut, any rut away from Steve made his throat close up, but twenty years? He’d heard of Alphas that had developed life-long paranoia, become irrationally violent, even abusive from being stuck in a rut for too long, and too long was hardly a month. Twenty years? No wonder Bucky couldn’t fathom the thought of Steve leaving.

“Does he act like he’s rutting?” Natasha asked. “Ever?”

He shook his head, then stopped to shrug. “I don’t know. I couldn’t say.”

“Haven’t you been around him in a rut before?” she demanded.

“Not before a few weeks ago,” Steve snapped, and Natasha appeared taken aback slightly. Steve hadn’t really ever been exposed to Bucky while rutting. Their first time, Bucky had locked him out of reach as soon as his rut started to set in, so Steve didn’t know what he would act like. “He’s not – He’s not horny, or whatever, all the time, I know that much.”

“But he’s scenting you constantly,” Natasha said.

“That’s normal,” Steve said. She raised her eyebrows. “Okay, I know it’s not normal for you, but it’s normal for us.”

“Every few seconds?” she repeated.

Steve just shrugged. “I don’t mind it,” he said simply.

Natasha appeared skeptical. “If he’s behaving like he did while in the hands of the Red Room, then he’s even more unstable than we think.”

“He forgets things,” Steve admitted quietly.

“What things?”
He shrugs. “He forgot that I told him about food being for more than nourishment. He… He forgot…”

Steve stopped, hesitant. Natasha pressed it.

“What did he forget?”

“He spaces out,” Steve muttered. He looked at his hands, to start scraping under his nails unconsciously. “He speaks in Russian sometimes, forgets how to speak in English. Still understands it.”

What did Bucky think when he couldn’t remember how to speak English?


“He doesn’t get violent with me,” Steve snapped at her before she could imply that Bucky would ever intentionally hurt him again. “Even when he forgets that he’s a person, he knows who I am.”

“Who does he think you are?” she demanded.

“He just calls me his,” Steve says with a shrug.

Natasha gave him a dry grin. “Rut behavior,” she said, and Steve scoffed, rolling his eyes at her. “Look, I know you think it’s okay for Alphas to act territorial and controlling all the time –”

“I don’t think that!” Steve interrupted sharply and Natasha rolled her eyes right back.

“You don’t mind that he’s scent-marking you every few seconds,” she said, as if that proved her every point.

“I scent him every few seconds back!” he snapped.
Natasha repeated her skeptical look. Steve dropped his hands to his hips, glaring at her in challenge. He was reminded of just a few weeks ago, growling at her like some infuriated Alpha who wanted to use a commanding tone on her, and just like then, Natasha didn’t bow to his frustration. “What’s so wrong with scent-marking?” he demanded.

 Abruptly, she sighed. “Nothing,” Natasha said, and unfortunately, she’d raised her guard. Steve couldn’t tell if it was true or if it was false, and if false, why she would lie about it.

 “What am I supposed to do?” he asked instead.

 “What does he do when he spaces out?” Natasha asked instead of answering.

 Steve dropped his hands, then crossed his arms and shrugged. “He goes non-responsive. Sometimes he speaks only in Russian, sometimes he’ll speak English but only… Only like he thinks I’m a handler. A few days ago, he spaced out, I couldn’t get him to acknowledge me or remember me for a while. But when he slips into Russian, he knows who I am.”

 “Or he knows that you’re his Omega,” Natasha said.

 Steve glanced at her. “What’s the difference?”

 “In addition to being kept in a chemical rut,” Natasha started and Steve tensed, “the Red Room fed him with Omega pheromones, usually distress scents, so he’d think that what he was doing was to protect the Omega he was smelling, I assumed they were synthetic. It was easier when he was drugged.”

 Steve, at first, remembered the last time Bucky forgot English, how he’d reacted so negatively to the smell of Steve’s worry, but the past tense in Natasha’s statement jarred him.

 “You assumed?” he repeated.

 Natasha worked her jaw from side to side. “I’ve gone through his file,” she said simply. “The Baba Yaga agents were capable of altering their scents to manipulate Alpha agents, it was what made them so valuable to the KGB during the Cold War. Madame B was assigned to be his handler after she
Steve shut his eyes, raised his hands to cover his face, and exhaled slowly in a groan into them. He thought about that moment in the gym, when Bucky so easily obeyed the command suck on it.

“I hate the idea of leaving him,” Steve muttered into his palms. “I really don’t want to make him stay behind.”

“This only proves further that he’s unstable,” Natasha replied. “Until he’s adjusted, he should stay here.”

“I know,” Steve answered, “I just… I don’t like leaving him.”

Natasha gave him a long look, one that was still guarded but introspective, and Steve found himself looking away. It was a relief that he could give in to his shy instincts when it was him on the defense stand instead of puffing himself up defensively the way an Alpha would now that the truth was out. In the corner of his vision, Natasha tilted her head to one side and slipped her arms into a crossed position over her stomach.

“Are you okay?” she asked abruptly.

Steve tightened his jaw, his lips, his brow. He nodded shortly.

“You sure?” Natasha asked again, and her tone was uncharacteristically kind.

Steve took a long time to respond. In the end, he shook his head. He was sure, but he was lying.

“Do you want to talk?” Natasha said, and Steve shut his eyes to exhale sharply. “I know… I realize that you probably got boxed into a corner, waking up in the future. And nobody noticed that you were hurting. I didn’t notice. I’d like to apologize for that.”

“You had no reason to suspect anything,” Steve murmured.
“Maybe I didn’t have reason to suspect you lost a partner, but at the very least, you lost a dear friend,” Natasha said. Her tone was uncharacteristically kind, and Steve raised a hand to rub his eyes tiredly. “I know Sam’s offered to talk with you, but… Maybe you could use someone with shared life experience.”

Steve opened his eyes and looked at her feet, then at her crossed forearms, then back at the floor. Natasha echoed his own words from barely two weeks ago, a sentiment that Sam had voiced a few days ago, and one he had once believed in.

Not long after his mother died and he began working the streets, he crossed paths with another working Omega. He’d actually butted in on her territory. Her name was Eleanor, and after she’d finished chewing him out for trying to take her clients and realized he was just a scared boy, she’d taken him under her wing. She had explained the tricks of the trade, where to buy condoms and birth control, how to tell if a client had a disease that might be transmitted to him, what doctors he could go to that would check for venereal diseases without asking questions. What doctor he could go to if, but more likely when, he needed an abortion.

Her advice had been invaluable. She’d been a good friend to him until her murder in 1942. She’d been like a new mother to him until then, really. And even dead, she was guiding him. Her death had been an abrupt shock that had firmly reminded him why it was a bad idea to go looking for Bucky. She had been murdered by her childhood sweetheart.

But after the serum, after the war, after the future and the things he’d learned had been said and printed with his face painting the front pages, Steve had embraced certain aspects of the gender roles that had been forced on him as an apparent Alpha. He didn’t want to talk about his emotions or thoughts anymore.

“Steve?” Natasha prompted gently.

“I’m fine,” he lied easily.

Bucky would know it was a lie, and Steve would know he knew, but if Natasha could tell that he wasn’t telling the truth, there was nothing in her concerned gaze that betrayed it. Steve reached into the drawer and selected ten of the various ceramic weapons; four throwing knives, a short and a long tanto, two tactical daggers, a set of heavy knuckle dusters, and a karambit. Each had leather sheaths, the tactical knives and tantos complete with straps that could holster themselves to his limbs. The short tanto, in particular, was so thin that he could probably holster it to his upper arm and no bulge would be visible.
“I have something to tell you,” Natasha then said.

Steve, his arms loaded with the ceramic weapons, turned to face her. “What?”

“I went looking for your records,” she said, looking sorry for him. “There aren’t any.”

“I know,” Steve answered.

Natasha blinked, and that was her only reaction. “You know?”

“Brandt had all of them destroyed,” Steve told her.

“I figured that,” she muttered, then shook her head. “Do you have evidence? That Brandt was the one to destroy them?”

Steve shrugged. “He told me to my face that he was planning on doing it.”

“Anyone who could corroborate?” Natasha pressed.

He thought about it, then slowly shook his head.

Natasha blew out her breath heavily. “Well. I found your parents' marriage license, your mother’s death certificate. That’s all. I didn’t even find anything for Barnes, just his sister’s birth and his parents’ death certificates.”

Steve shrugged again. “His parents might not have had a marriage license. I doubt George was a legal citizen, he belonged to a Romani tribe, the government didn’t treat them kindly. And my mother wasn’t legal, either,” he added, “she was born and raised in Ireland, my dad brought her over as a war bride.”

He guessed, at least. His mother had never liked talking about his dad and their marriage. He knew they got married in 1917, and his father was dead by 1918. Mrs. Barnes had taught his mother English, so she must not have spoken much of it when his dad brought her to the States.
“I thought that,” Natasha murmured after a moment.

A thought occurred to him and Steve bit the inside of his cheek, lightly. “You could try looking for my arrest record,” he added reluctantly. Natasha raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t give my real name; it would be under Roger Smith.”

Natasha arched her eyebrow farther. “Roger Smith?” she repeated.

“I was thinking on my feet,” Steve defended. He’d been arrested only the one time. He hadn’t even spent a night in jail because the arresting officers didn’t have the evidence to hold him longer than the night and the captain took pity on him once the drunks started to file in and were looking at him like they were starving dogs and he a cut of lean steak.

“What were you arrested for?” Natasha asked.

He answered before he could think better of it. “Suspicion of prostitution.”

He sounded more confident than he felt. Natasha’s eyebrows lifted fully. Steve looked her in the eye, waiting for her full response.

“Were you innocent?” she asked after a long moment’s silence.

Steve merely shook his head.


Steve shrugged for the third or fourth time. He was beginning to feel a deep itch in his muscles; his body wanted his Alpha and wanted to be out of this conversation with its heavy themes. Yet he remained planted where he stood.

“My mugshot will be in there,” he told her, because that was the full, concrete evidence that was important. The mugshot could be compared to his enlistment pictures and prove that the serum hadn’t
changed his DNA. “The record will declare me an Omega.”

“And the charge?” Natasha asked. “You’re okay with it being exposed?”

“No,” Steve sighed. “But I wasn’t okay with a lot of things that happened to me in my life,” he said in a voice that trailed off into a quiet murmur. He shook his head, looking at the floor and the faded brown carpet. “What’s one more?”

Natasha knit her brows together in the center, lines appearing in her forehead that abruptly aged her ten years or more. She looked well into her thirties, maybe even nearing 40, rather than the 29 Steve knew her to be.

“I get that,” she said quietly. “I’ll try my best not to let that come out. We might not even have to defend your designation, it might never come up.”

Steve gave her a wry smile, though. “You and I both know that the world’s not that kind,” he said, and Natasha dropped both her gaze and her shoulders. She nodded. She knew.

A knock came from the doorframe behind them and Steve turned, finding Clint standing in the doorway. He was rubbing at his eyes, leaning on the door jam and yawning.

“Hey, Steve,” he said in a voice thick with sleep. “You coming to DC tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Steve said reluctantly. “You?”

Clint nodded. “We leave super fuckin’ early. Get plenty of rest.” With that, he walked out.

“He’s right,” Natasha said, catching Steve’s attention. “I’ll brief you after the flight down. We leave from the helipad at six thirty.”

Steve nodded shortly. Natasha gathered a few more things for him; a pre-paid phone, for Bucky he assumed, some comm links, a small panic button that would broadcast his location to JARVIS. He took them, juggled them in his arms to turn on the phone and text his number with it so he’d have it as he left the room. Natasha walked with him to the elevator, and as he pressed the button to call it,
“I did a few missions posing as a hooker,” she said. Steve looked at the elevator, not at her. “It was rough. I mean it, if you ever want to talk —”

“Thank you,” Steve interrupted, “but I can get by on my own.”

Natasha eyed him warily. The elevator doors opened and Steve stepped inside. Natasha caught the doors before they could glide closed, and gave him a slight smile.

“The thing is,” she said, “you don’t have to.”

Steve looked down. Natasha released the doors and they shut. The elevator rose without him needing to speak, the doors opening a moment later, and Steve looked up to find Bucky standing in front of him.

“Did you even move?” Steve tried to joke, tried to smile. It wasn’t effective.

Bucky reached for him, pulling him out of the elevator and into his embrace. Steve dropped his forehead onto his shoulder, the weapons and supplies ladening his arms making a cold barrier between them that meant he couldn’t hug back. Bucky ran his wrist down Steve’s spine, over the thin strip of skin between his shirt and jeans exposed by his leaning forward, down his hip, back over his shoulders and finally to his neck and cheek. Steve pressed his face into his wrist, then into his palm as it cupped his cheek, and Bucky kissed the tip of his nose.

“C’mon,” he murmured.

Steve let himself be lead from the elevator’s doors to the bedroom, where Bucky was finally sleeping, to sitting on the mattress and dumping the ceramic weapons onto its surface. Bucky examined them, checked the blades for sharpness, durability, checked the handles and grips, then placed them on a dresser by the door. He checked the phone, the comm links, the panic button, and these joined the weapons on the dresser. Steve stayed sitting on the bed until Bucky came back to him, to kneel before him and take his hands. He squeezed his hands, sweeping a thumb over his knuckles.

“What’s the matter?” Bucky prompted quietly.
“I don’t want to go,” Steve whispered immediately.

Bucky squeezed his hands again. “I know, sweetheart.”

“There’s no proof that I didn’t fake my way into Project Rebirth,” Steve mumbled, then stopped just to suck in a breath at the wash of emotion nearly bowling him over. “Natasha couldn’t find any proof I even existed, Buck. Natasha couldn’t find my records.”

Bucky squeezed his hands once more, then lifted one and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. Steve sucked in another breath through his nose.

“I don’t wanna go,” Steve muttered again. Bucky flipped his hand and kissed his palm, then the inside of his wrist. “I don’t wanna do this anymore, Buck,” Steve whispered, shaking his head, “I don’t wanna be Captain America. I never wanted to be Captain America. Captain America’s turned into a fucking pigheaded Alpha-centric bigot, I hate him, I hate keeping my mouth shut all the damn time, I’m sick of having to pretend I’m fine –”

His voice cracked and he broke off, for Bucky to drop his hand and reach up to cup his cheek.

“Then quit pretending,” he told him gently. Steve shut his eyes, pressing into his touch. “You don’t owe anybody anything,” he said, “you don’t gotta do nothing you don’t want to. You done enough, sweetheart, you done more than enough. Let it go.”

Steve choked on an inhale, then slid off the mattress to fall to the floor in front of Bucky and grab him in a tight hug. Bucky dropped onto his ass, drawing Steve between his legs and holding tightly as he could with only one arm. He folded his legs behind Steve’s knees, even, locking him between his heavy thighs where his arms couldn’t secure him. Steve buried his face in Bucky’s neck, feeling not like Atlas was squeezing him between his palms, but that he had just dropped the world onto Steve’s back, dusted his hands, and walked off to leave him to hold it up on his own. The full weight of everything that had happened in the wake of Insight hit him then; the truth of his status and what that meant for his life, what that meant for the world, and how it would be taken. He hadn’t touched the Internet or news outlets since finding Bucky alive and his true designation being exposed, but he knew the world. He knew what they thought of everyday male Omegas, he knew what they would say for him. There was a reason Steve had been called girl-boy _long_ before he’d even presented.

To start, it would be his fault that his life had been covered up and himself reported as an Alpha. There was no concrete proof that it had been Senator Brandt’s idea, and even if there once had been,
it would have just been covered up in turn. Congress would sooner blame him than one of their own. Congress would sooner blame the Omega than the Alpha.

Secondly, Congress would likely try to fixate on the lie of his life rather than focus on the blatant failure of the US government to keep S.H.I.E.L.D. and HYDRA by extension in line. Thirdly, as Captain America, they would question why he did not stop HYDRA sooner. Because it would not matter that Steve had been given the barest amounts of information, that he had only been on active duty in the future for two years since the Chitauri Invasion of New York, or that there were hundreds of other people alive and actively working for S.H.I.E.L.D. who should have and could have actually done something about HYDRA since his interment in the ice in 1945. None of that would matter.

If anything, the only other person Congress would blame would be Peggy. Peggy, or maybe Natasha. Omegas had no business working in intelligence or the military, and no matter how progressive the future claimed to be and for all their scratching, third-wave feminism had yet to crack the glass ceiling.

“I got you, doll,” Bucky murmured in his ear. “Nobody can touch you here.”

Steve nuzzled into his neck, already dreading tomorrow when all of Bucky’s scent would fade from him within hours. He squeezed his arms around Bucky’s shoulders and neck, a hand creeping up to tangle in his hair, pressed into his front and nuzzled his neck.

“Can we…?” he said quietly, an incomplete question. “I want to still feel you tomorrow. Please?”

“I can do that,” Bucky answered sweetly. “I’ll stay in you all night, how’s that?”

Steve let out a sound akin to a whimper, nodding quickly into Bucky’s neck. Bucky gripped the back of his neck, then tucked his face into the nape of it to mouth at his scent gland lightly.

“If I bite you again, bite you hard enough to leave a mark, will it hurt?” he asked quietly.

Steve swallowed. “I don’t know,” he murmured. “I don’t think so.”

He wasn’t sure if it had even hurt the first time.
“I don’t want it to hurt,” Bucky said.

“I can Google it,” Steve answered. Even if it would, the pain would remind him of Bucky, and that was better than nothing.

Bucky nodded into his neck, then dropped his arm to hook under Steve’s thighs. “Hold on, baby.”

Steve pushed his legs around Bucky’s hips, locking them at ankles, then gripped his wrists and held on. Bucky pushed to his feet, stood up, then set him gently on the mattress and Steve released his grip to lie back. Bucky bent over him to kiss his lips, then pulled back and tugged his phone from his back pocket.

“Okay,” Bucky said, looking at it. “What the fuck is Google?”

Steve laughed gently, then reached out for the phone. Bucky pressed it into his palm, then dropped beside him and propped up himself on an elbow. Steve swept through his home screen until finding the Google search bar widget.

“This thing,” he said, pointing to it before tapping it. The Google app opened, the keyboard launching, and he tapped out a testing query. “You enter a search term, and it gives you results based on what you asked.”

He Googled the word *apple*, and the top result was the company, not the fruit. Bucky huffed, shaking his head.

“He Googled the word *apple*, and the top result was the company, not the fruit. Bucky huffed, shaking his head.

“ Weird,” he said. Steve just shrugged.

He tapped on the search bar again, then paused to think of how to phrase the question. Bucky dropped off of his elbow while he thought, kissing his temple. Eventually, Steve began to type. It was best just to be as blunt and factual as possible with Google.

*Can my Alpha bite into my scent gland again after bonding*, was what he searched. The top result was from Planned Parenthood on the importance of not bonding rashly, and after scrolling through pages for a minute, Steve found his answer.
He dropped the phone onto the bed on his other side and turned onto his side to face Bucky, draping an arm over his waist and kissing him. Bucky pushed his hand into his hair, eventually massaging the back of his neck, as they kissed for several long moments. Steve parted his lips and Bucky took it as an invitation, pushing his tongue into his mouth. When they broke for air, Steve rolled onto his back again and Bucky followed, throwing a leg over his hip.

“You can bite me,” Steve said quietly.

Bucky kissed down his neck, stopping at his scent gland and sucking on it.

“It won’t hurt,” Steve added, his eyes falling shut. It wouldn’t. It wouldn’t feel as good as a first bite, but it wouldn’t hurt. Though, he wouldn’t have a first bonding bite to compare it to, as he couldn’t remember much of the cabin past Bucky collapsing into his arms. He hadn’t been fully conscious when Bucky had bit and bonded him. Probably, that could be added to the pile of things that had been done to him without his consent, but he didn’t want to think about that just then. He just wanted Bucky.

Bucky laved at his scent gland with his tongue, then slowly rolled his hips into him. Steve let his arms fall over his head, not feeling up to much more than lying there and letting Bucky do the work. Bucky kept sucking and licking at his scent gland, slowly and sweetly arousing Steve to the point that even he could smell the slick coming out of him. Just before it could start to seep into his underwear and cool, Bucky lifted up from his neck and undid the button and zip of his jeans. Steve lifted his hips up, letting Bucky pull off his boxers and pants, then raised his shoulders and arms when Bucky tugged at his shirt. A moment later, he felt Bucky’s bare abdomen and thighs touching him, and Steve lifted his hands to set them at Bucky’s back.

Bucky kissed his lips softly, as a hand crept between his thighs. Steve spread his knees apart, his ankles dangling off the edge of the bed, and hummed in appreciation as Bucky began to gently prep him. He was glad for the slowness; it meant he felt every movement, every texture, the calluses of his fingertips compared to the smooth glide of his knuckles, where the skin around his nails was frayed, the slight jut of the nail itself. Steve held onto him and Bucky kept kissing him, his lips, his neck, his shoulders, his chest. Slowly, Steve was losing awareness of anything but Bucky’s fingers and kisses and the heat coming off his skin.

It was a fragile and weary bliss. For a moment, Bucky pulled away from him, perhaps to get his fingers deeper or just to look at him, but it caused an immediate and highly negative reaction in Steve. He whined, squeezing his eyes shut against what little light was in the room, his fingers scrabbled for a hold on Bucky and found only scarred skin.
“Shh, shh, you’re alright, babydoll,” Bucky murmured. He bent low again, pressed their lips together, and Steve whimpered faintly. Bucky licked into his mouth, then kissed along his jaw to his neck and down to his scent gland. “I got you, sweetheart, don’t worry, ‘m here, I got you.”

“’M ready,” Steve mumbled. “Please, get in me, please, I need you –”

“Shh, shh, it’s okay, sweetheart,” Bucky crooned gently in his ear. His fingers retreated and Steve winced, feeling the emptiness like a pain. “I’m right here, baby, right here.”

He was only empty for a moment. Bucky kissed under his ear, then bit at the lobe before catching his lips, and Steve sighed into his mouth as Bucky pushed in and stopped seated fully against his hips. Steve’s heels came back up the bed, planting into the mattress and digging in, as Bucky kissed his mouth again before dropping down to his scent gland and he began a slow rhythm. Steve, in all honesty, could have been content just to lie like this all night, but Bucky began to increase his pace and it got too good for him to continue remaining passive. Steve dug his fingers into Bucky’s back, pressed his heels into the mattress to lift his hips up, whimpered and moaned as Bucky began to scrape his teeth over his scent gland. He pressed his head back into the bed, to bare his throat as far as he could, and Bucky mouthed all over it, over his collarbones, his shoulders, his chest, back to his scent gland to suck hard on it.

Bucky was soon going at a punishing pace, soon fucking Steve’s brains out and Steve vaguely was aware of the cries and gasps and groans coming from his own lips, even less aware of what Bucky was saying to him other than the I love you’s intermittent in his words. Steve was soon coming, then again, then again, managing three orgasms before it started to hurt, then Bucky was sinking his teeth deep into the scent gland in his neck as he finally came, too, and Steve well and truly lost all awareness.

Bucky flipped them over, so Steve was lying on his chest, and Steve tucked his head into the nape of his Alpha’s neck. There was a faint throb in his neck where Bucky had bitten him, but it was more hot than hurt, and Steve prayed to the God he didn’t believe in anymore that it would still be throbbing the next day.

He woke up to his phone ringing. Steve groaned at the sound, burying his face farther into Bucky’s neck, but it kept ringing at an annoying volume. Bucky growled, shifting under him, then the ringing stopped.

But not because Bucky had turned it off. Bucky shifted again, and the phone pressed to Steve’s ear.

“Steve?”
Natasha’s voice.

“Yeah,” Steve grumbled in answer, voice scratchy from sleep.

“It’s six fifteen. You heading down any time soon?”

“Shit,” Steve mumbled.

Natasha laughed quietly on the other end of the phone. Steve took the phone from Bucky, lifted up to sit straddling Bucky’s hips, then let out a quiet, involuntary gasp as he felt Bucky still joined to him. Bucky caught his waist, swallowing visibly.

“You okay?” Natasha asked.

“Fine,” Steve answered immediately. He rubbed at his eyes, then dropped a hand to his neck. His scent gland pulsed with faint heat, feeling tender and swollen. “I’ll be down in fifteen minutes,” he added to Natasha, then quickly hung up and tossed the phone aside.

Bucky’s thumb swept over his ribs. “You okay?” he asked, echoing Natasha, but in a softer tone.

Steve started to nod, then shook his head. He dropped down again to kiss him, then with great reluctance, lifted off of him. Bucky winced against his mouth and Steve kissed his cheek apologetically.

He sat up again, and Bucky’s hand came to his neck. His fingers stopped at the nape of it, pressing down gently on his scent gland, and Steve’s eyes fluttered shut.

“Call me as often as you can,” Bucky said. Steve nodded. “Wear a high collar, okay?”

“I’ll be in a suit,” Steve mumbled, but he understood. Bondmarks were private things, not to be shown off so soon after being made. And even if this wasn’t the bite that bonded them, it would be red and flared and attention-grabbing, and Steve wanted to keep it between him and his Alpha. It
was something intimate and precious to be shared only between them two.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” Bucky promised.

“Eat,” Steve said. He slipped off Bucky’s lap and kissed him gently. “And go back to sleep.”

But Bucky sat up, watching as Steve went about getting dressed, and Steve really didn’t expect him to go back to sleep. Bucky watched as Steve strapped the ceramic weaponry to his body. He used one of the knives to slice open the pockets of the slacks he’d be wearing; he could keep his phone and wallet and anything else he might need in other pockets. He tuck the throwing knives and karambit and knuckles dusters into the inner pockets of a jacket. He tied the sheaths of the tantos to his thighs, the tactical knives to his chest just under his arms. He dressed, the slacks and shirt loose, clipping the comm unit to the inside of his pants before winding it up his shirt to wrap over his ear. He donned the jacket and slipped a tie around his neck, buttoning the collar to the top, then knotted the tie tight around his throat. Just to be safe, Steve ducked into the bathroom to check that there were no marks visible over his collar. There were none; either Bucky had taken care not to bruise high on his neck, or they had faded overnight.

Knowing his Alpha, and his body, Steve suspected they had just faded.

Bucky joined him in the bathroom, catching him by the arm to kiss him. Steve bent to tuck his face into his neck, then nuzzled lightly. Bucky swept his wrist over Steve’s shirt under his jacket, and Steve slipped out of the bathroom.

“I’ll see you later,” he said instead of goodbye.

“Love you,” Bucky answered, voice tight.

“I love you, too,” Steve said. Bucky walked with him to the elevator, and as the doors parted, caught his elbow and kissed his cheek one last time. “I’ll be back soon,” Steve promised, though it wasn’t true.

Bucky just nodded. The doors shut on his scowl.

Steve let himself exhale once, told JARVIS that he needed to reach the helipad, then raised his hands to rub at his eyes. He let himself have the seconds between floor ninety-one and eighty-two to let all
the air out of his lungs, to let his shoulders deflate and his spine droop forward. He felt the familiar posture of defeat, without the crook in his lower spine or the dull ache of arthritis. He fully covered his face, trying to inhale deeply and steadily, then the elevator dinged.

Steve jerked into a parade rest stance. His arms folded behind his back. His spine inflated and stiffened. His shoulders set squarely, his jaw clenched and face dropped into an expression of determination. All before the doors opened.

The common floor was deserted, but through the windows on the far side of the building, he saw Natasha and Clint waiting near a still helicopter. Steve stepped out of the elevator, to cross the room with a long and quick stride. He opened the door to the helipad, exited the building, and nodded to both Natasha and Clint as they turned to face him.

“Morning,” he greeted stiffly.

Natasha’s expression was unreadable. Clint yawned.

“Off we go then,” Clint mumbled.

“I’m flying,” Natasha said. Steve just nodded.

They donned headsets after climbing into the helicopter. Natasha took the pilot’s seat and Steve took the co-pilot’s, and Clint clipped in the back to just let his head loll forward and begin to snore over the radio. Natasha reached back and flipped his microphone up before she took the helicopter into the air, cutting off his snores.

“We’ll get coffee in DC,” Natasha said over the headsets.

“Fine,” Steve said. Coffee didn’t do much to him anyway.

“The session opens at ten,” Natasha added, “I’ll brief you when we land.”

Lady Liberty stood guard over the bay, her torch held high to herald the oncoming dawn and her book of justice in hand to herald the new age. Looking at her weather-beaten face, Steve thought she looked more like a symbol of fatigue than freedom. After the centuries that had gone by since she had been erected, her arm must have grown tired holding up her torch that provided no light to a godless God-fearing nation. Her heart must have grown weary that the freedom she was meant to represent was still being handed out in controlled allowances to her sisters and brothers, the emancipated slaves of Rome and the West her maker had meant her to represent.

As Natasha flew past Lady Liberty, high above her seven-pointed crown gone dull through the years, there was a deep itch in Steve’s bones that was growing steadily into restlessness and anxiety. His body wanted his Alpha.

Little good an itch would do. Almost unconsciously, Steve reached up with tender fingers to the side of his neck, where just under his collar, his scent gland still pulsed with heat.

The Washington monument eventually came into view, perhaps an hour and a half after they had left Manhattan and Lady Liberty. Natasha put the helicopter down behind Bolling Air Force Base, where Airmen came to secure it and they left it. A taxi was waiting for them, and Steve wound up squashed against the window seat with Natasha crowded on his left side on the drive off-base into the city itself.

They were let out outside a coffee shop a few blocks from the Capitol building. Steve didn’t bother going for the line, inside, just headed for a booth in a corner and let Natasha and Clint head to the counter to order. He sat down, feeling a bit nauseous from the flight, the car ride, and hunger.

Natasha and Clint joined him several minutes later, holding bags and cups of coffee. Steve took the coffee he was handed, grateful though it would do nothing to him, then the five egg sandwiches Natasha pushed on him. He looked at them, not wanting to eat despite his discomfort, and Natasha gave him a look that said he had no choice. Steve ate them, albeit slowly. The cheese tasted processed, the meat laden with grease, the bread cardboard-like in taste and texture. Food was sure better than it had been when he was a kid.

It was nearly nine when they entered the coffee shop, quarter past when Natasha began to brief him on the inquiry so far. Ten minutes in, Steve found himself holding his head up in his hands, as despite the fact that Congress had been inquiring into the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. almost three weeks, they had gotten absolutely nothing done.

“That’s Congress for you,” Clint said at one point.
Though he said nothing to them, Steve was seriously considering if he and Bucky could just vanish. Fake papers and escape out of the country where they didn’t have to answer to Congress for anything, like they’d planned to do when the war was done. They should have deserted during the war.

At a quarter to ten, they left the cafe, refills of coffee in hand, to walk the seven or eight blocks to the Capitol building. There were crowds on the streets already, and as they approached, the crowds became populated with reporters.

Steve went stiffer, in shoulders, in spine, in face and arms. Natasha went looser, steps superficially relaxed as her hips swayed in time to the click of her heels. Clint hunched his shoulders in and turned down his hearing aids, and Steve envied him. They pushed their way through the crowds of reporters and cameras and microphones, saying nothing, to the steps of the Capitol and towards the Congressional inquiry.

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[2014 Transgender Violence Statistics Sobering Thus Far, A.J. Walkley for Huffpost]

“As the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia approaches on May 17, the Transgender Violence Tracking Portal (TVTP) has released its first report — in the first four months of 2014, 102 acts of violence against transgender people have been logged. Such reports are sent in to the portal voluntarily, meaning that there have definitely been many more unreported acts of violence as well…

“Among the 102-person figure that comes in from 14 countries worldwide, “36 persons were shot multiple times, 14 stabbed multiple times, 11 were beaten to death, three were burned to death, three dismembered/mutilated, and two were tortured, two were strangled, one was hanged, one had her throat cut and one was stoned to death…””

*  

[october 8th, location undisclosed]

“Boss! Hey, boss, check this out!”

Brock looked up, ready to snap at the rookie who’d interrupted him, to a news broadcast just as it was unmuted.
“– with Agent Romanoff for the inquiry is Captain Rogers, finally showing his face on Capitol Hill.”

Slowly, a grin spread across his face. Captain America walked beside the Black Widow and Agent Barton with a stiff upper lip into Capitol Hill, and not a single bodyguard trailing behind him. There was no sign of the asset.

How does one catch an animal? With just the right honey-sweet bait.

Chapter End Notes

the answer to your outrage is yes. whatever you're thinking the answer is (probably) yes. but feel free to demand further answers from me in the comments anyway, i try to reply to as many as i can bc you guys deserve to know that you've made me smile. i'll see you next week for the update! (p.s. is there an anti-brock rumlow squad yet? if so, can i join up? if not, what are you guys doing get on that)
oh, sweetheart...

Chapter Summary

"sweetheart, you're no whore..."

Chapter Notes

Hello, it's Tuesday, and this is a chapter. I just want to say that y'all are the sweetest, kindest readers I could ever have and I love you very much. No there's no reason to be suspicious... Much thanks to the lexi squad for lending me their eyes to make sure this chapter is at its ultimate form before I present it to you, my dearest readers, having actual betas is such a godsend, Grammarly hates me so much because I use my commas in a very specific way and we do not agree on whether or not they are appropriate. Of course, lexi#2 is also particular about her commas, but we've come to a compromise. You can listen to this chapter's playlist on Spotify here, and don't forget to leave a review, to at least threaten me if nothing else. I mean, no spoilers. Enjoy!

Edit: You can find the cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“The world at large is a dangerous place. But for some, their risk of harm, harassment, severe
injury or even death skyrockets. Every woman is fully aware that she should be afraid of the man walking behind her late at night. Every parent teaches their children that they should be wary of strangers offering gifts. It feels like every person knows to assume that if they are not careful, they will be the warning story told to scare a little responsibility into teenagers. And on the other hand, it feels like every far-right conservative has an irrational fear of any individual to be not white, straight, Christian, and not cisgender or typically designated. It’s been said so many times that half of female homicide victims are killed by male partners or friends [CDC], but what’s the actual truth for people of color, for trans people, for the untypical designations?

“… Over 20 black men and teenage boys were unlawfully killed by police in 2012. That’s not counting other suspicious deaths or confirmed foul play or injury, or any kind of harm caused to black women. It’s July…

“… At least 50 trans women were murdered by individuals who were proved to be transphobic since January. There are 277 active missing persons and suspicious death cases of trans women that have yet to be processed in New York. That’s not counting trans men, either…

“… Five male Omegas were born in the New York between 1990 and 2000 according to census data. One was murdered last year, but three of them committed suicide before reaching 25. The fifth has been missing since 2006, and as of today, there is no one looking for him…”

*

[october 8th, the United States Capitol Building]

The Congressional panel gathered, and true to precedent, all members of the inquisition were white, middle-aged, Alpha males.

Steve and Natasha stood before them, on trial essentially. At the center of and leading the panel was Congressman Wenham, with Generals Bryant and Scudder on each side. After the panel had filed in and taken their seats, Wenham took up his gavel and banged it once.

“All may be seated,” he declared.

The sound of over a hundred people taking their seats at once overtook the room: The shuffling of feet, scraping of chairs, re-settling of weight. Then silence.

Wenham looked once over the room, then down to his notes.

“We meet here today to continue the inquiries following the collapse of the Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division, Project Insight, and the return of the Nazi cult
known as Hydra.”

Wenham then met Steve’s gaze directly. “As Captain Rogers has finally decided to join us,” he went on, and Steve clenched his jaw, “then the rumors of Captain Rogers’ designation and involvement in Hydra may also be addressed.”

Steve said nothing. Naturally, not only would the survival of HYDRA be his fault, but now he was being accused of actively aiding them. So he clenched his jaw and stared straight ahead, speaking not a word.

Wenham slightly narrowed his eyes as Steve maintained a level gaze, then shifted his gaze back to his notes.

“The first item on the agenda is, still, the resurgence of the cult Hydra. We resume where we left off yesterday with the presence of Hydra within S.H.I.E.L.D.” Congressman Wenham adjusted his papers and turned a hard eye on Natasha, who didn’t appear at all fazed. “Agent Romanoff claims that it was the actions of General C. Phillips that allowed Hydra to persist past the defeat of its founder. Agent Romanoff?”

“Thank you,” Natasha said, and Steve had to admire how she actually sounded grateful. “If you would, please, turn your attention to the screens, I will show you further documentation of Operation Paperclip.”

Steve did not turn his attention to the screens, but kept his gaze fixed firmly on the tabletop before him. Natasha had papers spread out on it, so far that they reached past where Steve was sitting, enough that he could focus his gaze on them and not on, what he assumed, would be soon showing Zola’s face.

The panel was being televised. He only hoped that Bucky wasn’t watching.

“Operation Paperclip was started by General Phillips to recruit Nazi scientists to the SSR, which later became S.H.I.E.L.D. It is his signatures on the documents that provided military pardons to each scientist and granted them Visas to enter the States. These papers have the original watermarks and have been examined by forensic scientists to verify that they are legitimate.”

“What reason would General Phillips have had to recruit Nazi scientists instead of condemning them?”
“You’ll see here, page 37b, in paragraph four…”

Steve kept his focus on the papers. His hands, under the table’s surface, were clenched into fists. Despite the fact that Zola was now well and truly gone, he was still angry at Phillips for lying to his face. *A life for a life,* he’d been promised. It had taken too long and too much suffering to be fulfilled.

It took five hours for Natasha to convince the Congressional hearing that the documentation of Operation Paperclip was valid, and even at that point, the panel did not state whether or not they accepted that it was the reason for HYDRA’s continued existence. Their silence was answer enough.

“The next item is Hydra’s accumulated war crimes committed across the globe,” Congressman Wenham announced after a short recess was granted. “Agent Romanoff,” he said, “you yourself are guilty of carrying out more than one of Hydra’s orders.”

“I am guilty of obeying the orders of my superior officers,” Natasha answered easily.

“Do you believe that Director Fury had any involvement in this?” Wenham demanded.

“As he is now dead by the hands of Hydra, no,” Natasha said dryly, and privately Steve admired her talent for falsities.

“And your allegations that the Secretary of the World Security Council, Alexander G. Pierce, was involved?”

“I have documentation…”

They argued another hour. Congressman Wenham eventually stated that he wished to have Natasha brought to trial for the murder of Pierce, to which Natasha smiled sweetly and said she had further documentation to prove it self-defense.

The topic was, eventually, tabled. Tabled, not resolved. Steve’s nails were biting into his palms from how tightly he clenched his fists.
“To the next part of this item,” Wenham said, shuffling papers. “After digging through the massive amounts of classified information you released to the Internet—” Natasha continued to smile as Wenham glared at her, “—we have found Hydra’s so-called greatest weapon.”

A back molar flared in pain as Steve cinched down his jaw. Congressman Wenham waved for a file to be displayed on the screens, and it wasn’t Project Insight.

“The Winter Soldier has vanished,” Wenham said calmly. A metal arm emblazoned with the Soviet star took up most of the screen, the photograph blurry as the subject was moving. Fighting, likely. “The Winter Soldier’s file is primarily in Russian, and what little there is in English only ever refers to it as the asset.”

“He,” Steve snapped.

A hush fell over the room. Steve clenched his jaw.

“I’m sorry?” Wenham asked coldly.

Steve swallowed and unlocked his jaw. “He,” he repeated. The word seemed to echo in the silent chamber. “The Winter Soldier is a person. Not an it.”

Wenham looked over his papers, as did the rest of the panel. “There is no indication that the asset was a human being,” Wenham announced. “We assumed that it was an android or mech suit of some kind.”

Steve opened his mouth, and Natasha set a hand on his arm. He shut it.

“The Winter Soldier is not an android,” Natasha said, where Steve would have likely just blurted out that the Winter Soldier was James Buchanan Barnes and deserved to be referred to as a he and not an it.

“There is discussion of maintenance,” Wenham replied, “repairs, adjustments, procedures that were performed on an it. There is not a word indicates that the asset is an actual human.”
Steve gritted his teeth, praying desperately that Bucky wasn’t watching the broadcast.

“I have translated some of the parts in Russian,” Natasha said. “They are on the screen now.”

Steve did not look at the screen. He heard gasps, then curses, shouts of alarm. Somewhere a glass shattered. General Bryant uttered a single: “Dear Lord…” that was picked up by his microphone and echoed throughout the chamber. Steve did not look away from the table’s surface.

“The Winter Soldier’s identity, for now, will remain confidential,” Natasha said. “He was taken prisoner by an ally to both HYDRA and the KGB known as the Red Room several decades ago. You will see on the screen the schematics for the electroshock device that Alexander Pierce had built to wipe his memory in 1966, while, I might note, he was still serving in the office of Governor in the state of New Hampshire. I have video footage of the Winter Soldier undergoing a memory wipe; however, for the sake of those in this room who are not comfortable watching graphic instances of torture, I will not show it now.”

Steve knew that Natasha didn’t give a shit what those in the room were comfortable with. She would have been perfectly happy to show in clear, graphic detail, just how much of a prisoner the Winter Soldier was to HYDRA in addition to being a weapon. He knew that the only reason she wasn’t playing it was because he was there, and he was grateful.

“If the Winter Soldier is indeed a human and not an android, then his identity may not remain confidential.”

“With all due respect, Congressman, the Winter Soldier was a prisoner of war and victim of HYDRA just the same as those he was forced to assassinate. Out of respect to him and his family, I will not disclose his identity.”

“Agent Romanoff, you are aware that this is an inquisition. You may not withhold any information.”

Steve lifted his focus from the tabletop to catch Natasha’s gaze. She looked at him from the corner of her eye only, and he nodded slightly. As much as he wanted to cling to the anonymity of the Winter Soldier, Wenham was correct. They didn’t have a choice.

“Who is the Winter Soldier?” Wenham demanded again.

There was uproar. Steve wished he could clap his hands over his ears, the volume of noise in the room exploded so violently and so abruptly. He saw Clint out of the corner of his eye yanking out his hearing aids and Natasha’s eyelid twitching as her only reaction. Wenham banged his gavel, shouting for silence, and the uproar continued. Wenham rose to his feet as he continued to bang the gavel, but wasn’t even audible over the sound of the attendees shouting.

Cameras flashed as reporters crowded in to get closer. Even though there was a barrier separating those viewing the inquisition and those participating, reporters pressed in on all sides, their microphones reaching, and the words best heard in the din were:

“CAPTAIN AMERICA, YOUR THOUGHTS?”

“SILENCE!” Wenham screamed into a microphone. It cut through finally, and a hush fell over the room. Steve pressed two fingers to his temple, trying to massage away the headache coming in from the ringing in his left ear.

Wenham sat down slowly. “All those in attendance will return to their seats immediately or be removed from the hall,” he declared in a quieter but no less firm tone into the microphone. “Immediately!”

The crowd shrank back. Under the table, Natasha gripped Steve’s knee apologetically for a brief moment.

“Agent Romanoff,” Wenham said, voice half hoarse from shouting to be heard. “Do you claim that the Winter Soldier is the Sergeant James Barnes of the Howling Commandos who was killed in action in January of 1945?”

“Yes,” Natasha answered simply.

“Captain Rogers,” Wenham said, and it was the first time they had addressed him at all. “Do you support her claim?”

“I do,” Steve answered.
“You believe the Winter Soldier to be your former sergeant?”

“I know he is,” Steve said. It was easy to keep his tone emotionless; as if he were just claiming the Winter Soldier to be his sergeant, and not everything else Bucky was to him.

“How can you be sure?” Wenham demanded.

“I’ve known him my whole life,” Steve said.

Wenham, for a long moment, said nothing, as the hush settled over the hall yet again.

“You and Sergeant Barnes met in 1943,” Wenham tried to insist.

Steve shook his head. He hadn’t intended to get into this now, but he was honor-bound to answer all questions posed to him. He had set his hand on the Bible and sworn to tell the whole truth, and even if he doubted its author, he always kept his word. So he shook his head.

“You and Sergeant Barnes met in 1943 when you rescued him and the other soldiers from a Hydra facility in Austria after their capture at the Azzano,” Wenham said, and Steve shook his head again.

“At what point did you meet Sergeant Barnes?” General Scudder snapped.

Steve took a moment to process what he was going to say. It was one thing to tell his friends. But the whole nation was likely watching this, and those that weren’t would be seeing headlines on the Internet as soon as the words came out of his mouth.

“Did you meet in basic training?” Scudder demanded. “Or after he joined the Howling Commandos? When?”

“I was a baby,” Steve said quietly. If it hadn’t been for the microphone perched on the table before him, the words would have been lost. “His mother babysat me as mine had to work after my father’s death. We were neighbors until 1933. He was my best friend my whole life.”
Where before there had been deafening noise, there was now deafening silence. Steve stared with a tight jaw and hard eyes at the tabletop before him. His hands were clenched on the table’s surface. He waited for the blow to come.

“Captain Rogers,” Wenham said, and Steve did not like the way his tone abruptly brightened, “what is your relationship with the Winter Soldier?”

“His name is James Barnes,” Steve snapped at first.

“What is your relationship with James Barnes?” Wenham asked again.

“Congressman, may I ask the relevance?” Natasha said hastily.

“Answer the question, Captain,” Wenham insisted.

Steve first clenched his jaw, then unstuck it, and answered. “He’s my Alpha.”

When the uproar returned, Wenham did not immediately bang his gavel for silence; he didn’t even touch it. The whole panel looked shocked.

Steve shut his mouth and jerked his face down, so the cameras zooming in on his face couldn’t see the anger in his eyes. He shut his mouth, while reporters around him yelled for answers to questions they had no right to ask. He shut his mouth, exercising the right to remain silent he theoretically still had.

Wenham let the uproar die down on its own this time before speaking again.

“So,” he said in a slow, dangerously kind tone, “you and your sergeant carried out an inappropriate relationship throughout your time in the service?”

“Congressman,” Natasha said before Steve could answer, “may I point out that same-sex and same-designation marriage is now legal in 37 States?”
“But carrying out an intimate relationship with a fellow officer in the military is prohibited no matter
the state,” Wenham announced, and Steve shut his eyes. “As is falsifying information on enlistment
forms. Since we have now come to the subject, Captain Rogers, are you, or are you not, an Alpha?”

“Captain Rogers’ designation is not the subject of this inquiry –”

“In my agenda,” Wenham interrupted Natasha sharply, “item four, Captain America’s role in the
persistence of the Nazi cult Hydra and the truth of his designation, to which the American people
have a right to know!”

Steve longed to hide his face in his hands, to refuse to answer, to, frankly, just leave. What right did the American people have to demand anything of him? When had he agreed to sell his soul to Captain America?

“What gives the American people the right to insert their noses en masse into the life of the greatest
soldier in American history?” Natasha demanded in his defense.

“As a clause of Project Rebirth,” Wenham snapped, and Steve swept a hand over his eyes tiredly
before dropping it into a fist in his lap, “Captain Rogers agreed to allow his life to be subject to the
inquiry of the United States government at any interval where it pertains to his career.”

Whenever the timing, he had clearly, unwittingly, sold his soul to the United States of America a
long time ago.

“I am not an Alpha,” Steve announced.

Wenham slowly blew out his breath. So did the rest of the room, which, at this point, was beginning
to feel like an auditorium, and he a captured victim of the hungry lions looking down on him. Or a
pit of vipers, their tongues flicking to taste the air, and he just a boy with scraped knees from dark
back alleys in Brooklyn.

“Then you falsified your designation on your enlistment forms?” Wenham asked.

“No,” Steve said.
Wenham blinked. The other members of the panel exchanged glances.

“How were you admitted to Project Rebirth?” General Bryant demanded.

“Rebirth only took Omegas,” Steve said, more calmly than he felt. “Dr. Erskine didn’t feel comfortable giving the serum to an Alpha after what happened to Schmidt.”

His every word defied the history the American people had lapped up for the past seventy years, and he was tired after all these years of silence.

“I have documentation to prove that,” Natasha added.

Steve finally looked at the screen, as Natasha called up an old memo. It was weak evidence, but better than nothing.

“For what reason was your life story falsified, then?” Scudder asked.

“Senator Brandt wanted to make sure that I was never exposed as an Omega,” Steve answered, then looked up at them, so the cameras would catch his vindictive smile as he said, “I think some of us in the room can guess why.”

The cameras flashed again. The Congressional panel looked down on him with hard expressions, but from the corner of his eye, Steve saw more than one woman’s face go stormy. But he was tired. The inquiry had been in session for several hours now. It was already past dark, Steve desperately wanted to go home, to return to his bed with Bucky and collapse, and he doubted they would be returning to New York that night.

“You claim that a United States Senator falsified your records?” Wenham asked of him sharply.

“I do,” Steve said.

“And do you have proof?” Wenham added.
Steve shook his head, and Wenham nodded, as if he had known that all along. Steve knew all along they wouldn’t believe him. Congress wasn’t on the minorities’ side.

“I am afraid you do not make a very compelling case, Captain Rogers,” Wenham said. He checked his watch, then lifted his gavel. “We will break for the night and resume tomorrow at eight a.m., where we will discuss Captain Rogers’ case; falsifying information to wrongly claim his title and his inappropriate relationship with a subordinate.”

“Congressman,” Natasha started, but Wenham banged the gavel.

“Dismissed,” he announced.

The panel rose and with them those in attendance. As the panel filed out, Natasha hissed a curse.

“It’s alright,” Steve told her gently, “we knew this would happen.”

“This shouldn’t happen,” Natasha spat. “Let’s go.”

Clint approached, setting a hand on her shoulder as she gathered her papers. She hardly even reacted. He caught Steve’s eye, a sympathetic look to his face, and Steve just shook his head. He wanted no comfort from Clint.

“We have a hotel,” Natasha said, confirming Steve’s fears; he wouldn’t get to lie next to Bucky tonight. “Let’s go.”

Steve took out his phone as they filed out of the auditorium, sending Bucky a text that they would be staying overnight in DC. He promised to call later.

He got an answer right away.

Call now.
Steve glanced around the still filled room, then texted Bucky that he’d have to wait five minutes. There wasn’t an answer at all to that.

Natasha hailed a taxi outside the Capitol building, and Steve dialed the number of the prepaid phone Bucky was using.

Pressing the phone to his ear, he waited for the answer. Natasha succeeded in flagging a cab and they piled into the back seat once again, Clint and Steve taking the edge seats and Natasha squished between them. Natasha gave the driver the address of a hotel downtown and the car pulled away from the curb.

The dial tone stopped. Steve touched his temple to the window, the chill of early October nights seeping from the glass and into the headache built up in his skull.

“Hey,” Steve said softly.

“Where are you staying?”

Steve blinked once, then turned to face Natasha. No hello, then, no how are you. Bucky sounded stressed, which was probably why.

“Where is the hotel?” Steve asked Natasha.


Steve repeated this to Bucky, and he heard keyboard strokes over the phone. Bucky must have found his laptop.

“Security?”

“I’ve got friends there,” Natasha said, leaning into Steve’s shoulder to talk into his phone.

“Friends from where?”
“Do you want to talk to Nat?” Steve asked shortly. He rubbed at his temple, tired and frustrated.

“Yes,” Bucky answered, and Steve gritted his teeth before handing the phone over. He pressed his temple into the cold window, squeezing his eyes shut. He tried to tune out Natasha and Bucky’s voice over the phone. He envied Clint’s hearing aids.

He ended up pressing his palm over his ear. It muffled Natasha’s voice and cut out Bucky’s almost entirely. Steve pressed his other hand over his eyes, the lights streaking across his closed lids making him nauseous.

Natasha tapped his shoulder. He lifted his head, then took the phone back from her. He put it to his ear and mumbled another hey.

“I was watching the broadcast,” Bucky said.

Steve pressed his palm tighter over his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he murmured.

“What’re you sorry for? Ain’t nothing you done.”

“I had to tell them, Buck,” Steve said, and whatever else he might have had to say was drowned out by Bucky shushing him.

“I know,” he said. “But it’s okay. They can’t do nothing about us, can’t stop us. We’re bonded, remember? Let no man tear asunder?”

Steve swallowed through his constricting throat. Those were wedding words. Matthew 19:6, “Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

Except Steve didn’t know where God was, let alone if he and Bucky were one flesh the Lord had joined together for no man to tear asunder.
“Yeah,” he said anyway. There was a deep itch in his bones that had turned into an ache, a physical constriction in his chest that felt fragile and bottomless. His body wanted his Alpha, to be reunited with the second half of his one flesh. Little good an itch would do. His hand slipped from covering his eyes to the side of his neck, where the flesh was still inflamed and warm under the cloth.

“You’re in a cab, right?”

Steve nodded, then quickly muttered an affirmation.

“Stay on the phone ’til you get to your room. We can talk there, okay?”

“Okay,” Steve mumbled.

“I know you ain’t, or you’d just lie, so I won’t ask if you’re alright.”

Steve dropped his hand, looking shamefully at the shine of his shoes in the passing lights. “Sorry,” he said quietly.

“You got nothing to apologize for, sweetheart. Ain’t your fault. Ain’t a problem, neither. I talked to Sam earlier.”

“Yeah?” Steve said. He tried to focus on that, on Bucky, instead of the way his chest hurt listening to him.

“Yeah. We talked ’bout fault. It ain’t my fault any of the stuff happened, so it can’t be your fault, neither.”

Steve swallowed through a tight throat. He bit his lip, having no words to respond with.

“And it ain’t my fault I’m messed up in the head, Sam says. So it ain’t your fault you’re not okay. It’s okay to not be okay.”

“How?” Steve asked quietly.
“It’s human.”

Steve bit on his lip, then covered his face again with the hand not holding the phone to press down subtly on his orbital sockets with his fingers and palm. The longing ache in his chest was spreading up to his nose and the throbbing pain in his brain was spreading out to his eyes. For a brief moment, then it returned to his neck, holding on to his scent gland under his collar.

“It’s not a fault at all,” Bucky went on. “It makes you just as human as everybody else.”

“I know,” Steve said, just to have something to reply with.

“Do you?”

After a second, Steve shook his head. But Bucky couldn’t see him, so he murmured: “No.”

“That’s okay, sweetheart,” Bucky promised gently.

“It’s not,” Steve said quietly, and he heard Bucky exhale over the phone.

“It’s okay that you don’t agree,” Bucky told him. “I still feel like I ought’a get whipped, and it’s okay that I’m not there yet, so it’s okay if you’re not there, either. Sam says so, at least.”

“Sam’s a smart guy,” he said mournfully, and Bucky answered with a light but humorless laugh. Steve wondered – No, he hoped that Bucky felt the same itch for the other half of his one flesh.

“Yeah, sure is. How far off is your hotel, doll?”

Steve glanced up, then asked Natasha.

“Twenty minutes,” she said, looking at her own phone. He appreciated that she was trying to give him some privacy.
Steve repeated it. He heard Bucky murmur a quiet okay. Steve clenched the hand not holding the phone, praying Bucky wasn’t about to say they should hang up until he got to his room.

“Let’s talk about something nice, okay?” Bucky said, and Steve slowly unclenched his fist, laying his palm over his collar. “I’m got my arm put back on earlier.”

“That’s great,” Steve said, trying for enthusiasm. He hadn’t been there. “Your shoulder’s healed up good?”

“Yep. Not a twinge of pain. Cho’s gonna make me do physical therapy and shit, but it’s all light stuff. She’s got me stretching these rubber bands, doll. I can probably bench press a truck and I’m stretchin’ rubber bands.”

Steve laughed quietly. There were over two hundred miles between him and Bucky, but he could tell that Bucky was smiling now. There was a weak hum in their bond that felt like his smile.

“Stark put all sorts’a weird shit in my new hand. Seriously, he’s turnin’ me into a Swiss army knife, Stevie. I got a corkscrew in my thumb.”

Steve snorted, and the hum strengthened some. “In your thumb? Why your thumb of all places?”

“I don’ fuckin’ know, doll, there’s a corkscrew in the thumb, a tiny screwdriver in the index, scissors in the ring finger, and an actual fish scaler in the pinky. It’s got a ruler, too, all two inches of it. And the scissors are still just as useless as they are in an actual Swiss army knife.”

Steve laughed again. “What’s in your middle finger?”

“I think nothing?” Bucky answered. “Stark didn’t say anything, at least.”

Steve thought back to when Stark initially discussed putting tools in the fingers of Bucky’s prosthetic hand, and a sneaking suspicion that there was a small motor in the middle finger came to him.

“You don’t think…” Bucky started.
“Possibly,” Steve said. Bucky groaned and Steve sniggered lightly.

“That guy’s weird,” Bucky announced. “Seriously. The fuck, Stark?”

“I guess you’ll just have to find out?” Steve suggested.

Bucky groaned again, but there was still the fragile hum that felt like his smile connecting them over the two hundred plus miles between Manhattan and DC. Steve clung to the feeling, his palm soaking up the heat coming off his scent gland. As soon as they got to the hotel and he was locked safely in his room, he would strip off his tie and fold back his collar just to look at it, just to check that it was still red and there were still the marks of Bucky’s teeth. Out of habit, he prayed. He prayed that there would be.

“How you doin’, Stevie?” came Bucky’s gentle voice.

“I’m alright,” he answered.

Bucky hummed lightly across the phone. Steve couldn’t tell, through the faint static of the crappy prepaid cell, if that meant he believed him or not. Steve wasn’t sure if he believed himself or not.

“I remembered something earlier,” Bucky said.

Steve slowly smiled. “What?”

“The backs of your knees are ticklish.”

Steve laughed, folding his ankles tighter to the seat even though Bucky wasn’t there to reach out and demonstrate how ticklish his knees were. He laughed, even though Bucky had said he knew that two weeks ago in the shower at Natasha’s safehouse. He’d forgotten, then remembered again. “Yeah, that’s true,” Steve agreed, trying to see it as progress, and Bucky chuckled as well. “What else did you remember?”
“Tickling your knees,” Bucky said, laughing, and Steve rolled his eyes despite his smile. “Don’t roll your eyes at me, dollface, don’t think I can’t tell you’re doin’ it.”

“How?” Steve demanded. He kept his voice down, though he doubted Natasha was listening in and Clint was holding his hearing aids in his palms. He didn’t really want the cab driver listening.

“You’re not denyin’ it,” Bucky snorted.

“How can you tell?” Steve demanded again.

“No clue. Maybe I just know you that well.”

Steve leaned against the window, his palm cupped against his scent gland and a smile on his face. “I’ll admit it,” he murmured.

“Ha, see, gotcha,” Bucky teased him. “My babydoll’s a brat, huh?”

Steve rolled his eyes again. He heard Bucky laugh.

“You just did it again,” Bucky said.

“I did,” Steve answered. Maybe it was like how Steve could tell that Bucky was smiling.

“Didja wanna hear what I remembered or were you just gonna be a brat?”

“What did you remember?” Steve asked. He sat up a little straighter, just to improve his posture.

“We was in your room, doing’ homework. You was tryna teach me somethin’, I didn’t remember that part, but me, I wasn’t havin’ none of it. You know you’re cute focusing?”

Steve felt his ears go warm in addition to the gland in his neck, ducking his head despite the fact that
no one was looking at him. “You think everything I do is cute, Buck,” he mumbled.

“Hell, yeah, I do! You’re blushin’, ain’tcha?”

“Shuddup,” Steve grumbled, and it only made Bucky cackle.

“You’re cute, Stevie! You’re fucking precious!”

“You were telling me about a memory,” Steve tried to insist.

“Right, right. Anyway, I think it was Latin or grammar –”

“Oh, because those are two things easily mixed up.”

“Who’s tellin’ the story here? I say it was one of the two and it don’t matter which it was.”

“Uh-huh,” Steve answered skeptically. Bucky huffed, but he was still smiling. Steve could tell.

“You was tryna teach me something, doesn’t matter what, and I couldn’t focus on it ‘cause you were damn adorable. You’d gotten some sun ‘cause you’d been doin’ a paper route, so you had all these freckles over your face and arms and your hair was shinier than normal, and your hair’s like spun gold on a bad day, doll.”

Steve was still blushing a little. The phone was cool against his ear.

“And me, I was tryna my damndest not to just lean in and kiss you. I think you were thirteen? I don’ know if I was fourteen or fifteen yet, I can’t remember, but you were thirteen ‘cause you’d been doin’ the paper route.”

“You were fifteen,” Steve said quietly. “It was May.”
“That makes sense. Then you were nearly fourteen.”

Steve was beginning to recall the moment Bucky was talking about. It was early May, the summer had come in full swing early, but the air was still dry from the spring. He’d grown a whole two inches that May and gained some muscle doing the paper route.

“I nearly did, y’know?”

“Did what?” Steve asked absently, recalling how Bucky’s hair stuck to his forehead in the summer heat.

“Kiss you.”

Steve’s ears went hot all over again. He swallowed through his constricting throat.

“That was why I leaned in. I leaned in and you looked up, you asked what I was doin’, so I started tickling you. Got you on your back, laughin’ your head off, got your shoes off and everything.”

“It was grammar,” Steve told him. “I was trying to help you memorize prepositions.”

“Prepositions. Yeah, alright, but I still don’t give a shit about prepositions.”

Steve nodded vaguely. He remembered it clear as day. He had had his nose buried in the textbook, reading them aloud, and had looked up to find Bucky only a few inches from his face. His heart had started beating hard in his chest, and his voice had almost cracked when he asked if Bucky was alright. He could still picture the way Bucky had looked, like he’d found a hundred dollars in his shoe; his eyes wide and mouth open, cheeks pale and lips red. He’d been licking them. It made more sense now, if Bucky had been thinking about kissing him.

Steve, in fact, had sprawled onto his back in the hopes that Bucky would straddle his thighs and tickle his stomach and underarms until he got so close that they were inches apart again. He had hoped Bucky would look down at him, wide-eyed, and when Steve licked his lips, he’d close the gap.
“I think there were a hundred times that I nearly kissed you but didn’t, Stevie,” Bucky said.

“I was probably hoping you would all those times,” Steve answered softly.

There was a deep ache in his chest that swelled and throbbed. He could tell Bucky was smiling regretfully, just as Steve was.

“‘M sorry I never did, dolt,” Bucky murmured.

“Turned out alright,” Steve said. Eventually, anyway. Maybe. He turned his gaze out the window, watching the silhouette of the Gaylord nearing. “Anyway, you’ll get plenty of opportunities to make it up.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said quietly. Steve bit his lip. “I don’t think I’ll wanna let you out of the apartment for a week once you get back,” he added, a little more upbeat, and Steve felt his ears go hot yet again. He felt Bucky grinning, and it hurt since he couldn’t see it.

“You’re blushing, right?” Bucky asked.

“You’re smiling,” Steve answered.

“Yes to both,” Bucky said, and Steve’s lips curled despite the hurt in his chest. It was bittersweet.

Steve’s gaze flicked out the window again as the taxi pulled into the driveway. “We’re at the hotel,” he said into the phone. Then just stopped.

“Stay on the line,” Bucky asked. His voice was hasty.

“Yeah,” Steve answered quietly. “I won’t be saying much.”

“‘S fine.”
Steve popped open his door, unclipping his seatbelt and getting out. He stretched, taking the phone away from his ear for a moment, while Natasha and Clint crawled out.

Natasha hefted her briefcase out of the trunk while Clint paid the taxi, then she lead them up to the hotel’s front desk. Steve stuck the phone back to his ear belatedly, catching Bucky on the tail end of complaining about turkey bacon.

“– it’s so dry, what’s even the point?”

“Real bacon’s better,” Steve agreed vaguely. Natasha exchanged a few words with the receptionist, then a woman in a skirt suit exited a back room and walked up to shake her hand. “Who’re Natasha’s friends, did she say?”

“She knows the head of security,” Bucky answered. His voice went tight, slipping out of trying to distract Steve with pleasant conversation. “And half the security staff.”

“Alright,” Steve muttered in reply. He half listened to Natasha and the woman, presumably the head of security, exchange words, then a bellhop was summoned and Natasha waved Steve and Clint on. The bellhop and woman lead them to elevators, getting in with them, and they were all silent as they traveled to the nineteenth floor, then to a room at the far end of the building.

“Can you have some fresh clothes sent up for us?” Natasha asked, putting down her briefcase.

“Of course,” the woman in the skirt suit answered.

Steve looked around. There was only the one room, vast as it was.

“Steve, what size are you?” Natasha called. “Suit wise?”

He turned back, blinked a second, then hesitantly said: “44 long?”

Natasha narrowed her eyes at him before flicking them over his body, then leaned over to the head of security. “Make the slacks a size smaller,” she said. The woman nodded knowingly. Steve, a little uncomfortable, stepped around a sofa and sat down.
“Stevie, you alright?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, pressing the phone back to his ear. “Fine.”

“Uh-huh,” Bucky answered skeptically. Steve glanced over his shoulder, just as the bellhop and the head of security left.

Natasha wandered over and flopped onto the sofa beside him. “They’ll drop the clothes off at six,” she said. “The bellhop will bring us toiletries.”

“Who’ll do the what?” Bucky demanded.

“Natasha’s friend is getting us clothes for tomorrow,” Steve told him.

“Oh,” Bucky muttered.

Steve glanced around the room again. There was only the one room, with two beds and a single bathroom. He bit his lip, then hit mute on the call, so Bucky wouldn’t hear him.

“Are we sharing?” he asked Natasha softly.

She nodded. “Clint snores,” she said, though Steve already knew that.

“Steve?”

Steve hastily unmuted the call. “Yeah, I’m here,” he said. He stood up from the sofa. “I’m gonna… Talk to Bucky in there –” he gestured to the bathroom “– if you guys don’t mind.”

“Go ahead,” Natasha said, waving a hand. Clint replaced him on the sofa and Steve stepped into the bathroom as Natasha curled up to put her head in his lap.
Steve locked the bathroom door, then put the phone on speaker and set it on the counter. He yanked his tie off, dropping it carelessly into the sink, undid a few buttons at his throat and pulled his collar away from his scent gland.

It was slightly puffy still, barely pink, and had faint puncture marks visible. It was nearly healed over already.

“Stevie?” Bucky said again.

“Sorry,” Steve said automatically.

“You okay?”

Bucky kept telling him not to lie. Steve put his hands on the counter and leaned on it a minute, sighing loud enough that he was sure Bucky heard him, then picked up the phone and sank to the floor, his back pressed to the bathtub.

“No,” he murmured.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky said then.

“Not your fault,” Steve said.

There was silence a minute. Then:

“Thank you,” Bucky said, “for tellin’ them that…”

“What?” Steve asked, half exhaling the word. Fuck, he was tired. He was tired, his fingers trembled slightly as they held the phone, the deep ache in his chest felt like it was going to expand his whole body and consume him whole, but he didn’t want to sleep alone.
“That I’m not an it,” Bucky said eventually.

Steve shut his eyes, then slumped backward until he could rest his head on the bathtub edge. “I couldn’t just say nothing,” he mumbled.

“You could’ve, but you didn’t. Thank you. I – Handlers referred to me as an it. I sometimes… I forget that I’m not an it… Sometimes…”

Steve pressed his hand to his face, trying to contain the ache. “I’m sorry,” he muttered from under his palm. “I wish I was home with you.”

“I know, doll. I wish you were here, too. But you’ll be okay, you’re safe with Baba Yaga.”

For a second, Steve said nothing. Bucky called his name softly once more.

“Natasha wasn’t ever a Baba Yaga,” Steve said.

“She wasn’t? But…”

“The program she was in, they were all Widows. The woman you’re remembering is the woman who trained her. The original Widow, she had sisters, they were the Baba Yagas.”

“I… I remember Romanoff…”

“She wasn’t a Baba Yaga,” Steve repeated tiredly.

Bucky said nothing. Steve dropped his hand to his neck, impulsively pushing hard on the tender skin over his scent gland, making pain flare down his spine.

“What’d you just do?” Bucky demanded, sounding panicked.

Steve jerked his hand away. “I – I didn’t –”
“Are you okay? Something hurt, what hurts?”

“Nothing,” Steve tried to insist and heard Bucky growling over the phone. He dropped his head back in a reflex, except Bucky wasn’t there to kiss his bared throat.

“Steve,” Bucky warned him.

“I just… I touched my scent gland,” Steve mumbled.

“What’d you do? That was pain, sweetheart, that wasn’t something good.”

“I pressed on it,” he answered, shamefully at being caught. “It’s almost healed again.”

Bucky went quiet.

“Maybe we should run away,” Steve said, barely above a whisper, half paranoid of Clint and Natasha outside the door. “Like we planned to, run off, live out in the country somewhere where no one can find us. Pick a deserted island and just stay there. Just… disappear.”

Bucky’s silence went on longer, and for a second Steve panicked that he didn’t remember their plans to run away to Paris after the war.

“Maybe we should,” Bucky said finally. “But you weren’t never the kind to run away from a fight, Stevie.”

Steve let out his breath, deflating with the exhale.

“And you know we’d be back as soon as the next crisis came along,” Bucky carried on. “Much as you hate who Captain America is today, you’re still the guy who snuck into a secret Nazi research facility and rescued over 400 guys on the off chance just one was still alive.”
“I knew you were alive,” Steve mumbled. Bucky didn’t reply, and after a second, Steve added, just as quiet, “I didn’t think you remembered it. When I rescued you.”

“I remember some of it,” Bucky said, and Steve deflated a little more.

“Do you remember –” he started, then stopped. He wasn’t sure if he wanted him to. “After?”

“Some of it,” Bucky said again, in a tone that made Steve shrink on himself, and while part of him was pleased that Bucky’s memory was getting better and better, a greater part of him wished that Bucky hadn’t been able to recall the bad parts. Bucky probably remembered Steve screaming in his face the most.

“I never said I was sorry,” Steve said.

“What for?”

“Lashing out,” he muttered, looking down at his knees splayed open on the floor. The floor was white marble, swirled with black, and it reminded him of the resort hotel in France. Like everything else just then, it hurt. “Attacking you like I did.”

For all the things he was sorry for in life, how he paid rent was the biggest, and right behind that was spitting in Bucky’s face: “I already had an Alpha, but he wasn’t around, was he?”

“You had right to be mad at me,” Bucky said, but Steve shook his head.

“I didn’t have the right to be cruel to you,” he confessed. “I was bitter.”

“You had right to be,” Bucky repeated.

“But not – Not to hurt you like I did,” Steve said. He reached up, pressing his palm to his scent gland as if he could prevent the heat from escaping from it and keep it from healing over, and maybe it was a good thing that there were over two hundred miles between them, because he wasn’t sure he could have said this to Bucky’s face. “I was bitter, so I wanted you to feel guilty and I was glad you looked sickened, ‘cause I wanted you to feel like it was your fault. But it wasn’t, and it was wrong of me to
want to make it that way.”

When Bucky didn’t answer again, Steve kept talking.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he insisted. “You only ever wanted to do right by me and I tried to make you feel like you hadn’t because I was bitter about my own choices. I chose to – to do what I did. I wanted you to feel like I blamed you, but I didn’t.”

“You had every right to blame me,” Bucky spoke up.

Steve squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head. “No, no, I didn’t. You were just trying to do right by me, Buck. It wasn’t your fault.”

“If I’d been there –” Bucky started, and Steve cut him off.

“It’s not your fault. If it’s not your fault or my fault any of the bad things that happened to us happened, it’s not your fault that I –” He stopped, swallowed through his constricted throat, and started again. “It wasn’t your fault I made myself into a whore.”

“Aw, sweetheart,” Bucky said softly, almost a coo across the phone. “You’re not a whore, sweetheart. You never been a whore.”

Steve tried to smile, shaking his head.

“You didn’t have any other choice,” Bucky said. “You would’ve starved to death if you didn’t work the streets. Sweetheart, you’re no whore.”

“Was one, then,” Steve muttered.

“Stevie,” Bucky murmured, “much as you hate that you did, I’m glad for it.”

Steve’s jaw dropped. “You’re – What?”
“I’m glad for it,” Bucky insisted. “And as sick as that makes me, I’m happy you kept yourself alive and fed and a roof over your head no matter what paid the bills. Far as I’m concerned, it got you back to me, and that’s enough.”

His mouth hung open and Steve found he just didn’t know how to reply.

“I told you that before, didn’t I?” Bucky said quietly.

“No,” Steve whispered.

They never talked about it. They had never talked about it, they had always found excuses to pretend it never happened, that there wasn’t time to discuss it, that it was in the past and therefore didn’t matter. Bucky had never told him that he was grateful for Steve’s time as a whore.

“I should’ve,” Bucky said. “God, you gotta believe me, I ain’t mad about what you did, never was, never will be.”

“But—” Steve tried to say.

“No buts ‘bout it. I couldn’t ever be mad at you that you put food in your stomach and had heat in the winter, fuck no, Stevie, how could I be mad about that?”

Steve couldn’t answer. He had always assumed that Bucky had just wanted to pretend he’d never sold his body.

“I love you,” Bucky said gently.

“Love you, too,” Steve murmured.

Bucky would always find new ways to surprise him, he supposed.
“It’s almost eleven,” Bucky said. “You gotta get up early. You should sleep.”

Steve swallowed, then bit on the inside of his cheek and looked down at the swirled marble floor. “Can I tell you something?” he said quietly.

“‘Course you can, doll.”

“I don’t want to sleep alone,” Steve admitted.

Bucky was silent for a moment. Steve covered his scent gland with his palm, thumb wrapping around his neck to rest on the knot of his throat.

“I don’t want to, either,” Bucky said at last.

“Are you gonna?”

“Probably not.”

Steve nodded absently even though Bucky couldn’t see him.

“I’ll tell you what,” Bucky said, and Steve sat up a little straighter. “You go to bed, I’ll try to sleep. And we stay on the phone, I’ll stay on the line until you fall asleep. That way you’re not alone”

“Allright,” Steve mumbled. It wasn’t falling asleep secure in Bucky’s embrace, but it was better than nothing. “Thank you.”

“Don’t gotta thank me, sweetheart. I’m always gonna do my best to take care’a you, yeah?”

Steve smiled tightly, painfully. “I’ll still thank you. My ma taught me manners.”

Bucky laughed. Steve remembered, a long time ago, a drunk man on the verge of a rut snarling in his
face, “Didn’t your mama teach you manners, boy? A nice Alpha wants to take care’a you, you let him!” , and he thought musingly that this was what his mama taught him manners for after all. It put a smile on his Alpha’s face when he was hurting.

“You still got all those knives?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Want me to sleep with one under my pillow?”

“Please,” Bucky said quietly, and Steve didn’t even have the urge to protest any longer.

A knock came at the door. Steve glanced up, feeling Bucky tensing over two hundred miles away, but got up from the floor to answer it.

“You lot done?” Natasha asked, rubbing at her eyes. She’d taken off her makeup already, but the motion left smudges of black under her already baggy eyes. She looked exhausted and like she was approaching forty, not thirty.

“Yeah,” Steve said shortly. Natasha stepped back so he could walk out, then she moved into the bathroom as he left.

He hadn’t thought about Natasha and Clint. Clint was already sprawled on one of the beds, snoring lightly with the blankets tangled around his waist and one leg sticking out. There was a stack of clothes, cotton pajamas, and a small bag of toiletries on the unoccupied bed. Steve heard Bucky calling his name and pressed the phone back to his ear hastily.

“What’s the matter?”

“Um,” Steve started. “The three of us… We’re sharing a room…”

“Makes sense,” Bucky said. “Sleeping in shifts?”

“I don’t think so?” Steve answered, a bit taken aback. He had assumed Bucky would be upset about the sleeping arrangements. “You don’t mind?”
“You’re better off grouped together,” Bucky answered, sounding confused, like he didn’t get what Steve was alluding to. “Somebody breaks in, you’re not alone.”

“Yeah,” Steve muttered. “But… I’m sharing with Natasha and Clint.”

“They’re your friends, ain’t they?”

“Yeah…”

“Whatchu worried about?”

Steve faltered. He wasn’t sure any longer. Clint’s snoring wouldn’t bother him; Bucky had always snored like a freight train before the war. He’d shared rooms with Natasha before, even a sleeping bag on more than one occasion. She always picked him as a partner for cold assignments because his body radiated so much heat. Natasha was fine.

He hadn’t ever slept in the same room as Clint before. And sure, he trusted the guy with his life, he trusted Clint wholeheartedly in a fight, but that was different. That was a life or death situation, that was separated from the day-to-day, and that wasn’t anywhere near as vulnerable as sleep. He wasn’t comfortable around Alphas that weren’t Bucky in cramped quarters.

“Stevie? You alright?”

Steve was then immensely glad that Bucky had volunteered to stay on the phone until he fell asleep. He probably wouldn’t be able to.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “The bathroom locks, at least.”

Bucky made a non-committal grunt. Steve walked over to the second bed, picking up the pajamas and shaking them out. They were full length, in pant and sleeve, and would button to the throat. Steve was grateful for that as well, and the fact that the hotel was willing to provide sleep clothes. He hadn’t been looking forward to sleeping in his suit, and there was definitely no way he could even contemplate sleeping in anything less than full sleeves and pants in the same room as Clint. He tugged the shorter of the two tantos from the hole in his pocket and placed it under the pillow, then
went about disarming himself as best he could without undressing. Clint continued to snore behind
him.

Natasha exited the bathroom a minute later, and Steve gathered the pajamas and toiletry bag to re-
enter the bathroom and change for bed. He was quiet, but so was Bucky. Steve brushed his teeth,
splashed water over his face which felt grimy, then scrubbed at his hands habitually.

“You want me to tell you a bedtime story, sweetheart?” Bucky asked as Steve left the bathroom
again. Steve just laughed quietly. Natasha glanced at him, standing by the bed Clint was in to take
out her earrings, and Steve just pointed to the phone pressed to his ear. She shrugged, pulling back
the blankets and getting under them. She’d stuck Clint’s leg back on the bed, Steve noticed. He
moved to his own bed, plugging in his phone and laying down with it by his face.

“You good?” Bucky asked. His voice was quiet not pressed to Steve’s ear.

“Mhmm,” Steve answered, being soft so as not to disturb Natasha. “Goodnight.”

“Night, doll. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” Steve whispered. He switched out the lamp and shut his eyes, settling close to his
phone. He could almost hear Bucky breathing.

He actually managed to sleep.

Morning came abruptly with Natasha shaking his shoulder. Steve jerked, Natasha grabbed his wrist
and he realized he had snatched the handle of the knife beneath his pillow in reaction.

“Just me, big guy,” she said. “Good reflex, though.”

“Thanks,” Steve mumbled. Natasha stepped away, moving towards the bathroom, and Steve hastily
looked away when he registered that she was wearing only a slip. He saw Clint sitting on the end of
his and Natasha’s bed, holding a remote and looking at the TV, but it was muted. The captions were
turned on, and after Steve read for a few seconds, he looked away. The newscast was discussing
yesterday’s events at the inquiry.
Steve picked up his phone and checked his call records. Last night’s call to Bucky had lasted nearly six hours. He must have fallen asleep sometime around one, but Bucky hadn’t hung up for another hour after.

He texted him to say he was awake but didn’t expect a reply, as it was hardly six. He received one before he even locked the screen.

Bucky answered him with a simple *Morning, doll*, then a second text came through asking how he’d slept. Steve replied honestly, because he still felt exhausted, and Bucky answered with an apology. Steve sent *Not your fault* and Bucky sent back a *Still sorry*. Steve just blanked the phone and set it down to rub at his temples.

Natasha exited the bathroom a minute later. Steve gathered the stack of clothes neatly piled at the end of his bed, then all his weapons and replaced her in the bathroom to dress. He felt bad about it, but he cut holes in the pockets of the slacks so he would be able to reach the tantos. He fumbled in tying the tactical knives to his chest, his fingers stiff from sleep, then, without thinking about it, reached up to scratch at the side of his neck. A faint burn flared in it and he hastily stopped, so Bucky wouldn’t think he was hurting himself again.

The burn faded to a light itch, and Steve dropped his hand to look at his scent gland. It was still pink and puffy, but the puncture marks were gone, not even white pinpricks. Steve finished dressing without looking at it or touching it again.

Outside, Natasha raised her eyebrows at him. “How much coffee do you have to drink to feel anything?” she asked.

Steve blinked at her for a minute, trying to process the question and then find an answer for it. “I have no clue,” he said finally.

Natasha narrowed her eyes, tapping a finger against her chin. “Have you tried espresso?”

Steve shrugged.

“You’re trying espresso,” she said.

“Fine,” Steve sighed. Maybe it would actually work on him, who knew. Natasha waved at Clint,
then signed something; Steve had picked up a fair amount of modern sign language since 2012, but Natasha signed a lot faster and with gestures he didn’t recognize, so all he caught were the words *Coffee* and *Moron*. He assumed she was lovingly insulting. Clint groaned and fell back against the bed, raising a finger in a gesture Steve didn’t need to know sign language to understand, but Natasha walked over and pushed his hearing aids at him. Clint hooked them into his ears with a scowl.

“Good?” she said.

Clint waved a hand, then fiddled with the left one. Natasha repeated the word.

“Good,” he said. Natasha patted him on the shoulder, then grabbed her briefcase and strode out. Steve and Clint trailed behind her.

There was a taxi waiting for them at the curb, as well as Natasha’s friend from the night before. She and Natasha spoke for a brief moment while Clint got in the cab, then they shook hands and Natasha got in. Steve followed her, dropping his head against the window after he shut his door. He checked his phone, but had no new texts, and pushed it into his jacket pocket.

The taxi took them back to the cafe near the Capitol building. Steve returned to the corner booth while Clint and Natasha got in line; granted, a very short one. They were back a few minutes later, and Natasha handed Steve a large cup of iced coffee.

He took a gulp, then coughed and grimaced at the incredibly bitter taste of it. “What the hell is this?”


Steve made a face at it, then took a more cautious taste. “You could’ve put sugar in it,” he grumbled.

“Go ask for sweetener,” she said, pointing over her shoulder. Then she pushed five breakfast sandwiches in to-go bags toward him. “And eat.”

“Drink your coffee,” she said.

Steve drank it, but didn’t go ask for sugar, not wanting to be a bother. By the time he got through half of it, it wasn’t so bad anymore. He wasn’t fond of bitter things, but fortunately, it was the sort of bitter he’d once been accustomed to.

At seven thirty, Natasha got up. Clint and Steve followed her lead, taking the few blocks to the Capitol building by foot. The press swarmed again, Steve drew into himself and looked at Natasha’s heels clicking against the pavement. Steve noticed Clint turning down his hearing aids and envied them yet again.

They took their seats in the courtroom turned auditorium. The hush was almost as bad as the reporters clamoring. Natasha muttered in Clint’s ear so he could turn his hearing aids back on, then the inquiry panel streamed in.

The audience rose. Steve stood as well, but Natasha remained seated. The Congressmen eyed her distastefully and she smiled sweetly at him. Steve remained standing until the Congressmen took their seats, then leaned toward Natasha to ask what the hell she was doing, but she answered before he spoke.

“They’re not respecting us, why should I respect them?”

For a second, Steve was confused. Natasha gave him a hard look, and after a second, Steve realized she meant us in a collective term. Us, as she meant Omegas as a whole. Steve leaned away, frowning at his hands. It had been a long time since he’d been included in collective terms.

“Welcome back,” Congressman Wenham declared in a bored tone. “We resume on item four of my agenda, Captain Roger’s involvement with the cult known as Hydra, as well as the added sub-item, his relationship with Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, who, according to Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff, has returned from the dead. Agent Romanoff, why don’t you start with how Sergeant Barnes is alive to have become the Winter Soldier?”

“In January of 1945,” Natasha began, and Steve settled his elbows on the table, to look down at it and hide his face best he could from the cameras, “Sergeant Barnes fell from Arnim Zola’s train in the Alps. The fall would have killed any normal man. However, we believe that Sergeant Barnes was given a serum comparable to the one given to Captain Rogers while wrongfully imprisoned at a Hydra’s research facility in Austria. Sergeant Barnes, as the records have plenty of proof to show, was the subject of experiments by Arnim Zola for a significant period of time anywhere between October 1943 and November 3rd, 1943. From further reports from that point onward, Sergeant
Barnes showed an increase in strength and endurance."

“Weren’t those reports written by Captain Rogers?” Congressman Wenham interrupted. “And hasn’t Captain Rogers proved to be biased where his sergeant was concerned?”

Steve gritted his teeth. He was not biased. He’d written more than one report calling Bucky a reckless son of a bitch, he’d even written up a warning for insubordination after the fool risked his ass to take out a handful of guys that had ambushed Steve, abandoning his position in the process, and had yelled at Steve for a full ten minutes when the mission was over about unnecessary risks. Hell, Steve would admit that Bucky had been biased where his captain was concerned, but he had always taken great care to be objective towards his sergeant.

“I am referencing reports by medical staff and Agent Carter,” Natasha said with ease, however. “As I assumed anything written by Captain Rogers would be automatically dismissed without review.”

Wenham tightened his jaw. At the end of the panel, the woman taking notes raised her eyebrows as though agreeing.

“One such report is displayed on the screen,” Natasha added. “And copies, for your viewing.”

An assistant crossed to them to take the reports, handing them to Wenham, who glanced over them before passing them down to another congressman.

“So Sergeant Barnes supposedly survived the fall. What happened next?”

“He was taken by Soviet officers,” Natasha said. “The KGB seized him and gave him to Aleksander Lukin, who continued to experiment on Sergeant Barnes. Lukin ran the Red Room, a department of the KGB that has been known to perform extreme psychological experiments…”

Steve found himself tuning out. Wenham and the rest of the panel exchanged words like barbs with Natasha over the Red Room and its connection to HYDRA. A few hours passed, Natasha displaying report after report of the Red Room’s experiments, none of which Steve looked at.

“Do you have any further proof?” Wenham demanded as noon came nearer. “Anything more concrete?”
“A recording found in Sergeant Barnes’s file has been translated and submitted to the panel to review. As its contents are disturbing, I assumed it inappropriate to play it for the audience.”

Again, Steve knew it was for his benefit only. Again, he was grateful. Until:

“Play it,” Wenham snapped to the tech controlling the TV Natasha was displaying files on.

“I warn you, it is highly unsettling,” Natasha said.

“Play it,” Wenham insisted. The tech nodded, searching through his computer a moment, then a video file appeared on the screen. Steve knew he shouldn’t look, but he couldn’t tear his gaze away.

At first, there was silence and a static-filled image. Then the silence took on quiet notes, until it became the clear voice of a woman humming.

The image cleared. Steve curled his hands into fists, nails biting into his palms and clenching his teeth hard. The image cleared to reveal his Alpha wrapped in chains from his shoulders to his hips. He hung suspended from them, several feet in the air and over what was clearly a bed of hot coals. He wore ratty trousers and nothing else. Nothing to stop the chains from biting into his skin, or to guard against the heat emanating from the coals, or even to give him modesty. His upper arms and shoulders were lacerated, and when the camera panned, Steve clenched his hands hard enough to feel his nails cut into his skin. Bucky’s back was more wound than skin, and still, the chains wrapped around the open lashes on his back. The lashings looked fresh, as well, blood still oozed from them to cover the chains and drip into the coals, leaving steam to rise. An inhalation tube wrapped around his face, poking into his nostrils, which connected to a massive tank at his feet.

The camera panned again, returning to his face, and it zoomed in, perhaps just to show the viewers that the tube was secured to his face by heavy staples.

A woman was slowly circling him, one hand pressed to the inside of the other wrist, obviously stimulating the gland beneath the skin to over-produce her scent. The woman spoke in Russian, though captions appeared at the bottom of the screen in English. Steve knew he shouldn’t read them, but couldn’t look away.

“Wake up, Alpha,” the caption said. “I need your help.”
In the video, Bucky gave a slow groan. The woman continued to massage her wrist, and as Bucky groaned, his nose twitched, like he was smelling the air. The staples in his face tugged on his skin as his nose scrunched up.

“I need your help,” the caption repeated. Bucky’s face twisted in a grimace, the staples ripped skin with the strain and blood started to spill down his face like tears. The woman continued to circle him, continued to speak in a calm tone. Steve found his stomach turning.

“I’m afraid. I need your help, I’m afraid they might kill me. I need you to help me, Alpha. You have to save your Omega.”

Steve wanted to look away and couldn’t. In the video, Bucky’s bloody face was twisted in something like disgust, something mixed with fear. He, unfortunately, had seen Bucky make that face before, hardly a week ago. The last time Bucky had forgotten his identity, when Steve had felt weak and couldn’t suppress his body’s natural reaction to Bucky pulling away from him. When his body had started to pump out a distress signal in his scent.

In the video, Bucky thrashed against the chains. His body swung from side to side, and clearly, that was what the staples were for, as the tube strained to stay connected to him and the machine. The woman stopped in front of him, arms held out to continue stimulating her scent gland, and the captions kept going. “I need you to get free, Alpha. You have to save your Omega. I need you to free yourself and free me. They have me captive. Other Alphas have hurt me, Alpha. A man bound me and raped me. I’m so afraid that he’ll do it again. I need you to kill him, Alpha. I need you to save your Omega.”

In the video, Bucky thrashed, clearly struggling to free himself. Natasha raised a remote and paused the video.

“There are notes relating to this experiment in the documents I submitted this morning,” she said, quite calmly, impressively so, given what was happening on the screen. “It is said to have been the forty-third in a series of at least seventy experiments similar to this one. The woman speaking to Sergeant Barnes is a KGB operative known only as Baba Yaga, one of three sisters who served in the Soviet Union during World War II and the Cold War. They were famous for their ability to manipulate their scents; to cut them off entirely, sometimes, but mostly for how they were able to fake distress and trick Alphas into believing they were in danger.”

Steve fixed his hard gaze on the static image of the Baba Yaga. Her face was not visible, her back had been to the camera the entire time, but he didn’t need to see her face to know he hated her. Bucky’s face was twisted in pain and horror and disgust, he was covered in blood and emaciated;
Steve had the urge to break something, just to release the pain and horror in his own chest.

“The respirator stapled to Sergeant Barnes’ face is feeding him dimethyltryptamine,” Natasha continued calmly, “a hallucinogenic compound also known as DMT, and as you can see, the vaporizer storing it can hold several liters and it is half empty at the time of the video. The dosage is recorded in the notes would be lethal to a normal human.”

“Keep playing it,” Wenham said with a wave of his hand.

Natasha played the video again. Steve managed to look down, away from it, but looking away couldn’t keep him from hearing what was happening.

The chains rattled while the woman spoke. Then, making him start in his seat, Bucky screamed. The woman only spoke louder, her words becoming shouts as Bucky screamed in pain. The scream carried on, and on, and on, the chains rattled, the woman yelled to be heard. Steve heard the chains break and forced his gaze to stay on the table top. The sound of chains clattering and a heavy thump like a body falling several feet came from the video, there was hiss of red-hot coals striking skin, but there were no screams from it. The woman stopped speaking.

And Bucky said something. Steve looked up, because Bucky was speaking Russian, and the caption said: “Show me, Omega.”

Steve looked away again. He felt sick. He wondered if this was how Bucky felt anytime he thought about Steve’s work before the war.

The side of his neck itched, and when he raised a hand to scratch at it, his pinky caught his scent gland and a jolt of sensation went through his spine. Steve stopped, then carefully drew his hand away. His scent gland abruptly burned under the collar of his shirt, throbbing painfully and itching fiercely for a minute before dulling. He wasn’t listening to the panel or Natasha anymore. The video had been stopped again. His mouth was dry. Other than the throbbing itch under his collar, that was his only symptom.

Until going off them three weeks ago, Steve had been on suppressants for about 13 years, not including his time in the ice. Still, he vividly remembered what pre-heat felt like. It started with an itch in his scent gland, progressed to dry mouth and ravenous hunger. Then fever and fatigue would set in, followed by restless joints and a loss of clarity in his thoughts. It took about a day, never more than that, never less than seven or eight hours, for his body to be hit by the overwhelming desire to find his Alpha and be knotted.
And here he was, sitting in a courtroom in DC, with his Alpha over two hundred miles away in New York. His body had some fucked up timing.

Steve lifted a pen from Natasha’s papers, pulled her notepad away from her while she argued heatedly with Wenham, then scribbled a small note at the bottom of it before circling it. He pushed it back toward her, then tapped it with the pen.

Natasha glanced down when Wenham next spoke. She didn’t look at Steve, but leaned back in her chair to glare at Wenham. She looked at her watch pointedly, and Wenham copied the move. He sighed heavily, then picked up his gavel.

“We will break for a long recess,” he said. “Meet back at 1:30.”

Wenham banged the gavel. “Dismissed.”

When the panel stood, Natasha remained seated. Steve did, too this time. A glance around the room showed several other women remaining in their seats, even a few men. Even distracted by the fact that he was in pre-heat, Steve was a little awed at the sign of solidarity from people he had expected to demonize him.

As soon as the panel was gone, Natasha gathered up her papers. Steve and Clint followed her, until Natasha ducked into the Omega and Beta women’s bathroom and they both stopped.

Then Natasha stuck her head back out and raised her eyebrows at Steve. Steve frowned at her, then she waved her hand once and ducked back in. Clint bumped him with his elbow, and Steve realized that Natasha wanted him to follow her in.

Steve hated public bathrooms, mainly because he’d always had to use the Alpha bathroom. However, now that he was exposed, he was free to use the Omega bathroom. He was still uncomfortable stepping into it, as Omega bathrooms were largely designed with women in mind.

“What’s wrong?” Natasha demanded as soon as he stepped in. Steve held up a hand to her, then checked the rest of the stalls to make sure they were empty. “Why did you ask for a recess?” Natasha added.
“How long does it take for your cycle to reset when you go off suppressants?” Steve asked without looking at her.

“What?”

He turned around. “You heard me.”

Natasha shrugged, looking confused. “A month, maybe? I haven’t gone off suppressants in years –”

“Neither have I,” Steve said frankly.


“A day?” Steve guessed. “But I had one after the helicarrier and it took only a few hours to set in –”

“That was just a stress heat, those hit faster,” Natasha interrupted. “Have you had a natural heat since the serum?”

Steve shook his head. “I haven’t had a natural heat since I was 17.”

“Fuck,” Natasha muttered. Steve hugged his torso, feeling aching hunger settling in his gut despite having eaten only a few hours ago. “Can you make it the rest of the day? It’s Friday, there won’t be a session tomorrow, we can go back to New York tonight and you can take the rest of the week off –”

“And if I can’t make it the rest of today?” Steve asked.

Natasha looked sorry for him. “They’ll find a way to use it against you.”

Steve nodded. “I don’t know. Maybe. Probably. Pre-heats have always had defined stages for me, I’ll know when it’s a few hours out, but I haven’t had one since the serum –”
“I’ll be able to tell if it’s a few hours off,” Natasha interrupted. “I’ll find an excuse to end the session early and get you out of here. Come on, let’s go get Mexican.”

“Mexican?” Steve questioned as Natasha headed for the door.

“Spicy foods are supposed to delay them,” she said. Steve shrugged and followed her out.

Clint raised his eyebrows and Natasha shook her head. Steve was grateful she didn’t tell him; heats were still incredibly private matters.

“We’re getting Chipotle,” she announced and Clint just shrugged. They made their way out of the building, Steve folding in on himself as the reporters pressed in on all sides, and Natasha flagged a taxi at the curb.

The cab approached, stopping just before them, but something rolled into Steve’s foot and it was too late for him, or anyone, to react.

It was a flash grenade. It went off just as Steve looked down, in time with maybe a dozen others, and the crowded street filled with smoke and the sounds of screaming. Steve clapped his hands over his ears, ringing from the bang, then realized he had been blown off his feet and was lying on the ground. In addition to the disorientation from the flash, he’d hit his head on something and he felt blood when he reached around to grope blindly through his hair. Several figures swarmed on him and he reached for the knives strapped to his thighs, but a syringe was jabbed into his forearm through his suit and he fell back, his heart thudding and lungs struggling to inhale, blinking hard as a face swam into view above him.

The face, badly scarred, grinned down at him.

“And they call you the toughest Alpha on the block,” the man said, and Steve blacked out.

Chapter End Notes

*hides*
i have been informed that i must share the previous, working title of this chapter with you. lexi#1 and another friend of mine both agreed that it was infinitely better than any title i could have come up with. i disagreed, hence it was only ever a working title. the working title was: cloudy with a chance of BUCKWILD.
lexi#1 still insists that it's a better title. thanks to the lexi squad for helping me with this chapter, it wouldn't be the same without you. and yes, i know you guys just want to get to the chapter, idk why y'all in such a rush, it's not like anybody's gonna die. don't look at me like that. you can find this chapter's playlist here. i release you! go forth and read!
edit: you can find the cover art on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“First thing first, always, always tell your parent or guardian if you believe that you are starting pre-heat. Heat is nothing to be ashamed of, it is a natural part of being an Omega. You may have your first heat anywhere between the ages of 16 and 18, so practice safe protocols with your parents for what to do when it hits. Work out code words to let your parent or guardian know if you begin pre-
heat in public. Only tell trusted adults if you begin pre-heat. Practice making heat kits with your Omega parent. And always, always be aware of your body’s processes…”

“The first thing you may notice is an itching in your cervical scent gland. It will feel like a deep, burning itch that only intensifies if you scratch it. The moment you feel this itch, even if or especially if you are under 16, tell a trusted adult…”

“Once fever and hunger begin to set in, you will know that you only have a few hours before the heat proper begins. Always keep a stock of emergency supplies handy; simple finger foods, bottles of water, ice packs, etc. Avoid putting foods that require a lot of effort to eat or cook in heat kits. Include high protein and carb foods, but not things high in sugar, no matter how much you might want that bar of chocolate!”

“And remember, never consider asking an Alpha to assist you through your first heat. It is difficult for Alphas, especially young ones who haven’t had much experience with ruts, to resist the urge to bond with an Omega in heat, and unplanned bonds can derail your entire life…”

* *

[october 9th, 2014, stark tower]

Bucky reluctantly hung up the phone at 01:24 hours. He’d been listening to Steve’s slow breathing for maybe an hour at that point, but the phone was prepaid and he would run out of minutes if he stayed on the call all night. He spent a while just staring at the empty bed, then lay down on Steve’s side and buried his face in the pillow.

He tried to sleep. He’d promised Steve he would, but he hardly dozed, rising in and out of dreams for a few hours. Eventually, he gave up, took the phone and headed for the gym. He spent the hours between then and morning going back and forth between the kinds of equipment, trying out the things he’d never used before and re-familiarizing himself with the ones he recognized. As per Cho’s directions, he was careful using his left arm; it felt different than his old arm, certainly lighter, but as far as he could tell, just as strong.

Sometime around six, the phone pinged. Bucky hastily put back the dumbbell he’d been using and lunged to grab the phone, checking it quickly.

Steve

Morning

Bucky was hasty to reply, then again to ask how he’d slept. Steve’s answer was non-committal, but honest, at least.
I’m sorry

Not your fault.

still sorry

Bucky waited a while, but Steve didn’t reply again. Despite the many miles between them, he felt Steve’s exhaustion vaguely, weighing down his joints and slowing his reactions. Bucky sat down on a weight machine, just staring at the phone for a while, as if that would make Steve reply again.

The side of his neck abruptly burned. Bucky hissed, dropping the phone to clap a hand to it, but the itching sensation was gone as quickly as it came.

Or rather, it faded. Becoming a distant and faint ghost of a sensation, as it wasn’t his neck that was itching, it was Steve’s.

For a second, Bucky stared in dumb shock at nothing, then leapt to his feet and ran for the bedroom. He was dressed and armed in minutes; hauling out Romanoff’s carbine to disassemble it and stow it in a backpack, ladening his boots and belt with knives and pistols beneath his clothes, even taking Steve’s shield. He still felt light and spent a minute looking for some kind of armor, but he could only find Steve’s uniform and ill-fitting armor would be just as unhelpful as none. He had to go in plain clothes; heavy denim jeans, work boots, leather jacket over a lumpy flannel shirt that would hide the guns and knives on his torso. Bucky took the stairs rather than the elevator, skipping half the steps in his haste to reach the garage.

He half worried that JARVIS would protest him taking Steve’s bike and leaving the garage, but the AI said nothing to him, and even if he did, Bucky wouldn’t have stopped. Steve was in DC, and his scent gland was itching. Bucky wasn’t sure how he knew for sure, but he knew that meant Steve would be going into heat soon.

He tore out of Stark Tower’s parking garage system before dawn. When he had learned how to ride a motorcycle, he didn’t know either, but that mattered less to him than getting to Washington before Steve’s pre-heat turned into full heat. The sun lifted over the waterfront as the motorcycle roared onto the interstate; Bucky ignored speed limits and weaved in and out of the morning traffic, kept a wary eye out for police, disappearing into the rush every time flashes of blue lights caught his eye. He would probably reach DC around noon or one o’clock if he drove with the appropriate caution, but he had no clue how long it would take Steve to break into full heat and didn’t want to risk not being there to defend him when he did.
So Bucky drove recklessly. He took turns and curves at full speed, never dropping below 80 or 90 miles per hour. He hid behind semi-trucks whenever a police or state patrol car appeared on the highway. He cut into gaps that caused neighboring vehicles to honk angrily, more than one driver yelling at him out the window. Bucky ignored them all. He utilized every skill he knew to ensure he was never caught and narrowly avoided wrecking the bike on nearly half the curves. Around Baltimore, the interstate turned into a twisty, winding six-lane highway, and Bucky wasn’t above cutting the shoulders on the abrupt curves. Traffic ebbed and flowed, the wind roaring around his helmet, and finally, as the sun reached its peak, Bucky saw signs for DC.

Then the traffic thickened abruptly. Even on the motorcycle and even throwing caution to the winds, Bucky found himself unable to weave through it and stopping more than once. Frustrated, at one point when he had to actually stop the bike in the stand-still traffic, Bucky tugged the phone from his jacket to check the time.

It was nearly two o’clock, and he had several missed calls from a number he didn’t recognize, all within the space of a few minutes. Bucky frowned at it a second, but then it rang again, the same number, and he answered it, putting it on speaker to hear and speak through the helmet.

“Barnes!”

“Stark?” Bucky guessed.

“Where the fuck are you!”

“Somewhere,” Bucky said evasively. The car in front of him moved and Bucky shoved the phone into his jacket to grab the bike’s handles and run it forward the next few feet.

“Are you on a highway? What highway? Where?”

“It’s none of your business,” Bucky called out.

“Did anyone contact you? It’s got to be a trap, Barnes, you’d better not –”

“Slow down,” Bucky interrupted. He dug around in the jacket to draw out his comm unit when he next came to a stop, plugged it into the phone and hooked it into his ear. “What are you talking about?”
“Steve,” Stark said.

Bucky’s mouth went dry. “What?”

“Wait, do you not know? Why did you leave then?”

“Know what?” Bucky demanded sharply. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Wait, you left hours ago – Are you almost to DC?”

“Where’s Steve?” Bucky demanded again.

“His tracker puts him somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley –”

“What the fuck happened?” Bucky interrupted him again, fear gripping his chest.

“HYDRA attacked as they were leaving the courthouse –”

Bucky tore out of the traffic, amid honking and shouting, to change directions west onto 495 to follow signs leading into Virginia. Stark kept talking in his ear, but Bucky’s head was just a mess of shit, Steve, shit, over and over. He cut into the exit, a pickup slamming on the brakes to avoid hitting him, and revved the engine to tear off 95.

“Did you know this was going to happen?” Stark yelled in his ear.

“No!” Bucky shouted back. “Give me directions, track my phone!”

“What the hell did you leave for?”
“Because!” Bucky snapped. He cut between two sedans and weaved around a truck, causing more honks with his reckless driving. “Just give me directions, I’m just outside DC!”

“Alright, alright, JARVIS says you’re on 495, get onto 66 west at exit 49, about 20 miles.”

Bucky revved his engine again. The speedometer wobbled as it reached 140, then 160, Bucky cut between two more cars to reach the head of a gap and flooded the engine with more fuel, making the needle hit 180 and stop. Bucky kept accelerating. He heard sirens behind him, cursed and glanced once over his shoulder. There was a state patrol car trying to catch up with him. Bucky accelerated more.

“Get this flatfoot off my back!” he yelled into the headset.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Bucky cut over the shoulder on the next curve, leaned to cut around a truck into the left lane. There was a string of five or six cars traveling in the passing lane, Bucky muttered another curse and swung onto the shoulder completely to fly past them. Someone honked yet again, but he totally ignored them. The sirens faded into the distance, his exit coming up fast. He cut in between cars, tearing off onto 66 west. Another siren picked up behind him and Bucky only sped up.

“This is a trap, you know that, right?” Stark called.

“Steve – He’s in a bad way,” Bucky answered. “I don’t give a shit if it’s a trap.”

“The fuck does that even mean?”

“What’s his exact location?”

“You’re taking route 29, exit 43A.” Bucky swerved around a van to take the exit as it loomed. “Then 211 west. He’s somewhere in the national park, I’m working on triangulating it, the signal’s weak.”

Bucky cut into the shadow of a trailer hauling junked cars, startling the driver into laying on the horn.
and while he ignored it, Stark cursed loudly in his ear.

“Barnes, you’re doing almost 200 miles an hour!”

Bucky sped up.

“Fucking Christ, Barnes!”

“Has there been any word from Steve?” was his only answer.

“No. He, Nat, and Clint were hit coming out of the Capitol building at 12, Nat and Clint contacted me just before one from the hospital, and the tracker started pinging about ten minutes before I first called you, but that was it. I’m guessing that whoever grabbed him activated it on purpose, hence the whole ‘it’s a trap!’ deal.”

Bucky ignored Stark’s ridiculous tone of voice for it’s a trap. “They’ve had him two hours?”

“Just about.”

Bucky cursed. He couldn’t tell what Steve was feeling, not through his own fear and adrenaline rush.

“Wait, what did you mean by ‘in a bad way’?”

Bucky didn’t want to think it. He accelerated further, but the bike’s engine groaned and he was forced to ease up on the gas.

“Barnes? I just got word from Romanoff, she said that Steve started pre-h–”

“I know!” Bucky snapped. “It started this morning, that’s why I left!”

“Shit,” Stark said. Bucky cut around more traffic, agreeing with him privately. “Romanoff said Steve
noticed it around noon, he had her call recess so he could tell her.”

“It started this morning,” Bucky insisted, weaving past a sedan and a jacked-up truck. “He probably just didn’t notice it. He didn’t notice it until it was right on him last I was with him.”

His clearest memory, his absolute clearest recollection, was standing in Sarah Rogers’ kitchen with the strong scent of gingerbread perfuming the air, looking at Steve’s flushed face as he mumbled “Honest, I feel weird.” It was only Steve’s first heat, but if Steve didn’t say anything to Romanoff until noon, then likely it followed the same pattern now.

“It’s 100% a trap, Barnes. Romanoff said that HYDRA hit the street with flash grenades and went straight for Steve, didn’t even bother going after her or Barton. There was a syringe left behind, so they probably drugged him with something.”

“Shit,” Bucky whispered. It was lost in the wind. Who knew what whatever drugs his captors had given him would do to Steve’s body on the cusp of heat.

“Take the next exit!”

Bucky cut through two cars to zip into the exit lane, cutting off a truck and eliciting another honk and shout of profanity.

“There will be an old road on the left going up the mountain, take it.”

Bucky cut hard to the left when he saw it, drifting into the turn, and raced up the single lane road.

“You’re twenty minutes out. This is a service road, it looks like they’re holding him in an old fire watch tower.”

“I know the place,” Bucky said instantly.

“You do?”
“There’s a holding facility under it,” he answered. He hardly remembered it, just flashes of cold and shocking pain. But what he struggled to remember, his mind knew how to physically reach unconsciously. “I burned it down, I think.”

“That would be why it’s disused, then.”

The road twisted sharply and Bucky was forced to slow down or be thrown off its craggy surface. Soon nature began to break up the pavement, cracking it apart with creepers and vines, and as greenery overtook asphalt, the clear imprint of tire tracks could be seen.

“Two miles,” Stark told him.

Bucky braked abruptly. He turned the bike in stopping, then jumped off its back and let it fall to the ground to land amongst the thicket with a muffled thunk. Bucky dropped to a crouch, drawing his backpack off his shoulders and pulling out the pieces of the carbine. He assembled it, loaded it, then tugged out Steve’s shield and held one in each hand. The shield stuck out amongst the greenery, but he didn’t have any other armor. He neared a stream, then paused to dip a hand into the mud and spread it over the bright paint.

“I don’t have eyes up there, so I can’t help you get in,” Stark said.

“I know the layout,” Bucky answered.

“We’re on our way in a quinjet. Our ETA is thirty minutes.”

“Copy,” Bucky said softly. He caught sight of the firetower through the trees, two guards patrolling its balcony, then slipped into the bushes.

“Leave something for us, yeah?” Stark asked. Bucky didn’t answer.

He crept through the underbrush around the firetower and away from the road. He could bet that Steve’s captors expected him to come in storming from the nearest entry, as the Winter Soldier was trained to do, but he wasn’t just the Winter Soldier.
Bucky Barnes was first and foremost a sniper, and snipers took the quiet route.

There was a bunker beneath the firetower, with three main entrances. All were likely to be under heavy guard, but there was a fourth emergency exit buried in an embankment at the north-east corner of the bunker that, hopefully, would be forgotten. Bucky skirted the creek’s edges, keeping out of the water to remain silent, to approach the hatch cut into the ravine’s edge. It was completely covered in plant life, a tree’s root system disguising its rusted surface, but the plants were dealt with rapidly with a sharp blade.

The hatch creaked as he opened it. Bucky winced, stilling, but there came no sound from it. He slipped inside, relaying in quiet whispers to Stark what entrance to take.

“Copy,” Stark said.

Bucky tasted the air. He smelled stale air and men, but there wasn’t even an underlying trace of an Omega’s sweet perfume. He could only pray that meant Steve hadn’t gone into heat already.

* [ Why Are There More Betas Closer to the Equator? , Dr. H. C. Harris, Elizabeth R. Cowen, Ph.D., April 1998, National Geographic]

“For centuries, racism and sexism went hand in hand and created a social hierarchy that equated the Beta designation and dark skin color. This lead to many decades of breaking down that stereotype, but recent archeological data has begged the question: Are more black people Betas? If so, why?”

“…Much of the evidence points towards one of the most basic symptom of heat: Fever. What if Beta women did not evolve from Omegas, but the other way around? Consider Siberia. There is much to be said for the efforts to stay warm, but in order to have sexual intercourse, much has to be sacrificed by way of coverings. If fertile periods could coincide with a natural fever, then the body’s internal temperature could supplement the cold caused by nudity. In Africa, there would be no need to provide additional warmth during intercourse…”

* [hopefully still october 9th]

Steve was groggy and disoriented when he woke. His body felt heavy, his muscles too limp to lift his
limbs, until he realized that his arms and legs were tied down and that was why he couldn’t move them. He tried to turn his head, and even his forehead and jaw were restrained.

“Well, good morning, Cap.”

Steve’s vision was blurry as a face swam into view.

“Have a nice sleep?”

The mouth rippled and gleamed red in his blurred vision. He blinked several times, and the mouth curled into a grin that showed teeth that looked long and jagged.

“I’ll bet you’re wondering what’s happening,” the grin said. The teeth looked several inches long, glistening before his eyes. “Right now, you’ve got a cocktail of about fifty different venoms, poisons, neurotoxins, and drugs in your blood. Not enough to kill you, but just enough to fuck with every part of your body. My buddy Doctor List made it with just you in mind, Cap, so I hope you’re appreciative.”

His mouth felt very dry, and with restraints wrapping around his chin, he couldn’t reply coherently. The grin widened and the teeth lengthened.

“List said you might hallucinate,” the teeth said. “I wonder what you’re seeing. Probably not any prettier than reality. Do you know what your actions at Insight did? I’ve got scars all over my body, head to toe, you probably wouldn’t even recognize me. But, hey, they got me a new codename that’s pretty badass, so I won’t complain.”

Steve blinked hard, trying to clear up his vision. Spots of color danced before his eyes. He remembered seeing pictures of the devil in school, and the red skin, long teeth, and huge eyes certainly looked devilish.

“You’ll be coming out of it soon enough,” the teeth told him. “Give it five, ten minutes.”

In the library, he’d found photographs of an ancient Bible called the Codex Gigas, or the Devil’s Bible. In its center was a massive depiction of the ancient serpent himself. Steve was reminded of it looking at the face in front of him.
The maw widened in a grin as Steve still couldn’t answer.

But a blink later, his vision was clearing. What could have been the devil’s face sharpened and became smaller, until it was plainly a man, though heavily disfigured by scars. His face looked stretched to one side, the skin pulled back to gather by the lump of an ear, hairless on one side and scruffy on the other. The left eye was half closed with the weight of the scars, where the sclera had been white, it was now blood red.

But even with his appearance harkening to Steve’s memory of the Devil’s Bible, he looked familiar.

“Rumlow?” Steve half murmured.

Rumlow grinned. His teeth were not long fangs, but completely normal. Just slightly yellower than Steve had last seen them.

“Atta boy,” Rumlow said with glee. “How you doin’, Cap?”

“Allright,” Steve grumbled, then jerked every muscle in his body to try and break the restraints. Rumlow jumped back, still grinning, and the restraints held. “Considering I’ve been kidnapped, pretty good.”

“No use trying to break those,” Rumlow warned him. “Have a look at what you’re sitting in. It was built for monsters bigger than you.”

Steve strained against the straps on his forehead and chin to look down. He was sitting in a padded leather chair, but in the corners of his still blurred vision, he saw huge metal apparatuses.

“Have you looked through your Alpha’s file yet?” Rumlow asked. “This is the thing that kept it from remembering you.”

His heart rate kicked higher. Steve jerked against the restraints again, but the muscle fatigue he had attributed to the drug he’d been injected with was beginning to feel deeper, more natural. His joints ached, his skin burned with warmth under the restraints; he had no idea how long he’d been in Rumlow’s hands, but clearly, it had been long enough that his body had proceeded long past the first
“Have a look,” Rumlow encouraged him, reaching out to a control panel nearby. Steve flicked his eyes to the right, to the left, and the metal rig hanging above him suddenly hummed to life, and a clear electric current ran over the pads that were likely meant to attach to the face. “Looks painful, doesn’t it? You’ll have the privilege of seeing it in action later.”

Steve struggled, but his body was fighting his efforts. His heart thudded painfully in his chest, kicking to twice its already high rate. Even then, he could feel the heat drawing nearer, his body looking to entice those around him into empathy and letting him go without harm, but he doubted that any Alpha in this room would pick compassion over lust if he slipped into heat now. He could smell his own fear, and clearly, the room full of Alphas could, too. He tried to count them, to see how many he’d have to defend himself against, but they kept moving and the fatigue of pre-heat and the after-effects of the drug made his mind weary and slow. There were at least fifteen people in the room, maybe twenty or twenty-five, but the room he was in was huge, there was a second level connecting to a balcony ringing the room, and there was no telling how many were in the facility in total.

Rumlow neared him again, and this time, he was holding up a small device between his fingers, a faint red bulb flashing a slow but steady pulse. It was the panic button Natasha had given Steve before leaving New York.

“The asset’s on its way,” Rumlow promised him.

Steve’s mind and body reacted in two very different ways. His head panicked, realizing the trap Rumlow had laid, himself as bait to lure Bucky back into HYDRA’s hands and then the very device Steve was strapped into. His gut, however, clenched with a spike of arousal at the thought of his Alpha.

At his redoubled struggling, Rumlow grinned at him. Steve clenched his jaw, trying to smell himself to see if there was any hint of his oncoming heat underlying his fear, but the leather restraints were pungent under his nose. In straining, he felt the hard bite of metal pinning his limbs; three on his shins, three on his thighs, three spread from his wrists to his shoulders, as well as two wrapped over his stomach and chest. The leather under him was moist from his sweat. He might be able to worm his way free, if it weren’t for the sheer number of restraints holding him down. The bright side, if there could be a bright side to this situation, was that the leather and his own panic overwhelmed any trace of heat in his scent. Neither outcome of his current situation looked promising: Bucky charging to his rescue and being overwhelmed by the facility full of HYDRA agents, or going into heat surrounded by dozens of hostile Alphas.

His pulse beat loud in his ear. His own fear, a primal terror of being the lone Omega surrounded on
all sides by unknown and unfriendly Alphas, stank heavier than the leather moistened by his sweat. His limbs strained and tired quickly. The side of his neck, his body angrily reminding him that he needed his Alpha, itched and burned.

“This thing’s been on about an hour,” Rumlow said, quite calm in the face of Steve’s easily noticed fear. “We figured the asset was probably following you, so it should be here any minute now.”

Steve swallowed abruptly, his throat dry and scratchy. Bucky had been in New York, but if the tracker had been active for nearly an hour, then Stark or JARVIS would have seen it.

He hadn’t thought about that. Bucky had been with Stark, so he had backup. He wouldn’t be coming in on his own. Bucky alone would probably be a formidable foe for this facility full of HYDRA agents despite ultimately outgunned, but with Stark and maybe even others at his back, then maybe he had a chance. Still, Steve kept struggling. Even Stark’s fastest quinjet took at least an hour if not two to get from Manhattan to DC, there was no telling where he was just then, and his heat was mere minutes away.

Rumlow grinned at him, and a loud thunk sounded somewhere on the edge of the room. Rumlow dropped the grin, turned around, and a knife embedded itself in his shoulder.

With his lingering disorientation, the shouting and flashes of gunfire both blinded and deafened him. Steve tried to clap his hands over his ears, but still couldn’t break the restraints. However, it meant that the Alphas in the room were distracted from him, so whoever had entered the room had potentially saved him from anyone noticing the scent of pre-heat under his fear.

The gunfire and shouting cut off abruptly, leaving a sharp, ringing tone in Steve’s left ear. The echoing of violent noise in the almost entirely metal room was painful, and a faint whimper escaped his lips as he twisted and tried to block out the ringing. Abruptly, a calloused hand clapped over his ear, pressing tight, and the ringing cut off with both the pressure and heat.

Steve opened his eyes to Bucky’s worried face examining him. He was covering Steve’s ear with his flesh hand, his metal hand working to undo the restraints.

“Oh, thank God,” Steve whispered, and the heat broke.

He saw Bucky’s pupils dilate as his nostrils flared, but Steve was no longer concerned about anything, really. He pressed into Bucky’s hand, trying to get to his wrist and suck on his scent gland.
His clothes and the restraints burned on his flushed skin. One on his forearm released and he darted his hand out to reach for Bucky, only to be stopped by the restraints still holding down his bicep and upper arm.

“Shh, shh, calm down, Stevie,” Bucky said, looking up at him to brush his thumb over his cheekbone. Steve turned his head, panting with fever as his lips parted, to briefly catch Bucky’s thumb in his mouth. He sucked on it a second, groaning on the salty taste of his skin, only for Bucky to pull it away. Steve whined at the loss.

“You gotta calm down, Stevie,” Bucky told him, catching him by the jaw to hold him still.

“Bucky – Please,” Steve half-begged, lifting his chin to him.

“No here, baby, not here, here’s not safe, you gotta calm down.”

“Bucky, I need –”

“Shh,” Bucky interrupted; he dropped Steve’s jaw to touch his cheek, pushing his bare wrist over his skin a few times, but pulling away when Steve turned his head to catch his wrist between his lips. “I need you to calm down, baby, I gotta get you out of here, can’t do that if you’re like this.”

“I’m fine,” Steve mumbled, but his hips jerked as Bucky released the first of the restraints covering both his thighs. As he lifted off the chair, the abrupt cold made his thighs and ass burn where his body was already over-producing slick. “Fuck, fuck, fuck –”

“Shh,” Bucky said a fourth time, his flesh hand pressing to Steve’s stomach and pressing down. “Just stay still, stay still Stevie –”

Movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention; Steve snatched a gun from Bucky’s waist with his free hand, aimed and fired. He heard a shout of pain as Bucky whipped around, drawing out two more guns and firing. Steve turned his head fully, and apparently, Bucky had already released the straps on his head because he could lift off the chair and look to the left.

It was Rumlow again, now bleeding out from several places and coughing up more blood. A thin remote lay in his limp hand.
“You… didn’t think… we didn’t have a… a plan B?” Rumlow rasped. He laughed, quiet and hysterial. He lifted the remote and waved it, before dropping his arm with a dull thump. Just beneath the chair Steve was strapped to, a faint beeping sound started.

Bucky ducked, still holding a gun on Rumlow, to look under the chair. He cursed and Rumlow laughed yet again.

“Bomb?” Steve guessed.

“Bomb,” Bucky agreed. He turned back to face Rumlow, fired once, and Rumlow collapsed, the bullet-bored hole in his forehead trailing blood. There was no chance he’d survived that.

Bucky grabbed the metal ring just under Steve’s knee with his prosthetic arm and started to pull on it. He grimaced, a vein popping in his forehead, and the metal snapped. Steve swallowed, feeling flushed and hot, as Bucky did the same to the next five rings holding down his shins. He cut the leather straps with a knife, before moving back to his thighs. Steve’s breathing and heart jumped as Bucky’s hand brushed the inside of his thighs in breaking the restraint, but the steady beeping underneath him drove fear back up above his arousal and he held still.

Bucky glanced around the room, looking for something, but kept pulling on the metal restraints. There were still two thick metal bands over his thighs, that were broader than Bucky’s whole palm. He grimaced yet again, looking around, then grasped it with both hands and pulled. The metal groaned, but didn’t snap.

Bucky let go, hissing a curse under his breath. Steve swallowed again, feeling a bead of sweat drip into his eye. Bucky fell to his knees, reaching under the chair, and hauled out a massive block of C4. A timer was strapped to it, wires reaching into it, and the clock was dropping by the millisecond.

There were three minutes left on it.

“Shit,” Bucky said loudly. “Shit, shit, shit –”

He pulled away from Steve, who couldn’t suppress a whimper of distress, and while Bucky glanced back with worry, he didn’t return to touching him. Instead, he flicked at a comm unit in his ear.
“Stark,” he called, “I’ve got a bomb, Steve’s locked down and I can’t get him out, two minutes, forty seconds left on the timer.”

Steve strained at the metal and leather holding him down. He tried picking at the restraints with his free hand, but with heat clouding his head and tiring his muscles, he was weak and clumsy. He tried to calm down, sucking in breath after breath and shaking his head. It wasn’t effective at all, he was still fevered, his gut nearly cramping with heavy arousal. Steve pressed his head against the chair, panting, and Bucky shot him a worried glance, obviously listening to Stark over his comm unit.

“It’s gonna be alright,” Bucky promised him, “you’re gonna be okay.”

“I can’t –” Steve mumbled, shaking his head still, “I’m sorry, I can’t –”

“Shh, it’s alright, just sit tight, baby, just sit tight.”

Steve thrashed against the restraints, straining against the thick metal bands still holding down his arms, chest, and thighs; even weak, he was still twice as strong as the average man, but the restraints on this chair had been designed for Bucky, Bucky at full strength and in immense pain. Bucky, who was kneeling a few feet away from him and trying to calm him from a distance. Steve thrashed again, panicking, but Bucky didn’t come to him.

“Shh, shh, just a second, baby, just sit tight, just wait –”

“Bucky, Buck, please, Buck –”

“It’s alright, you’re alright, just wait –”

“Bucky,” Steve kept whining. He remembered vividly, abruptly, pounding on the door of his mother’s bathroom and begging just the same, for the same response of no from his Alpha. Memories of his very first heat at fourteen years old had always been hard for him to pin down with any clarity, unable to recall much more than the feeling of pain and horrible fear at being rejected. Yet now, as it was happening again, he remembered what had happened before.

He’d been collapsed on the bathroom tile, banging on the door, hearing and smelling Bucky just on the other side. He’d tried to open the door but it was locked. Bucky had been apologizing, and Steve had called him a coward.
“Buck,” he whimpered, calling and reaching for him, “Bucky, please, I need you –”

“I’ll be there,” Bucky said back, but didn’t move to his side, “just wait a second, baby, just wait –”

“I need you now,” Steve insisted, “please, don’t leave, please don’t leave me, I need you –”

“Just wait –”

“Don’t you want me?” Steve forced out, afraid of the answer, remembering what had happened last time Bucky had told him no. “I’m sorry, I’m –”

“Shh,” Bucky interrupted, finally crossing back to him, though it was just a brief touch to his knee, “don’t think that, baby, I just gotta disarm this and then I can get you outta here, okay, just wait –”

“Please,” Steve begged once more. Bucky glanced between him and the bomb, reminding Steve that it was even there, then ran his hand up Steve’s leg, dragging his wrist over his pants and releasing his scent. Steve smelled rut, but where half his life he’d been afraid of it, it now came from Bucky, from his Alpha, a clear reassurance that Bucky wanted him, and now it calmed him. He paused for breath, sucking in air, and when Bucky reached up to mark his cheek, he turned, sticking his tongue out, and Bucky let him suck on his wrist for a moment before pulling away.

“Just wait a minute,” Bucky told him again.

Steve nodded, licking his lips where he could still taste rut and his Alpha, and Bucky pulled back to return to the bomb. He gave one more futile struggle against the restraints, sagging under them with heavy limbs. His head lolled to the side, trying to expose his burning scent gland to the air and cool it slightly, but the collar of his shirt rubbed against it, abrasive, and he hissed in pain, jerking upright again.

“You’re alright, baby,” Bucky called to him.

Steve mumbled a vague assent. He flexed his fingers, squirming in the restraints. He felt so hot, his clothes, once comfortable, were tight and rough against his skin. The beeping of the bomb’s timer echoed in the metal chamber, drilling into his skull. Bucky was talking quietly to Stark, and normally
Steve would be able to hear what Stark was saying let alone Bucky, but even his hearing was weakened by being in heat. Steve could definitely say that, even five minutes in, this heat was going to be stronger than any heat he’d ever had in his life. He could probably thank Dr. Erskine for that.

“There isn’t a black wire!” Bucky spat and Steve startled, jerking against the restraints. “Red and yellow, red and yellow only –”

He cut off. Steve swallowed, blinking blearily. Bucky glanced at him, then at the bomb and out of the room. Steve, sensing that he was probably planning something stupid like sacrificing himself by running out with the bomb, struggled harder.

“Don’t you dare,” he warned, “don’t you dare die on me again, Bucky Barnes, don’t you dare leave me again –”

“Okay, okay, I’m not going anywhere,” Bucky cut him off hastily, darting back over to him for a second to touch his thigh before returning to the bomb, “Stark, come on –”

A loud clang echoed across the chamber; Steve jerked again, but couldn’t smell another person. Bucky leapt to his feet, drawing his guns, but then put them down again.

A flash of red and gold; Stark, in his Iron Man suit, flew past him. He grabbed the bomb in both hands and then flew out of the room again. Bucky ran over to Steve.

“He’s taking the bomb out of the complex,” Bucky told him, “there’s a ravine, he’ll put the bomb in water.”

Steve strained to touch him, and Bucky pushed his wrist over his cheek again. He started working at the hinge of the metal bands and Steve settled for pressing a palm to his upper arm. He heard movement again and Bucky lifted up, then slammed both palms on the arms of the chair either side of Steve’s body, leaning over him so his chest pressed into his face, and made a threatening sound. Steve, however, happily pressed into his chest, nuzzling him through his shirt.

“Fuck,” he heard behind him. “Barnes, it’s just us –”

“Back off,” Bucky snarled. “Don’t come any closer!”
“Steve!”

Steve wrinkled his nose, then curled downward in the chair, trying to sink out of sight.

“Back off!” Bucky repeated.

“Who’s there?” Steve mumbled.

“It’s Natasha!”

“Get out!” Bucky snapped.

“Nat’s okay,” Steve tried to tell him.

Bucky growled, low and deep in his chest that Steve felt it vibrating against his cheek.

“Clint, get out.”

Steve stiffened. Natasha was one thing, and sure, he trusted Clint normally, but he wasn’t normal just then. Just then, Clint was only another unknown and unfriendly Alpha. Steve strained against the straps and metal bands, trying to cling to Bucky, and he heard Natasha yelling at Clint once again to leave the chamber. Bucky kept growling, and Steve heard footsteps nearing.

“Ya ne budu obizhat’ tebya.”

“I don’t speak Russian,” Bucky growled.

Steve turned his head, seeing Natasha edging nearer from the side. “What’re you doing?”
“He’s just rutting?” Natasha questioned.

“He is,” Bucky growled. “Don’t come closer!”

“Steve, how are you doing?” Natasha asked. She stepped nearer as well.

“I’d like to be out of this chair,” Steve said, totally unconcerned now that it was just her. Natasha was an Omega, she wasn’t a threat, and even if she was, he had Bucky. “Like to have my Alpha…”

He shifted as much as he could, looking for a bit of friction. His thighs were sticking to his pants where slick was cooling on them, and in lifting off the chair, they stuck to the leather as well.

There was, then, a loud and distant boom. Natasha half turned, then touched her ear and said something that Steve couldn’t hear. Bucky turned back to releasing him from the restraints in Natasha’s distraction. He broke the hinge on the second metal band over his legs, threw it off and used a knife on the leather under it. Natasha turned back and Bucky surged to cover Steve with his body again.

“Alright, I’m not coming nearer,” she said, and even took a step back to prove her point. “Look, you can’t just hunker down here, you’ve got to get back to New York. We’ve got –”

Bucky growled again and Steve shrank farther from her, and Natasha hastily changed tactics.

“I’ve got a jet,” she said. “You can’t pilot it in this condition, either of you. I’ll take you back to New York, just the three of us, you can hide out in the cargo hold and then hole up in your apartment. How does that sound?”

“Point,” Steve mumbled vaguely. Bucky swept a hand through Steve’s hair, Steve pressing into the touch, as he visibly considered his options. Whatever happened, Steve trusted Bucky to take care of him.

“I’ll get you out of here,” Natasha promised. “Steve may need medical attention, you can call a nurse or a physician on the jet and they can help him over a video call, no one will come near you.”
“’M fine,” Steve told her. “Just… Hot.”

“Shh,” Bucky murmured to him, bending to kiss his hair and Steve hummed happily. “Need you to tell me what to do, sweetheart. Do we trust her?”

“Sure,” Steve said. “Nat’s fine. Good for…” He broke off, gesturing obscurely with his free hand. “Stabby.”

Bucky chuckled and Steve smiled stupidly. He heard Natasha laughing, too, and that was a rare thing to hear.

“Yes, I am very stabby,” Natasha agreed in the distance. “I shall be stabby with anyone trying to come near the pair of you. That sound good to you, Barnes?”

“You’re good with this?” Bucky asked Steve one more time. Steve nodded, pressing into the muscle of his chest yet again. “Alright,” Bucky murmured, kissing his hair again. “We’ll go with her.”

He slowly backed off, exposing Steve’s head and torso to the air and Natasha’s view, but Steve was still unbothered. Natasha was an Omega, a woman, she was no threat to him. The scent of his heat would make her sick or sympathetic sooner than it would hostile. Bucky returned to breaking the hinge on the last metal restraint over Steve’s legs. In a few seconds, it popped and Bucky cut free the leather. Steve flexed his legs, lifting his knees off the chair’s surface, only to be caught by the metal bands on his chest.

“I’ve got something that can cut those,” Natasha called.

“Give it here,” Bucky said immediately.

Steve heard her step closer again. “It’s a laser, I don’t think you’re up to operating it like this,” she answered, and stepped even closer. “I’m not a threat, Barnes. I just want to help you get your Omega free.”

Bucky growled and Steve turned his head to look for Natasha approaching. She held her hands out, a small tool in one palm, and stepped nearer and nearer steadily.
“You can trust me,” Natasha promised. “We don’t want to accidentally hurt him. Just let me use this to cut through the metal and you can bend it until he’s free. Alright?”

“Trust her,” Steve muttered. Bucky stopped growling. Natasha nodded, then Bucky did as well, backing to one side of the chair.

Natasha stepped closer slowly, then nodded to Steve and switched on the tool in her hand. A red beam of light appeared between two tines, the tool appearing almost like a wide fork conducting a bright current between its points. She started with his left arm, taking the tool to the metal holding him in place, and a few seconds application cut through the thick bands. She moved around to his other arm and Bucky took her place, taking the metal in his like fingers and bending it out to cut out the leather and free his arm. Steve pulled his arm out quickly, and while the hot metal brushed at his clothes, the fabric of his shirt burned more.

Natasha cut the three bands on his right arm, then the two on his chest. She backed off as soon as she’d done so and Bucky moved in to bend the metal apart until Steve would be free to move clear of them. As soon as the last restraint was removed, Steve surged up out of the chair with its dangerous apparatuses, into Bucky’s waiting arms. Bucky half lifted him off his feet in his enthusiasm to hug him and Steve buried his face in Bucky’s neck, drinking in his rich and enticing scent.

Natasha cleared her throat. Bucky growled, but Steve tried to clear his head. He pulled back a little, only for Bucky to tighten his grip.

“The jet?” Natasha prompted.

Bucky moved his arms, not away, but down. He bent at the knee, hands grabbing Steve under the thighs and lifting. Steve, trusting him, jumped and wrapped his legs around Bucky’s torso. He hugged him tightly around the neck and shoulders, Bucky holding him now by the ass and back, and Steve tucked his head into the crook of his Alpha’s neck.

“This way,” Natasha said, moving away.

Bucky carried Steve out, following Natasha out of the facility. With hands holding firmly to his ass and back, Steve couldn’t roll his hips the way he wanted to, but he parted his lips over the scent gland deep in Bucky’s neck and sucked slowly, just to taste him. Even with his face hidden, Steve felt the sunlight on his skin as they left the compound, and the harshly cold air made him shiver. Bucky murmured quietly in his ear, gently shushing him, then voices from a distance reached his awareness.
“Out!” Natasha yelled. “Get off the jet!”

Bucky growled, his fingers digging into Steve, and even just the thought of whoever Natasha was speaking to made Steve whimper and draw even closer to his Alpha.

“How’re we supposed to get back?”

“I’ll come back for you later, get off!”

“But –”

“Now!”

“What’s going on?”

Steve lifted his head, squinting at the bright sunlight, spotting Stark, Sam, Bruce, and Clint standing near the quinjet landed in a small clearing. Four more unfriendly men and he hid in the protection of Bucky’s neck again.

“I’m taking them back to New York, but it’s got to be just me.”

“Hang on,” he heard Clint say, “hang on, Barnes is rutting –”

“And Steve’s in heat, he’s not going to let any of you near him –”

“Natasha –”

“I’m not going to touch her,” Bucky growled. Steve scowled just at the idea.
“He’s probably zeroed in on Steve’s scent, I’m probably giving him a headache at this point.”

Steve was probably giving Natasha a headache, but that was barely a thought in his mind. He felt the breeze tousling his hair, putting him upwind of the other Alphas. He clung to Bucky, trying to make himself as small and unnoticeable as possible.

“I don’t like this plan,” Clint said.

“Too bad,” Natasha answered. “Get off the jet.”

Steve checked over his shoulder again, seeing Bruce and Stark practically tugging Clint along and away from the quinjet. He kept looking over his shoulder distrustfully, but didn’t fight them. Natasha started for the jet and Bucky began to follow her again, keeping a careful distance, however. Steve turned back into his neck, parting his lips to return to sucking on Bucky’s scent gland, and Bucky massaged his fingers briefly into the small of his back.

The gangplank rose shut behind them. Steve looked around once more, spying Natasha going up to the upper deck, then Bucky moved off to the side towards rows of seats. When he started to lower him like he was putting him down, Steve doubled his grip, trying to cling to him.

“Just a second, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured to him, “just for a second. I’m gonna try and get something for us to lay on, alright?”

Steve reluctantly let go. When Bucky retreated, Steve pulled his legs up and hugged his knees, feeling cold and rapidly thickening fluid sticking to the inner part of his thighs and crack of his ass. It was remarkably uncomfortable, and yet his body was just making more. His stomach kept cramping, there was lactic acid built and building up in his limbs from struggling on the restraints, the tug and pull of his clothes over his skin was abrasive, and his fever felt almost as bad as the one caused by scarlet fever that nearly killed him more than once in his childhood. On taking the serum, he had thought that fevers would be a thing of the past. Clearly, he’d been wrong.

Bucky returned, taking his hands and pulling him off the seat. Steve winced at the pull of his slacks where his slick had dried to his skin, standing from the bench and following his guidance. Bucky pushed down on his shoulders and Steve knelt before lying on his side, feeling canvas under him. Bucky lay down beside him, pulling him into his chest and hooking a leg over his knee. Steve pushed his thigh between Bucky’s, grinding against him, but Bucky only held him still.
“Just gotta wait a little while longer,” Bucky murmured, “not safe yet, just a little longer.”

Steve whined, wanting to get out of his hot clothes and soothe the aching want low in his gut. There was only Natasha in the jet, yet clearly, Bucky still considered her a threat. While that was partly comforting, it was mostly frustrating, as it meant Bucky wasn’t going to give him any relief from his heat. Gland-stimulation and grinding could only take him so far, what his body needed was penetration. Heat and rut were very, very basic ploys for the survival of the species, and as such, nothing less than knotting would satisfy either.

And while he was frustrated by Bucky’s reluctance to knot him there, Steve recognized that on a canvas cloth in a cargo hold really wasn’t an appropriate place for it. If his fine linen suit itched and burned, then the canvas might cause severe irritation and even break into rash that would last until the heat stopped suppressing his immune system in its efforts to get him pregnant. He might even be capable of contracting infections in heat; he’d never been able to test himself in this condition.

Still, Steve wouldn’t admit that. For the whole two times he’d seen Bucky like this, Steve was not impressed with his clarity of mind whilst rutting.

Bucky kept up a steady stream of reassurances as the journey back to New York progressed; verbal and non-verbal, by murmuring in his ear and running his wrist over any piece of bare skin on Steve’s body he could find. Wherever his wrist touched, the flushed feeling abated, but only for a brief moment, returning almost as soon as Bucky moved on.

However, his comprehension of time was lax like many of his other senses. The quinjet landed sooner than Steve would have expected, and Bucky was lifting Steve off the ground, an arm under his knees and an arm under his back in a bridal carry, and was off the gangplank before it had even touched the ground. Steve was vaguely aware of being carried up flights of stairs, through doors that slammed behind them, until he was being lowered onto a soft surface with plenty of give.

A mattress. Steve reached for Bucky’s face, catching him and pulling him down for a kiss, then Bucky was tugging off his shirt and reaching for the pants stuck to his skin. Steve lifted his hips off the bed, wincing at the fabric tugging at the fine hairs along his legs, dropping back onto the bed and panting from the strain of just holding his body off the bed for a few seconds.

“Just a second longer,” Bucky told him. Steve turned his head, seeing Bucky pulling off his own clothes and putting down weapons. “Fuck, baby, you’re so damn beautiful.”

Steve grinned, pleased, as Bucky bent and mouthed along his neck. His body pulsed with want, fever, or both. Bucky lifted him again for a second, putting him down closer to the middle of the bed,
then crawled on top of him and started sucking on his scent gland. Steve sprawled underneath him, panting yet again, and pressed the back of his head into the give of the mattress.

“Gonna be so worth the wait, you are,” Bucky growled into his ear, kissing and sucking his way up to it. “Fucking hell, sugar, you taste so fucking good.”

“Don’t make me wait anymore,” Steve mumbled, lifting his knees past Bucky’s hips, where a warm weight pressed in under him, tantalizingly close.

“Gonna work you open,” Bucky promised, then sucked on his earlobe a moment. “You’ll be nice ‘n’ loose for me, won’tcha? Sugar sweet slick getting you all wet, babydoll. Fuck, you’re gonna be so good.”

“C’mon,” Steve begged, “c’mon, gimme –”

Bucky dragged his flesh hand down Steve’s body, pushing his fingers over the crest of his thigh and inward. Steve groaned at the gentle press, the slow intrusion of three fingers at once. His muscles, each and every one, were lax from heat, making it easier for Bucky to work his fingers and then nearly his whole hand in. The stretch and fullness of it was delicious, but a hand, flat and bony, was still not the fullness his body was craving.

“Come on,” Steve babbled, a frenzy of want and need, and Bucky sucked hard on the scent gland in his neck. “Please, ‘m good, please –”

Bucky pulled his hand away, grabbing Steve by the hips, one hand cold and unyielding, the other wet and warm. He bit gently on his neck, then reached up and caught his lips. Steve kissed back with a fevered hunger driving him to demand more and more. He rocked his hips against the weight pressing against him, half whimpering with every second that it was teasingly close and he still didn’t have it, then –

Steve gasped, his mouth falling open as his head fell back, and Bucky took it as a chance to kiss down his neck, rapidly turning just open-mouthed panting as he began a fast rhythm.

It didn’t take much for Steve to come, or a second time, then a third. He was soon somewhere between unconsciousness and ecstasy, yet still demanding more. He lost count of how many times Bucky brought him to and over the brink, lost track of time, lost track of everything.
Finally, Bucky was collapsing with a long groan, finally coming himself, and Steve, momentarily sated, passed out.

Chapter End Notes

see, i told you nobody was gonna die. okay, no one we want to live. rumlow is very much dead. this is why i need an anti-rumlow squad, bc i'll tell ya, i'm working on another fic for the same story 'verse, and rumlow has about five seconds of screen time before bucky kills him. it's great, my only regret is not having sarah shoot the rat bastard in missing in action when she had the chance. that might be the only part of the same story 'verse where rumlow's life is spared.

anyway, i’m done ranting about rumlow, comment and tell me how relieved you are that steve is okay and nobody important died! do you agree with lexi#1, should i have called this chapter cloudy with a chance of BUCKWILD? well, you can actually thank my brother's gf for the buckwild part, lexi suggested cloudy with a chance of death and the brother's gf said it ought to be buckwild. we're all writers and we talk about stuff like this all the time, my brother's incredibly confused as to how well his gf and i get along. but yeah, comment! see you next week!
Chapter Summary

sweet
swēt/Submit
adjective
1.
having the pleasant taste characteristic of sugar or honey; not salty, sour, or bitter.
"a cup of hot sweet tea"
synonyms: sugary, sweetened, saccharine; More
2.
pleasing in general; delightful.
"it was the sweet life he had always craved"
synonyms: pleasant, pleasing, pleasurable, agreeable, delightful, nice, satisfying,
gratifying, good, acceptable, fine;...

Chapter Notes

i'm late. i fully admit that, but on the bright side, bc i'm late, it won't matter that i can't
update again until next saturday at the earliest bc i'm going camping. probs not until
monday. so, pls forgive me for being late. to pacify you, there will be bloopers from the
production of this chapter in the end notes. how does one have bloopers for a written
story? easy, your beta volunteers to read it aloud to you so you both can get really in
depth into the editing and you discover that your beta cannot do accents to save her life.
just one of the many things that happen in the process of editing. it was the best.
so that! thank you lexi for being a wonderful beta, we shall all laugh at the bloopers
later, you're a real gem. you can find the playlist for this chapter here, the chapter cover
is on my tumblr here, and please do comment. enjoy!

psst! there were so many bloopers, i ran out of space in the end notes, so here's some up
here.
me: i need a title for this chapter
lexi: death.
me: no.
lexi: i tried to be a good super soldier and all i got was america breathing down my
neck.
me: wow
lexi: fuck, the musical
me: nO
lexi: *hydra can eat my ass when bucky's done*
me: *facepalm*

me: *shows lexi the chapter cover* what d'you think
lexi: sensual. so warm. so sexy. so intimate.
me: note that the flowers are in a pool of blood
lexi: *shows lexi the chapter cover* what d'you think
me: note that the flowers are in a pool of blood
lexi: sensual. so warm. so sexy. so intimate.
me: note that the flowers are in a pool of blood
lexi: sensual. so warm. so sexy. so intimate.
me: note that the flowers are in a pool of blood
lexi: sensual. so warm. so sexy. so intimate.
me: note that the flowers are in a pool of blood

*after we have entered the voice chat on discord, on a server with a bunch of our friends...*

lexi: "The six video boxes showed static, then slowly, the pictures sharpened." omg i'm gonna have to do voices.
me: *begins cackling* hol up lemme pull up my notes for their accents
lexi: what -- acCENTS???
me: accents! head two is from wales
lexi: wtf does a wales accent sound like???? i can't do accents!!! wtf is a german accent?? wtf is russian? i have to listen to the english dub of yuri on ice hang on
me, writing in the server chat: @everyone hop in voice to listen to me wheezing and lexi attempting accents
lexi, in chat: PLEASW DON'T

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Yesterday outside the United States Capitol building, an unprecedented attack took place. There were over 50 casualties, 7 deaths, and 12 people have been left in comas. Americans are no stranger to mass shootings, but right outside one of the most well-protected buildings in the country? What’s more, the attack wasn’t even aimed at the Congressmen and women inside. The goal of the
attack was to kidnap Captain America, and once they'd done that, they vanished. An attack that lasted hardly ten minutes left more than 50 people injured and seven dead, plus took down Captain America with two Avengers at his side with ease. The official number of insurgents at the attack has not been released, but estimates say there were at least thirty people there...

“After yesterday, there is no question that Hydra is alive. They are active, they are in power, and they have the ability to successfully stage a terrorist attack on the Capitol building and get away with it. What disturbs me most? Hydra attacked Congress just to capture Captain America. With brass that bold, what will we do if they decide to actually attack Congress?”

*

[location undisclosed]

The six video boxes showed static, then slowly, the pictures sharpened.

“Report,” Head Two demanded immediately.

Grant Ward and Jack Rollins sat side by side. At the clear absence of Rumlow, the six other Heads looked confused.

“What happened?” Head Two queried.

“Rumlow’s plan failed,” Grant announced. “The asset escaped.”

“And Captain America?” Strucker asked.

“Escaped as well,” Rollins said.

The six heads, as far as Grant could see, bristled with anger.

“Clearly we cannot put our hope in the Winter Soldier any longer. It is time for a new era,” Strucker said. Head Six audibly groaned. “I have not only successfully recreated the witch, but created an enhanced male I have named Quicksilver. I propose that the new Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver be sent to New York to eliminate the Avengers in their entirety as well as the asset.”
“We should recover the asset!” Lukin spat.

“The asset is no longer reliable!” Strucker countered.

“The asset’s original identity has been betrayed, as well,” Grant added. “The public is aware of its existence and sympathy for it has already begun.”

“The asset should have never been given to the Americans!” Lukin snarled. “Its home is here, and now it has been lost!”

“With all due respect, sir,” Rollins started, and Lukin cut him off with angry tutting. Rollins fell silent, glowering.

“The asset must be put down,” Strucker said before Lukin could continue his rant. “I call for a vote.”

“Yay,” Head Two said tiredly. “Strucker’s plan might work.”

“His pet projects haven’t even been tested,” Head Six protested.

“Yay,” Head Four said pointedly.

“Wait,” Rollins interrupted, “you can’t vote –”

“Oh, we can’t, can we?” Lukin interrupted mockingly.

“Rumlow is dead,” Grant said.

The heads fell silent.
“The asset killed him and his entire team,” Grant added. “Fifty-two agents in total.”

“Single-handed,” Rollins added. “Rogers went into heat moments after the asset infiltrated the compound Rumlow and his team were holding him in, so he must have begun pre-heat earlier that day. It’s my guess that the asset knew Rogers would be going into heat soon, and maybe he was already rutting by the time he got into the compound. The asset, as L knows, is more dangerous while rutting.”

Lukin covered his shadowed face with his hands. Head Two sighed heavily, Strucker rubbed at his temples, and Heads Four and Five exchanged quick words in Mandarin.

“The asset has always been unstoppable while unstable,” Lukin said from behind his hands. “It wiped out a facility of two hundred or more in 1957. It was why P built the chair and I was willing to sell him the asset.”

“For now, we need a new head,” Grant said.

“Rollins was Rumlow’s right hand,” Strucker said. “All in favor to promote Rollins?”

“Yay,” the five other heads said. Rollins did not react visibly, so neither did Grant.

“Ward, you take the place of the right hand,” Strucker went on. “It is your responsibility to appoint a left hand, Rollins. Returning to the subject of Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver –”

“Two yeses,” Head Two said. “Myself and M.”

“Nay,” Head Six said stubbornly.

“Yay,” Lukin voted, tone bitter.

“Yay,” Head Five said.

“Nay,” Rollins voted, though there was no point.
“Motion carried,” Strucker said with glee. “Rollins, you will receive the Witch and Quicksilver with their handlers by the end of the week. They will give you further directions. Session concluded.”


“After the terrorist attack by the recently resurfaced Nazi cult Hydra on the 9th, questions have been raised as to the origins of the group. What little information about it that isn’t classified far beyond the average citizen’s level confirms that while Hydra last rose to power during World War II, it wasn’t Schmidt that founded the group.

“An inside, anonymous source at the CIA spoke to us yesterday, who we’ll simply call Joe. Joe told us that he has access to many of the files released by Agent Romanoff in September at the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., including much of Hydra’s history. Our readers will be horrified to learn just how old Hydra really is…”

[a few days past october 9th?]

The past few days were a blur. Steve could recall shudderingly-good sex, possibly a bath, and assumed that somehow he’d eaten, because he wasn’t hungry and had a vague memory of licking Bucky’s fingers. But that was about it.

The bedroom door was standing open to show sunlight, so it was day. Steve rubbed at his eyes, coming to awareness slowly. He was lying on his back, one arm flung out and the other trapped underneath Bucky’s waist. Bucky was lying on his side, both arms and both legs wrapped around Steve, and snoring gently. Steve had a blissed-out smile on his face, feeling deliciously bone-tired, in the way only some excellently satisfying sex could do. Having Bucky enveloping him was just the cherry on top; Steve felt very pleased, safe, and protected.

The stretch of the sunlight, barely past the doorway, indicated it was just past dawn. Steve turned back into Bucky’s body, closing his eyes once more. He felt warm and secure, the heavy weight of Bucky’s arms and thighs pinning him down. There would be things to deal with when they woke – Congress, Steve’s team, hell, even the sheets –, but for the time being, Steve slipped back into sleep.

He woke again to Bucky stirring. Steve yawned, blinking, as Bucky kissed his cheek and pushed into a sitting position.
“Food,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve hummed a vague assent. He shifted until he was hugging Bucky’s thighs, his face pressed into his hip. A hand, warm metal, brushed through his hair.

“How ya feelin’?” Bucky asked softly.

“Good,” Steve murmured, a grin splitting his face. “Sore.”

Bucky chuckled, bending and kissing his temple. Steve wormed his way closer.

“Full,” he added in quietly, and Bucky’s fingers stilled in his hair. Bucky ran his flesh palm down Steve’s spine, drawing out a shiver in its wake, to curve over his ass. Steve parted his thighs, pushing one knee over Bucky’s shin, pleased and pliant to Bucky’s reaching fingers. His Alpha bent once more, kissing the back of his neck.

“Think it’s over?” Bucky murmured in his ear. “You need more?”

Steve shook his head. He yawned again, as Bucky’s fingers retracted.

“Only been three days,” Bucky said softly. “Think we should stay in for a while, case it comes back.”

“Kay,” Steve mumbled. He felt wholly satisfied, even with only three days, and doubted that the heat would return, but he was happy to go along with whatever Bucky thought best. He trusted his Alpha.

“Food or shower first?”

Steve hummed, shrugging.
“I think a shower,” Bucky said, lips brushing his ear. A warm palm ran down his thigh again. “Made a big mess, doll.”

Steve, grinning, answered in a mumble: “Your fault.” Bucky chuckled.

He shifted on the bed, going onto his knees and Steve rolled onto his back. Bucky pushed his hands under his waist and knees, lifting him into his arms, and Steve wrapped his hands around Bucky’s neck. Bucky pushed the bathroom door open with a foot, then slid open the shower door and set Steve on his feet. Steve yawned yet again, stretching his arms above his head, as Bucky closed the shower and turned on the water.

Steve certainly felt well-fucked, but he also felt warm and heavy, perhaps a little bloated. Yet, in dropping his hands down to touch his stomach, it didn’t yield to his fingers pushing in the way bloating normally would.

Bucky pushed an arm around his waist, drawing him against his chest, and Steve quickly forgot about the heavy feeling in his gut.

* [ Why America Should be Afraid of HYDRA Now, The Telegraph, October 12th, 2014]

“The United States is surprisingly fraught with violence for a first-world nation. Mass shootings are a regular occurrence, crime is rampant, gangs and organized crime families are better at regulating their neighborhoods than actual law enforcement. But a new threat is rising…”

“HYDRA took root in the Nazi party under the eye of Dr. Johann Schmidt, who believed in the ultimate race of humans like his peers, and it was believed to have been cut down by Captain America near the end of World War II, but in a shocking turn of events, America’s own thirst for power allowed it to regrow. The United States military granted visas and pardons to many Nazi scientists in exchange for their service to the US in Operation Paperclip, and many of these pardoned Nazis were HYDRA members. Most notably was Dr. Arnim Zola, a Swiss scientist credited with hundreds of discoveries and inventions, but also with being Dr. Schmidt’s right-hand man…”

“HYDRA seeks to create a utopia, a system similar to Big Brother out of 1984, to stop pain and suffering before it happens by way of revoking personal liberties from its citizens. America is supposedly the champion of personal liberty, but lately, that does not seem to be the case. The United States Congress is currently held by a fragile Democratic majority, who are known to push for bigger government, but after the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., there are empty seats in the Senate and House of Representatives as many Congressional members have resigned or been arrested for connections to HYDRA…”
For a few days, Bucky was wary for any sign of Steve’s heat returning. His rut, at the least, still kept him suspicious and territorial well past Steve’s heat fading, but Steve spent more time sleeping than anything else.

Bucky wasn’t really sure what to expect of his rut or Steve’s heat, so he utilized the tool Google on Steve’s phone and later laptop to do some research. Apparently, three days was well within the normal range for a heat to last start to finish without ending in a successful pregnancy, and as Steve had said he wasn’t able to get pregnant, that made sense. Ruts, on the other hand, would last at least two to three days past the end of the Omega’s heat regardless of length. From his research, he learned that this was probably an evolutionary development as Omegas were prone to exhaustion and susceptible to infection at the end of a heat. This made further sense; Steve slept two whole days after the scent of heat faded from his skin, and Bucky was still on high alert and fidgety that whole time.

He kept researching to find out what to expect once Steve’s exhaustion faded, just to make sure he was prepared. He had forgotten that menstruation existed, and upon reading about it, a flood of memories concerning his sister had him blinking in bewilderment for almost half an hour. At the very least, remembering Becca whining about her period reminded him what it even was.

Continuing to read, Bucky familiarized himself with the side-effects and cravings Steve would be likely to have while menstruating. There wasn’t much information on male Omega menstruation, or perhaps almost no information would be more accurate to say. It took Bucky some time to differentiate between what the Internet had to say about female Beta and female Omega menstruation; Betas, as they didn’t have heats, had fertile cycles that lasted about a month at a time and periods that would last a few days to almost a week. However, Omegas would have four to six heats per year, followed by a period that would last more than a week at a time.

From what he could learn about male Omegas, Steve was likely to have three heats at most per year. That was all he could find specifically concerning the menstrual cycle of male Omegas.

Bucky spent some time looking for supplies while Steve was asleep; the Internet said Omega men and boys were limited to pads, but he couldn’t find any in the apartment. He was familiar with credit cards, so he bought some pads online to be delivered to the tower, a brand that catered specifically to male Omegas. He also bought more chocolate and a heating pad, to soothe cramps and cravings. There was plenty by way of food in the apartment, but the Internet recommended leafy greens and
red meats to supplement the blood and iron Steve would be losing, so Bucky consulted with JARVIS to update the groceries delivered by robots to include more spinach and beef.

By two days, Bucky felt fully prepared to care for Steve in the aftermath of his heat. On the third day, Steve woke from his long rest and woke completely, rather than the previous brief moments of wakefulness for food and water. The Internet said it would take a few days past that for the lining of his womb to begin shedding, but in the meantime, Steve would probably still be tired and experience mood swings.

Still, he woke slowly, but smiled when he saw Bucky next to him, sitting up to put his head on his shoulder.

“Morning, dollface,” Bucky said quietly, reaching up to comb through his hair. “How you feelin’?”

“Hmm,” was Steve’s only answer initially. He shifted somewhat, pushing an arm around Bucky’s waist. “Hungry,” he said finally.

“We got food,” Bucky offered. “Lots’a food. Did some looking up on the Internet for what kinds of things you should be eating.”

Steve smiled again, eyes shut. “Lookit’chu,” he mumbled, clearly pleased. “Took me ages to figure out how to work the ‘net.”

“Nobody said you were smart,” Bucky answered and Steve laughed. “Anyway, I got you lots’a leafy greens, some chocolate, got chuck steak to make stew, stuff like that.”

“Yum,” Steve said, then yawned.

“Bought you pads and a heating pad for cramps,” Bucky went on. “Internet didn’t have much about Omega boys, though.”

At the mention of pads, Steve wrinkled his nose. “Ugh,” he said definitively. “I forgot that was gonna happen.”
“Lucky you,” Bucky said, and Steve laughed again. His Omega sat up, yawned, and leaned on Bucky’s shoulder to blink blearily. “Internet didn’t say how long it would take to start.”

Steve seemed to think a minute, then raised a hand to rub the gum of sleep from his eyes. “What day ‘s’it?”

“Thursday,” Bucky said.

Steve frowned a little, looking confused. “How long did the heat last?”

“It was done by Monday morning,” Bucky told him, and Steve frowned further. “What?”

“Dunno,” Steve mumbled. “I haven’t really had a full heat since I was a kid, maybe that’s it.”

“What?” Bucky said again, getting somewhat worried. They hadn’t stopped to test whatever HYDRA had injected Steve with, and there were any number of infections or diseases that could cut a heat short.

“It’s probably nothing,” Steve said, grabbing his hand and squeezing it. “It’s probably just the serum. My heats usually lasted five or six days. It’s probably just the serum,” he said a second time as Bucky started, worried.

“You should get seen to,” Bucky insisted anyway. “No telling what those guys drugged you with.”

“Probably a good idea,” Steve sighed. He squeezed Bucky’s hand once more. “Can we eat first?”

“Sure,” Bucky agreed, albeit reluctantly. He swung his legs off the bed, aiming for the door, and Steve headed for the bathroom. “You good?” he called after him, stepping closer.

“Yeah,” Steve said over his shoulder. “Three days, I’m probably already bleeding.” he added in a grumble.

Bucky, still a bit overprotective, lingered in the bedroom while Steve used the bathroom. A minute
later, he came out, tying the string on his sweatpants.

“Lucky me,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Maybe the serum’ll fix that, too.”

“Nothing?” Bucky asked.

“Nope,” Steve said. He put a hand on Bucky’s waist, kissed his cheek, and moved on for the kitchen. “But when the sheets are bloody in the morning, it’ll be completely my fault. I hate pads.”

Bucky shrugged and followed Steve out. His Omega took a seat at the island counter, propping his chin up on a fist, and turned to smile at Bucky as he neared.

“Your turn to cook,” he said.

“Thought the Omega’s place was in the kitchen,” Bucky said teasingly, pecking him on the cheek before moving to the fridge. “What’re you thinking, you want that stew or something quicker?”

“Quicker,” Steve said. “I could eat an elephant.”

Bucky rolled his eyes, opening the fridge in search of a quick meal. Steve would need lots of protein and greens, foods high in iron, for the next few days, and he had plenty of beef in plenty of different cuts. Quick, however, would be sandwiches.

He took meat, cheese, a few condiments and tomatoes, and laid them out on the counter. He put a bag of raw spinach on the counter as well, and while he turned to get the bread, Steve picked up the spinach.

“You’re taking this seriously,” he said, half laughing.

“You’re taking this seriously,” Bucky grumbled. He started setting up the sandwiches. “What else would I do?”

“Buck,” Steve laughed, “I survived on stale bread and water for the first twenty-five or so years of
my life, a few weeks having low iron levels won’t kill me.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t fuss,” Bucky countered in a petulant mumble. He took the spinach back and opened the bag, putting leaves on the half-built sandwiches.

“Thank you,” Steve said, making Bucky glance up. He was smiling warmly and reached out for his hand. “You’re more than I deserve.”

“No, I’m not,” Bucky insisted. He picked Steve’s hand up off the counter, lifting it to his lips and kissing the back of it. “You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

Steve smiled again, a touch of something sad to it, and Bucky kissed the back of his hand a second time. He let go to finish the sandwiches, two for each of them the way Steve had been doing, then pushed two towards Steve. “Eat up,” he said.

Steve picked up one, and Bucky waited until he’d bitten into it to begin eating himself. He watched his Omega eating with a careful eye. He was still worried about whatever had cut Steve’s heat short. It could just be the serum’s effect, but he kept thinking about the syringe mark on Steve’s arm, and whatever drug that had been strong enough to render a super soldier unconscious. In his reading, he learned of how weak the immune system became during heat. It granted sperm an easier job of fertilizing an egg, but left Omegas almost defenseless.

When they had both finished eating, Steve got up from his stool and stretched his arms above his head. Bucky still watched him, looking for signs of weakness in his mannerisms and movements.

“Are there doctors on call here?” Bucky asked.

Steve dropped his arms, his eyebrows tightening and said nothing for a second. Bucky frowned at him, but Steve shook his head and shrugged, apparently moving on from whatever it was that had confused him.

“There’s Bruce,” Steve said. “Um, there’s a clinic on the lower floors, remember?”

Bucky scowled a little, considering the options. Steve moved around the counter and pushed his arms around his waist, leaning on his chest, and Bucky put his hands on Steve’s hips by reflex.
“The clinic will probably be better,” Steve said quietly.

Bucky scowled fully, but Steve was right. A fully equipped health clinic, with a full cast of specialists, would be better to suit their needs than just Banner operating on his own. He wasn’t even sure what sort of doctor Banner was.

“Let’s get dressed and go down,” Steve said, then pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “If you want, I’ll ask Natasha to come with us.”

Bucky, then, laughed and Steve raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Natasha is good for stabby,” Bucky mimicked Steve’s words in the HYDRA compound. “That’s what you said.”

Steve flushed bright pink and Bucky kissed his cheek, pleased. “I didn’t say that.” Steve tried to insist in a childlike manner.

“She is very stabby,” Bucky mocked. He squeezed Steve by the hips, grinning. “That’s exactly what you said.”

Steve groaned, embarrassed, and dropped his forehead onto his shoulder. Bucky laughed again, running his hands up to the small of his back and subconsciously scent-marking the path between Steve’s hip and back.

“Don’t be shy, baby,” he cooed, “it’s cute.”

“Stabby,” Steve repeated, grumbling. “God, I blame you.”

“How! How is it my fault?” Bucky demanded, laughing yet again. Steve nuzzled into his neck a little.

“You were sucking up all my brain power,” Steve insisted. “Therefore, entirely your fault I called
Natasha *stabby.* ”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Sure, it was all my fault, sugar.”

“Yep,” Steve agreed, leaning back and kissing him briefly. “Come on, let’s go.”

They swapped their pajamas for real clothes; jeans and proper shirts. Bucky put knives into his boots and tucked a pair of guns into the waistband of his jeans, lifting his shirt over them to hide their presence. Steve took his hand as they entered the stairwell, looking at his phone in the other hand.

“Natasha’s joining us,” he said. Bucky nodded.

A floor down, Romanoff entered the stairs. She nodded once to him, then looked at Steve.

“Just a check-up?” she questioned.

“Just want to make sure the drug Rumlow hit me with isn’t still in my system,” Steve answered.

Romanoff raised her eyebrows. Steve raised just one of his, then shrugged dismissively. Bucky glanced between them as some sort of silent argument took place; Romanoff narrowing her eyes, Steve curling his lip down, Romanoff huffing and pursing her lips for Steve to just shake his head, shrugging yet again.

“Just a second,” Romanoff said, and exited the stairwell back into her apartment. Bucky rounded on Steve.

“The fuck was that?”

“I have no clue!” Steve laughed. “She just gets like that. Squinty.”

“So she’s squinty and stabby?” Bucky said, grinning.
“Oh, my God,” Steve groaned. “Stop. Stop it.”

“Squinty and stabby!” Bucky repeated, laughing. “I think you’ve got a type, Stevie.”

Steve groaned again, dropping his forehead onto his shoulder, as the door reopened and Romanoff exited.

At the bag she was carrying, Bucky squinted suspiciously.

“What is that?”

“It’s my knitting,” Romanoff said simply, waving the two needles before sticking them in the tote bag. “Even us ex-assassin’s have hobbies, Barnes.”

“And I’m sure you’re a wonderful knitter,” Steve said, while Bucky continued to squint suspiciously at whatever Romanoff was knitting. It was wide, a light peach color, perhaps two or three feet, but only a few inches tall. Too short to be the start of a sweater, but too tall to be a scarf. He wasn’t sure how he knew that.

“Shall we?” Romanoff prompted.

They started back down the stairs. Romanoff hung the tote bag on her shoulder and pulled out whatever it was she was knitting, resuming stitching quite calmly as they took the stairs from the very top almost to the bottom.

“We’re taking the elevator up,” Steve grumbled as they came out on floor twenty.

Bucky only nodded. They came out in the waiting room of the clinic, and fortunately, it was empty. There were a few nurses at the front desk, who Steve walked up to and began conversing with, while Bucky scanned the available surroundings. After a minute, a nurse waved them towards a set of double doors, and Bucky followed her and Steve into the clinic proper.

They were taken up another level and Steve was checked into a private room, though the only thing that kept it private was a heavy curtain. Romanoff took a seat in the corner, steadily knitting, and
Bucky took up guard duty by the curtain.

“Hey, you,” Steve called, making him turn. His Omega waved him closer. “Look scary and unapproachable over here, will you?”

Bucky shrugged and crossed to stand by the padded examination table. Steve took his hand and Bucky squeezed it on reflex.

A minute later, a different nurse entered.

“I’m just going to take a blood sample,” she said, putting down a basket on a metal tray. “Doc Finch is still debating if you need to give a urine sample, so we’ll just start with this. Left or right arm?”

“Left,” Steve said. Bucky moved to stand on his right. The nurse swabbed his arm with something, felt around with two gloved fingers, then picked up a needle. She drew four vials of dark blood from his arm, then pressed and taped gauze over the puncture.

“That’s that,” she said, stripping off her gloves to throw them away. “Doctor Finch will be back in a minute.”

After she left, Steve turned to look at Bucky and raised his eyebrows. Bucky raised his in return.

“You okay?” Steve said quietly. It was almost quieter than the gentle clack of Romanoff’s knitting.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered. “Course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Steve shrugged lightly. “The word doctor bothered you a little while ago?”

Bucky turned his lip down in a frown. “When?”

“When Stark brought up his X-Ray machine?” Steve prompted. “When he first mentioned Cho.”
Bucky considered it, then shrugged. “Dunno. It’s a word.”

But the longer he thought about it, the more confused he got, and then something occurred to him. Doctor was just a word, but someone had once driven at least one word into him until he reacted like Pavlov’s dogs. He knew because that was what he remembered most about the Baba Yaga. The swish of a kusarigama, the stench of distress, and a musical voice saying: Wake up, Alpha.

Even thinking the words once had him struggling to maintain control of his consciousness. The programmed response to zone out and obey the Baba Yaga had instilled in him was still strong despite it easily being thirty years since she had last swung her kusarigama in his presence. And if the Baba Yaga had such control over him even now, then what other words, otherwise harmless, could trip up landmines left in his mind?

“Bucky?”

Bucky shook himself, automatically reaching out to put an arm around Steve’s waist to reassure him. Now wasn’t the time to worry about words; right now, he needed to be worrying about Steve.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “Nothing.”

Steve did not look convinced, so Bucky pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Don’t worry about it,” he said.

“I’ll worry about it anyways,” Steve grumbled.

Just then, the curtain drew back. Bucky half reached for his gun on reflex, only Steve’s hand grabbing his wrist keeping him from drawing it. A woman in a lab coat stepped inside, rubbing antibacterial foam into her hands.

“Good afternoon, Captain Rogers,” she said, heading for the computer in a corner of the room. “I’m Doctor Finch, I’ll be checking you out today. What brings you in?”

“Uh,” Steve started. Bucky squeezed his waist. “Well, it’s a bit of a long story.”

Doctor Finch turned to look at him, expression only the tiniest bit intrigued. “Start at the beginning?”
“Well, on Friday I was experiencing pre-heat symptoms,” Steve said. He shifted uncomfortably on the table, and Bucky raised his flesh hand to drag his wrist over his knee. The doctor’s eyes flicked down at the motion and then away. “But just after I realized that I was in pre-heat, I was captured by HYDRA.”


“I was rescued quickly,” Steve said hastily, “before I started heat fully, but when they captured me, they injected me with something to knock me out. I was unconscious maybe an hour, an hour and a half, and when I came to, I was fairly out of it. I hallucinated a bit. Rumlow – The agent who captured me – said that the drug contained a cocktail of several different poisons, venoms, et cetera, all that would knock me out but not kill me. It takes a lot to knock me out.”

“So you’re worried what that did to you?” Finch said. “Did anyone take blood samples after you were rescued?”

“Well,” Steve said, then shifted again. “I kinda started heat right when I got rescued…”

Finch glanced at Bucky. “Were you present at his rescue?”

“I was first on scene,” Bucky answered.

“And I’m assuming you rutted?” Finch asked further, turning to face her computer.

“Yeah,” Bucky mumbled.

Finch made a few keystrokes, then looked back. “And how long did the heat last?”

“Three days,” Steve said.

“Is that normal for you?”
“I haven’t actually had a natural heat since I was seventeen,” Steve said reluctantly. “But… They regulated by the time I was sixteen, and they were never less than five days.”

Finch paused in her keystrokes as he finished his sentence. She frowned at the computer, then after a second, resumed tapping at the keyboard. Bucky wasn’t sure what had confused her, but whatever it was, she didn’t seem about to ask.

“And did the two of you use some kind of contraceptive?” she asked.

“The serum itself is practically a contraceptive,” Steve mumbled.

“I’m sorry?” Finch asked, only half glancing back at them.

“No,” Steve rephrased. “Erskine’s serum made my reproductive system pretty much impenetrable.”

Finch hummed. “Well, we’ll test for pregnancy just to rule it out, but it sounds like you’re worried about the drug’s effect on your heat?”

“On me in general,” Steve said.

“Well, how are you feeling?” Finch asked. “Aches, pains, nausea, headaches, anything?”

“No,” Steve told her, “it’s just that the heat was short.”

Finch nodded. “We’ll run all the diagnostics we’re capable of, and thanks to Stark Industries, that’s quite a few. In the meantime, has your period started?”

“No,” Steve said quietly.

“I wouldn’t really expect it,” Finch said. Bucky frowned at that. “It’s common in Omegas of such athletic stature for periods to all but vanish. We’re not too sure what causes it, but it seems to have
links to body fat ratios, and you, Captain Rogers, are entirely muscle.”

Bucky thought back to the light give of Steve’s skin and wondered if Finch was being figurative or literal.

“In the meantime, avoid HYDRA agents?” Finch suggested. “Watch your diet and exercise, keep things light, nothing too strenuous or heavy. I’d warn you against stress, but from what I hear, you’re due back in Congress soon.”

Finch pumped more antibacterial from a dispenser on the wall and pulled back the curtain again. “All the tests will be done by the end of the week. Have a good day, Captain.”

After a second’s silence, filled with only Romanoff’s needles clicking, Bucky turned to Steve with a frown. “That’s it?”

Steve shrugged. “I guess?”

“That’s it,” Romanoff answered. Bucky glanced at her. “There isn’t much guesswork left in medicine these days, Barnes.”

She tucked her knitting back into its bag. “Let’s go to lunch.”

“Uh, we ate earlier?” Steve said as she started for the curtain. He hopped off the table, and Bucky took his hand to fold their fingers together.

“Then let’s go get lunch for me and an afternoon snack for you,” Romanoff said. Bucky raised an eyebrow at Steve, who shrugged and started after her. Bucky went along with it. They followed Romanoff out of the clinic to an elevator, one with a full control panel. The buttons only went up to floor sixty, and when Romanoff pressed the button for sixty, a panel lit up with a grid. She placed her palm on it and the elevator made a soft beep before rising.

At sixty, they got out, only for Romanoff to select a different elevator.

“This is the only elevator that serves floors above sixty,” she told them as they entered. There, there
was no control panel. Instead, a bar above the doors illuminated.

“82, JARVIS,” Romanoff said.

“Certainly,” the elevator replied, and began to rise.

“This is the elevator that connects to the private garage,” Bucky noted.

“Yep,” Romanoff said. She adjusted her tote bag on her shoulder to check her watch. “It’s the only exit below floor sixty.”

Bucky glanced at her, then slipped Steve’s phone from his back pocket to check the time himself. It was nearly three o’clock.

“Were you in Congress today?”

Romanoff flicked her gaze at him. Her face was slack, neutrally so, and he didn’t know enough about people to gauge an expression in her eyes.

“No,” she said. “I’ve managed to take a break while Cap was out of commission.”

“What did you tell them?” Steve asked abruptly.

They looked at each other, and another silent conversation that Bucky couldn’t interpret happened in the next few seconds. Steve’s expression was hard, hers fading from neutrality to something like sympathy.

“I said you’d been injured,” she said finally. Steve’s shoulders relaxed.

Bucky caught Steve’s gaze and raised an eyebrow. He shook his head. Bucky knew that expression; *we’ll talk about it later* was written in his tired eyes. He curled his arm around Steve’s waist and pulled him tight against his side. Steve dropped his head onto his shoulder, exhaling softly.
The elevator doors opened and Romanoff strode out. Steve lifted his head and Bucky loosened his
grip so they could follow her, through to what Stark had called the common floor and an open
kitchen. Romanoff opened the wide fridge, larger than the one in Bucky and Steve’s apartment,
while Steve headed for the tall stools by an island counter. The kitchen mimicked their apartment on
floor ninety-one, but wider, as if designed with accommodating more people in mind.

“But speaking of Congress,” Romanoff said.

“I have to report back,” Steve guessed.

Romanoff took a jug of dark red juice from the fridge and put it on the counter, then gave Steve a sad
nod. “They gave you until next Monday.”

Steve put his face in his hands, sighing, and Bucky draped himself over his back, hugging him
around the waist and hooking his chin on his shoulder. Steve dropped his hands, leaning back into
him.

“I’m coming with you,” Bucky said softly in his ear.

Steve drew in a breath, then blew it out sharply through his nose. He worked his jaw from side to
side, eyebrows furrowed.

“I’ll follow you if I have to,” Bucky went on. “But I’m not staying behind again.”


“They want to see him, too,” Romanoff cut in. Steve sighed heavily once again. “So he has to come
anyway.”

“Alright,” Steve said again. He scrubbed at his eyes with a hand, then dropped both to clasp over
Bucky’s mismatched ones resting on his stomach. “But… Can we bring Sam? In case… something
happens?”
Bucky privately agreed. Wilson, Samuel Thomas was both a formidable foe and a talented counselor. He would feel safer if there was someone on hand to talk him down from the mind of the asset that wasn’t just Steve, especially after the last few times it had happened and Steve was the only one there. He hated scaring Steve, almost as much as he hated the scent of bad vanilla.

“I’d be fine with that,” Romanoff said. She turned to a cabinet, dug around in it, and drew out a bottle of clear liquid. The label was in Cyrillic, but once she unscrewed the cap, it was plain enough by the smell that it was vodka. Romanoff poured first the dark liquid into a glass, then a generous serving of vodka.

“Food?” Romanoff added, turning back to the fridge.

“I’m good,” Steve said. “What else is there?”

Romanoff put away the juice, then the vodka. Then she sat on another stool facing them and swirled her juice and vodka together.

“They’re going to try to find a way to punish you for being together during the war,” she started.

“I know,” Steve answered. He slipped the fingers of his right hand through Bucky’s metal ones, resting their knuckles flush together and sweeping the pad of his thumb over the crest of his hand. Bucky felt the texture of his fingerprint, the warmth of his fingers, where the gaps between the plates met his skin. “They can’t separate us now.”

*Let no man tear asunder.* Bucky remembered that from going to church with Steve and Sarah. He’d remembered watching Steve trace the stained glass with his eyes, watching the way the light was blue and purple and red and gold on his face, which was full of awe, and listening to a priest speak of the holy union of marriage. Hearing his voice echo throughout the cathedral, and watching Steve look in wonder at the windows. *Let no man tear asunder,* the priest had said, and Bucky had almost picked up Steve’s left hand to hold it between his palms, like no man could tear them asunder. Well, even then back then, no man for sure. Woman, yes, but only temporarily. Now, Bucky lifted Steve’s left hand and held it between his palms.

“No,” Romanoff agreed. “But I think I found a way to keep them from punishing you in the first place.”

“What?”
“You won’t like it,” Romanoff added. “And I’m not sure if it would be believable, but it might be worth a try.”

Bucky turned his head a little, to watch Steve raise his eyebrows and thin out his lips. “What is it, then?” he asked carefully. Bucky watched the way his jaw tightened, the flex of the masseter under his skin. His masked profile was the stereotype; stoic and guarded, but the chinks in his armor were where the mask parted over the face. Where the masseter flexed under his skin.

“When Omegas were admitted into the military in full, there was the question of soldiers forming relationships, which the higher-ups didn’t want,” Romanoff started. Steve nodded once. “But after that rule was put into place, several couples who had relationships prior to one or both of them joining the military fought it. Originally they were included and disciplined for having relationships, but many were couples that had married long before enlisting.”

“Okay,” Steve said slowly.

Romanoff put her drink onto the counter with the thud of glass on stone. “So the rule was amended, couples whose relationships existed prior to joining the military were exempt and could not be reprimanded in any way for having those relationships.”

“Then Bucky and I were together before we joined the military,” Steve answered.

Romanoff smiled tightly. “A lot of people tried to claim that, so a strict definition was put in place as to what counted as a relationship.”

“What?” Steve asked.

“This is why you won’t like it,” Romanoff said. “You’ll have to lie. You would have had to have at least spent a heat with him in order to qualify.”

Steve blinked once. Bucky looked at Romanoff with a frown.

“That wouldn’t be a lie,” he said.
Romanoff narrowed her eyes slightly. “Steve’s already admitted that the two of you parted in 1933. He was fourteen or fifteen.”

“I mean, we didn’t actually –” Bucky broke off, trying to find a way to phrase it.

“That’s why you’ll have to lie,” Romanoff said, as though he had confirmed that they hadn’t shared a heat and rut before the army. “Somehow, you met up again when you were older –”

“I was fourteen when I had my first heat,” Steve interrupted.

Romanoff broke off, and her lips parted slightly.

“It’s actually why we were separated,” Steve went on. He was looking at the countertop, and in the pauses between his words, his jaw tightened and the masseter flexed beneath his skin. “We were together.”

“Steve, I understand you want to be as honest as possible –”

“No, I really was fourteen,” Steve insisted. “I was a sickly child, but that first heat was what made me a cripple by the time I entered Project Rebirth.”

“Fourteen?” Romanoff repeated in a whisper.

“January of 1933,” Steve said.

Romanoff blinked, then took a long swig of her drink. She put it down with a thunk. “Okay,” she said. “Okay. That – That might even be less believable. I was medically forced to present early, all the Widows were, and even the Red Room didn’t want to trigger our heats until we were sixteen.”

“Rebecca knew,” Steve said.

Bucky lifted his head somewhat from Steve’s shoulder. Steve turned to look at him, reluctant but pleading. “She knows you’re alive by now,” he said. “She could testify that I presented so young
and you were there –”

“But we weren’t together,” Bucky said. “We were put in different rooms.”

“Not at first,” Steve tried to insist.

“They won’t ask you to say under oath that you had sex,” Romanoff said. Bucky glanced at her. “This is a God-fearing country, they’re not putting sex talks on national TV. If you could say that you cared for him during his heat in any way, it would be enough.”

Bucky looked Steve in the eye. Steve tilted his head to one side, a slight grimace turning his lip. Bucky hadn’t wanted his sister to know he was alive, but Steve was right, she knew he was alive at this point. He didn’t remember what it was that kept Steve from wanting to talk to Rebecca.

“Let’s talk to her,” Steve said quietly.

“Okay,” Bucky agreed hesitantly. “If you’re sure.”

Steve smiled tightly. “We don’t have much other choice.”

Bucky frowned, but something in Steve’s wary and disheartened expression made him think he was missing something, yet it wasn’t something Steve wanted to get into just then. So he nodded, acceptant, because Rebecca already knew he was alive. She already knew what he’d done, her memory of James Buchanan Barnes had already been tarnished. Whatever Steve was worried about mattered more.

“I’ll find her,” Romanoff offered. “Start the conversation.”

“Thank you,” Bucky answered quietly.

He pressed a kiss to Steve’s cheek, tucking his head close to his neck, for just a moment of silence. Steve leaned into him.
“I tried looking for your police record,” Romanoff said.

Steve sat up a little, but Bucky tightened his grip and he relaxed again. “Did you find it?”

“Yeah,” Romanoff answered heavily. “But… I found something else, too. Or rather, it found me.”

“What?” Steve said.

Romanoff leaned her elbows on the counter, frowning in a way that aged her. “Earlier this week, a woman emailed me. She said that her grandmother had been one of the nurses working under Erskine in Project Rebirth. Her story was… It was odd, but she offered to meet over Skype and showed me what she had.”

“What?” Steve repeated.

“Her grandmother is still alive,” Romanoff said rather than answering outright. “She was very young when the war happened, she’s not that old now and we can have her evaluated to prove she’s of sound mind if we need to.”

“What?” Steve said a third time. “What does she have?”

“A vial of your blood,” Romanoff said. Then half lifted her glass, gesturing with it to him. “Before the serum.”

Bucky could feel Steve swallow. He could feel his heart skip a beat. He felt Steve’s shock and held him tighter for it.

“She said that her grandmother had been ordered to destroy all samples taken from you prior to taking the serum,” Romanoff continued. “But she kept three. She’s kept it sealed and stored it on ice to keep it viable. The grandmother never said why.”

“This woman will testify to that?” Steve said hoarsely.
“That’s why the granddaughter contacted me,” Romanoff replied.

“Could we have the – my blood sample?” Steve said, his voice getting rushed and thick with emotion. “Would it still be – Could we test it?”

“What for?” Bucky said, frowning.

Steve licked his lips, glancing down. His brow and jaw both tightened, his thumb pausing in its hypnotic track over the plates of Bucky’s metal hand.

“The disease I had,” Steve said quietly. “The one they didn’t have a name for.”

Bucky blinked once, still frowning. He thought, and the names of dozens of illnesses and ailments came to him, any of which could have once plagued his Omega. What sickness of Steve’s had no name?

“The VD,” Steve mumbled. “Doctors didn’t know what it was then.”

Bucky opened his mouth, but stopped. The memory hit him hard, Steve’s face screwed up in anger and his snarling words. The memory hit him so hard, he could see it all, he could hear it, he could smell it, the acrid taste of smoke and blood in the air and the washed out scent of an Omega on suppressants. The memory hit him harder than remembering any other thing and he was there, back in that ragged and cramped tent in Italy, facing Steve properly after spending a week repressing the urge to look at him, the boy he’d wronged, and failing every time.

Bucky watched Steve slip off from the crowd, and while everyone around him cheered, he stood motionless, a frozen faux-grin curling his lip. He watched Steve slip off, then his feet were carrying him away without directions from his brain and he was following Steve.

It had taken a week to get from the facility back to base camp. A week that Bucky had hung back and watched Steve with awe from a distance, just to catch himself and force himself to look away. It was disrespectful to even glance in his direction, he thought, and with the way Steve wouldn’t look at him, he figured Steve didn’t want anything to do with him. So he didn’t look, even though he wanted so badly to do more than look.
He’d asked just before they reached the camp what had happened. He’d finally worked up the nerve to walk up beside Steve and ask. *I won’t bite*, Bucky had promised him. Steve still hadn’t looked at him.

Then Steve had said *I’ll tell you later* and he sounded angry when he said it. Maybe he was demented for it, but Bucky was glad to give Steve his anger. He was glad that Steve had spat out he’d tell him later, like really he was planning on beating the shit out of him and Bucky would be glad to take it. If it gave Steve any closure, any sense of justice, Bucky would be happy to jump off a cliff for him.

And even as he followed Steve from a distance, Bucky wasn’t sure why he hadn’t just left him there to rot in the Krauts’ territory.

Steve ducked into a tent, and Bucky found himself lingering a dozen yards off, chewing the inside of his cheek and wondering if it would be better to just preemptively find the cliff.

In the end, Bucky walked up to the tent. Steve wanted to yell at him, he was sure.

Bucky half parted the tent flap, just enough to make noise rather than lifting it to go in. He couldn’t knock, not on a tent. Inside, Steve called out: “I’m not here, Peggy.”

Bucky resisted the urge to grind his teeth thinking about whoever the hell *Peggy* was going into Steve’s tent and lifted the flap. “I’m not Peggy,” he said cautiously.

Steve lifted from his cot, looking up, and Bucky averted his gaze. Steve was wearing an undershirt, a thin cotton thing that clung to his skin and did little to cover him, so Bucky didn’t look. Even just a glimpse made his mouth go dry, something that he immediately felt guilty for.

“Can I come in?” he asked the ground.

“Yeah,” Steve answered shortly. Bucky slipped inside, staring at the ground still as Steve got up from the cot and turned his back to don a shirt.

Bucky flicked his gaze up once as Steve swung the shirt over his shoulders, and hastily looked down
again before just being drawn back up to watch Steve button up the shirt, back still to him. He couldn’t help but watch the muscles in his back, the way his waist was still just as narrow even with his massive shoulders, how featherlight his hair still looked even after being unwashed for days.

Then Steve turned back to him, crossed his arms over his chest and stared back. Bucky dropped his gaze, feeling ashamed of himself.

“What happened?” he asked. A second passed and he opened his mouth to add don’t tell me if you don’t want to, but then Steve answered him.

“I joined the Army.”

_God, he’s still such a little shit._

“I meant,” Bucky muttered, pissed off at Steve’s snarky attitude and then doubly ashamed of the fact that he was pissed at him in the first place; Steve had the right to snap at him, Bucky couldn’t hold it against him, “why’re you so –”

He stopped. He didn’t even know how to phrase it. He gestured vaguely to Steve’s body, trying to think of the right words. The boy he’d left back in Brooklyn ten years ago was just a little slip of an Omega, slender, skin and bones, but the man standing in front of him was taller than he, broader in the shoulders, arms and thighs like trees, like an Alpha.

“I don’t even know,” he finished. “Did you have a growth spurt or somethin’?”

He looked up again, just as Steve looked down. “There was a scientist,” Steve said quietly. “Dr. Erskine. He had this serum, designed to enhance people. It worked really well.”

Bucky suddenly felt his mouth go fully dry and he tried to swallow, but felt his throat sticking to itself. His mind flashed to the cold metal of the table, the IV’s and the scalpels slicing into his skin as if just to see him bleed, Doctor Zola leaning over him and giggling madly over what, Bucky didn’t ever know.

“You’re telling me,” he said after a second, “you signed up to be a lab rat?”
Steve still wouldn’t look at him. “Kinda?”

Fuck it!

Bucky jerked forward and grabbed Steve by the shoulders, his thumbs digging into his skin as Steve looked up. They were not quite eye-to-eye, Bucky was maybe an inch shorter than him, but any thought of how weird that felt was overshadowed by the idea of Steve on that metal table, strapped down and forced to do nothing but scream at the invasive procedures and the endless stream of drugs –

And so what if Steve had volunteered, consented to what Bucky hadn’t, what if whatever he’d signed up for had killed him? And he hissed his thoughts, wishing he could call Steve a moron like he’d used to do whenever Steve picked another fight, shake him and remind him that he wasn’t allowed to die on Bucky, but couldn’t with Steve’s wide eyes staring back at him. “What were you thinking?” he spat instead.

“I was gonna die anyway,” Steve retorted, then he knocked Bucky’s hands off his shoulders; Bucky shouldn’t have touched him without asking, he should have gotten his consent first, gotten permission, shouldn’t have touched him when he clearly didn’t want to be touched, should never have even touched him at all – wait –

“I had maybe a year left, the serum cured me of the half a dozen fatal diseases, asthma, allergies, my heart defect, some VD doctors couldn’t identify, everything.”

“You –”

Dying?

“Wait –”

VD? Oh, God, VD like venereal VD?

“Steve,” he said, then he had to grab Steve’s shoulders again just to ground himself, keeping his grip looser just in case, “you had what –?”
“I joined the Army so I could die for my country before I died for my sins,” Steve said coldly, just as cold as the blood in Bucky’s veins.

Steve meant VD like venereal disease. No, no, no –

“That’s what I was thinking.”

Bucky released his shoulders and stepped back. He felt like he was going to be sick. His head spun and he saw some faceless Alpha draped over Steve’s body with his mouth at Steve’s neck, he hardly heard Steve’s voice, couldn’t get the image out of his head, someone else where Bucky had wanted to be, where Bucky never should have been –

“Ma got the consumption two years ago, the hospital bills were more than either of us could cover, and when my boss found out she had TB, he fired me ‘cause he didn’t want me to spread it.”

Bucky was going to be sick, he had known Steve would move on, knew that Steve couldn’t ever be his again, not after he’d –

“I couldn’t pay the rent or Ma’s bills, then she died and I couldn’t even afford a pine box for her, they put her in a fucking unmarked grave with the suicide victims and homeless overdoses!”

And poor Sarah, god, she’d been so kind to him, she’d probably died hating his guts for what he’d done to her little boy, and had he known, he would have scraped together the money to give her a proper funeral even if Steve didn’t want to let him, he owed him and Sarah that much –

“I tried to find an Alpha and no one wanted me,” Steve spat out, and Bucky had wanted him, Bucky had always wanted to love and care for him, “sick and skinny and never able to have kids without dying myself, oh, and of the five female Alphas I found, all of ‘em could tell that I already had an Alpha, but he wasn’t around, was he?”

Bucky recoiled, feeling like Steve had just slapped him. This was his fault, all his cowardice and compulsivity had lead to this.

“So I went to the docks,” Steve hissed.
Bucky felt his mouth fall open and couldn’t bring himself to shut it. Steve glared at him, his eyes boring holes in Bucky’s sickening gut. Steve didn’t work at the docks. Steve could never have worked at the docks, Bucky had worked at the docks, and if this had happened before whatever thing Steve volunteered for, then Steve had gone to the docks while sickly and weak and Omegas only went to the docks to do one thing… No, no, Steve couldn’t have –

“I spent almost two years getting two dollars for giving head and five for getting fucked,” Steve said harshly.

Steve had. The one faceless Alpha became two, then three, then dozens as Steve kept glaring at him. First, Bucky had taken from Steve what he was too young to give up, had taken it without thought of what Steve would have said outside heat, and because he’d been too scared to go back, Steve had – God, he wanted to throw up, he was a coward, Steve had resorted to fucking prostitution all because Bucky hadn’t been man enough to go home and make sure he was okay.

“It was another three dollars for each extra time they came,” Steve was spitting, and Bucky couldn’t blame him, this was all his fault. “Sometimes they’d throw a dime or two at me and pretend it was a tip, they’d call me dollface and sugar.”

Those had been his to call Steve, fuck, the first thing he’d said to Steve waking up in Zola’s lab was hey, doll like a fucking moron!

“They’d leave bruises in the shapes of their fingers,” Steve said, like he knew that what he was saying was leaving the same bruises on Bucky and he wanted him to feel it, and, of course, Bucky deserved it, this was all his fault, “It was disgusting and degrading as all shit. Then I got sick from it, too. I couldn’t pay rent, I still have debts from Ma getting sick, I was this close –” Steve held his index half an inch away from his thumb “– to being evicted and doctors gave me a year, they didn’t even know what was killing me.”

He was such a coward. He should have gone back, even if just to slip money under Steve’s door, even if Steve didn’t want to see him, he should have gone back, he should never have even left or looked at Steve wrong in the first place, fuck!

“I felt sure I was going to be another one of those unidentified bodies in the harbor one day,” Steve hissed, “I felt sure God turned his back on me, I knew you –” Bucky staggered “– had turned your back on me.”

Bucky wanted to fall to his knees, to swear he’d never meant to do this to him. He’d only ever wanted Steve to be happy and he couldn’t bring himself to go back after he’d realized what he’d
done. He’d been so ashamed of going out of control like that that he’d hardly been able to stomach his own existence any longer, but, fuck... This was all his fault.

“Then I met Erskine,” Steve concluded quietly, “he told me he had a way out, and I took it.”

Bucky’s legs collided with something and he dropped down onto Steve’s cot, staring at the ground.

“I’m sorry,” he finally managed. He felt weak and like the shittiest human being alive for never thinking to go home and check that Steve was still okay, because, clearly, Steve had not been okay in the slightest. “I should’ve been there, I was s’posed to take care of you. I’m so sorry, Stevie.”

“Don’t!” Steve hissed and Bucky winced. “You left, you didn’t want me either, don’t Stevie me!”

Bucky’s heart broke. Steve looked at him like the shit he was, the rutting monster who couldn’t resist the scent of heat and then turned his back when it was all over. “I didn’t want to hurt you again!” he said, wishing that there was some way he could make up for what he’d done and knowing that there wasn’t.

“You were too young,” he said hopelessly, “I shouldn’t have –” should never have stayed in the house, should have run the second he recognized the scent of heat, should never have given in to his longing to stay and bring Steve close in his arms, should never have touched him when he had been too young to know what was happening and for Bucky to just take what he wanted without a single thought to consequences – “I should’ve controlled myself; I thought you were better off without me.”

“I –” Steve started angrily, then stopped.

Bucky looked at the ground. He should have controlled his own selfish desires. He’d stayed and he’d taken advantage of Steve, who didn’t know what was going on, who was too young to understand and didn’t have the ability to consent while in heat, who only knew that he was hurting and the longer Bucky touched him the better he felt. His frail bones broke easily like glass, his skin bruised easier, his constitution had almost failed because of Bucky and his selfishness. He’d nearly killed him.

“Wait.”

Bucky looked up at Steve, who had – stopped glaring at him? And was frowning? Whose tone had
lost all its venom and become confused?

“What do you mean, hurt me again?”

Bucky blinked at him, belatedly realizing that there were tears on his face. “When you presented. I got to you, I hurt you, I could’ve killed you.”

“Neither of you knew what you were doing,” his mother had told him. “Yes, it was rape.”

But Steve was still frowning at him, as if he didn’t have a clue what Bucky was talking about. “You locked me in the fucking bathroom!” he said. Bucky blinked once. “You wouldn’t touch me!”

“No, I busted out,” Bucky insisted. “When I was rutting, I got out and got to you. I –”

“Who told you that?” Steve demanded. “You never touched me, Buck, who told you that?”

Did Steve not remember? Had he repressed it, or just couldn’t fill in the gaps left by heat like Bucky? Hadn’t Sarah told him, said why it was better for them to never see each other again, so Bucky couldn’t put Steve in a place where he had to even look at the guy who raped him? Hadn’t Sarah…

“My mother,” he said after a second, and Steve slapped a palm to his forehead; Sarah would have told Steve, she would never have withheld something like that from him, but if Sarah never said – “Wait,” he said, “but – She said –”

Sarah would have told Steve.

“You didn’t touch me,” Steve repeated. “I kissed you, you scented me, then you locked me in the bathroom and threw the key out ‘cause you knew I was too young.”

“That’s why we had to leave, so I wasn’t a danger to you anymore,” Bucky tried to argue still.

His mother would lie to him, though.
“Bucky, you never touched me,” Steve was telling him and Bucky jerked his eyes upward to just gape at him – His ma was manipulative, he knew that. She eavesdropped and read people’s diaries and when Rebecca tried sneaking out with some Beta guy from her school, his ma had threatened to throw her out if she didn’t go looking for an Alpha like a normal Omega. But to mess with his head like that, make him think he had raped his best friend, just to keep him away from Steve?

“I always thought you left because your dad was transferred to another bank,” Steve said.

Sarah, Bucky knew, would have told Steve if Bucky had actually taken advantage of him while he’d been in heat, yet she must have known what his mother had been plotting and told a white lie to save Steve’s feelings.

“I thought…” Steve said softly.

“No,” Bucky murmured, then abruptly stood up. All the fight had gone out of Steve, and he was looking back at Bucky with wide eyes. “I didn’t hurt you?” he whispered.

“No,” Steve echoed.

Bucky took a very slow step in, ready to back off the second Steve said anything.

“Bucky?” he mumbled quietly.

“I’m so sorry,” Bucky said carefully. “I should’ve been there for you. I was scared, I was a coward. I’m so, so sorry, Stevie.”

In the brief second that Steve was quiet, Bucky was prepared to walk out and never look back if Steve still hated him.

“I forgive you,” Steve whispered, and the relief was so intense he could have collapsed again. Then Steve tightened his jaw again and dropped his gaze, fiddling with the cuffs of his sleeve, and looking almost as ashamed as Bucky felt. “Can you…” he started, then inhaled shakily. “Can you forgive –”
"'Course," Bucky said quickly. He couldn’t blame Steve, not when he should have been there in the first place to make sure that Steve never had to put himself in that position. "You said it yourself," he added firmly, "you didn’t have a choice."

He could hate the guts of any guy who’d dared touch his Omega, but he’d never blame Steve for needing to put food in his belly and keep a roof over his head. Steve exhaled deeply and Bucky cautiously lifted his arms to him.

"Please?" he murmured.

Steve stepped forward gingerly, then surged forward and wrapped his arms around Bucky’s waist. Bucky locked his arms over Steve’s shoulders, cupped the back of his head with a palm and let Steve bury his face in his neck, the first hug they’d had in ten years, and the void left in his chest when he’d had to leave Steve was already filling. Close up and under the suppressants’ effect, he smelled just the same and different; older, matured, but there was still that underlying sweetness like vanilla and cinnamon. Pressing a soft kiss to Steve’s hair, he never wanted to let go.

"'M so sorry, baby," he whispered again, voice cracking with emotion, "I won’t leave you again, I promise. I’ll take care of you."

Steve nodded into his neck. "You’d better, jerk," he whispered, and Bucky couldn’t help but smile at the old joke.

"'Course I will," he laughed softly. "I promise, I’m with you ‘til the end of the line, punk."

When Steve lifted his head from the crook of Bucky’s neck, he wasted no time in capturing his lips in a kiss. It was feverish and Steve’s lips were hungry on his own, it was the first kiss Bucky had ever had since the couch in Sarah Roger’s living room that hadn’t revolted him. Steve was the best thing he’d ever tasted and he never wanted to let go, and from the way Steve clung to him, he figured that his Omega felt the same.

Steve broke the kiss then, putting a hand between their mouths when Bucky tried to chase his lips. "We should tie the tent flaps," he said.

Bucky blinked at him. Then his mouth dropped into an O and he felt blood rushing southward. "You sure?"
Steve curled a fist in the front of his shirt, then lifted it to cup the back of his neck and leaned their foreheads together.

“The surest I’ve ever been.”

Bucky let go of him, just to step away and grab the ties of the mouth of the tent and loop them together. When he turned around, Steve was standing there, still, shy and looking at his feet. Bucky stepped back into his space and gently set his hands at his elbows, then, like he used to do when they were kids, reached out with a finger and tapped the underside of his chin.

Steve looked up and smiled.

“I love you,” Bucky promised.

Steve’s smile widened. He slid his arms around Bucky’s waist again, pecked him on the mouth and held on tight. “I love you, too.”

“I want to bond with you,” whispered Bucky and Steve opened his eyes. “I know we can’t now, but you should know. One day.”

“One day,” Steve promised back and Bucky kissed him again.

“Bucky?”

He blinked. Steve was looking at him with concern, Romanoff holding the glass of juice and vodka in the air with raised eyebrows. Bucky shook himself into clarity.

“I remembered something,” he blurted.

Steve half smiled, half frowned; lips lifted up at the corners, mouth widened, eyebrows drawn in and down at the centers, the barest of gaps between his lips. “What?”
Bucky opened his mouth, then glanced sideways at Romanoff. She looked curious, and this was something he didn’t want to share with anyone but Steve. The metaphor that Steve was Bucky’s favorite dolly was an accurate one; he wanted to hold and cling to their private moments like a frustrated child does to a toy when an outsider asks to take it.

“Is it a bad one?” Steve asked quietly, the half-smile aspect fading fully into the frown.

“No,” Bucky said quickly.

He touched his forehead to Steve’s temple, putting his mouth right by his ear so he could whisper the words and Romanoff wouldn’t hear. So he could hold onto them jealously, a child with a favored toy, or a dragon with its hoard. Steve certainly was a treasure to him.

“The tent in Italy,” he whispered. Steve’s gaze dropped, his lashes covering the slit between eyelids so they looked closed. “When I first told you I was with you ‘til the end of the line. I remember all of it now.”

“Oh,” Steve whispered back. The smile returned, but again in halves. “All of it?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, cocking his head to the side to look Steve full in the face. “What’s the face for?”

Steve shrugged, only half smiling. “Later,” he said.

Bucky didn’t smile. Half smiles made him worried. He didn’t remember fully what half smiles lead to or meant, but Steve only half smiling worried him.

“Later,” he agreed, though. Private moments, a jealous child or dragon with a treasure. Either way, Romanoff was listening and they weren’t sharing.

“Okay,” Romanoff said slowly. “Whatever that was, um, your blood sample.”

Steve looked up at her, expression going all stoic strength with a side of preparedness for anything.
“The granddaughter said her grandmother kept it in the back of her freezer,” Romanoff said. She shrugged. “We can try. Our tech can solve a murder from the Ice Age, we can probably test a seventy-year-old blood sample for diseases.”

“Get it from her,” Steve said quietly. “And… I’d rather Bruce test it.”

Romanoff shrugged. “Whatever you want. It’s your blood.”

Steve nodded absently. Bucky kissed his cheek, just to distract him from whatever thoughts had his masseter tightening under his skin. It worked; his jaw loosened some and he shifted to smile at Bucky.

“The grandmother’s name is Susan Hayle,” Romanoff said. “Stick out in your memory any?”

Steve shook his head. Romanoff nodded, lifting a shoulder and flicking her eyebrows up. “That’s alright, Hayle said she didn’t think you’d remember her.”

“There were a lot of people working on the project,” Steve mumbled.

“It’s alright,” Romanoff repeated. She lifted her glass, then threw back the last of her drink before turning and putting the glass in the sink. “The one good thing that came out of this mess is even Congress admits HYDRA is back.”

She turned back, raising her eyebrows. “And that you’re not on their side.”

“Who the fuck would think Captain America is HYDRA?” Bucky said incredulously.

Romanoff shrugged. “World got more side-eyed since you went under ice, Barnes.”

“Urban dictionary,” Romanoff said, sighing. “I told you about it so you would use it, Rogers.”

Steve shrugged helplessly again. Romanoff rolled her eyes.

“World got more suspicious and judgemental,” she said, raising her eyebrows. “And that’s saying something, since you were born during segregation.”

Bucky looked at Steve again. He didn’t know what segregation was.

“The states legislated the separation of white people and everybody else,” Romanoff said before Steve could speak or just shrug again. “Water fountains to schools.”

“Oh,” Bucky said. Then frowned, remembering water fountains with labels and then bathrooms and then the beat-up part of Queens people told him to steer clear of where the black kids went to school. Another blink, and he remembered an uncle and cousins who were asked to leave a restaurant and his ma saying it was damn lucky his pa had light skin and his pa countering it with it was damn lucky his ma didn’t live in Germany. Another blink, and he remembered Maria (what was her last name?), a pretty Beta girl with dark skin, and trying to take her to the school dance because she was the only girl who understood he wasn’t interested and the teachers telling him he couldn’t. Another, and he remembered all the reasons why Sam had said colored was a slur.

“That’s fucked up,” he decided.

“Very,” Romanoff said.

“Ending it was part of civil rights,” Steve added. “And it was abolished in 1964. Martin Luther King Jr. did a lot to see it end, then a few years later he was –”

Bucky blinked, and remembered lining up his scopes.

“I killed him,” he said.

Steve and Romanoff both looked at him. Bucky looked down at his mismatched hands.
“They said he was causing trouble,” Bucky mumbled, half shaking his head.

“He was,” Romanoff said frankly. “For white people.”

Bucky shrugged. “HYDRA was Nazis, Aryan dream and all. Makes sense that they’d want him dead if King lead civil rights.”

“The man who confessed to it recanted in prison,” Steve added quietly.

“Well, that guy was a genuine scumbag anyway,” Romanoff said darkly.

Bucky looked at his hands. What could King have done if Bucky had never lined his sights on him?

Steve nudged him, as if he could sense his thoughts.

“Not your fault,” he said in a murmur.

Bucky looked at his hands. His hands had aimed, his hands had squeezed the trigger.

“Remember?” Steve prompted. “You wouldn’t have done it if you were in control.”

Bucky nodded, but he still couldn’t help wondering. What could any of the people he’d killed done?

“It fired up a revolution anyway,” Romanoff said. Bucky looked up. “He became a martyr. If HYDRA had intended to silence black people, they failed.”

Bucky smiled tightly, nodding. He was sure that King’s family would have rathered had him alive than a martyr, revolutionary and all.
After a second turned into a minute, the silence stretching, Romanoff tapped a nail on the counter. “I’ll get that blood sample,” she said. “We leave at six thirty on Monday.”

She walked around the counter, picked up her tote bag, and re-entered the elevator. Bucky turned to face Steve, putting his hip on the island counter and leaning on it. He raised his eyebrows.

“What’s with the face?” he asked.

“What face?” Steve said. Bucky raised his eyebrows further.

“The face you made when I said I remembered all we said in that tent.”

Steve looked down. Bucky reached out with a hand, traced a finger down his jaw to tap under his chin. Steve sucked in a breath, then shook his head, reaching out to wrap his arms around Bucky’s waist and lean on his shoulder. Bucky locked his wrists behind Steve’s back and kissed the top of his head.

“C’mon,” he prompted. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“You remember everything I said?” Steve mumbled.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered quietly. Steve gave a short nod.

“I’m sorry for that,” he said. “I never should have said any of those things.”

“I wouldn’t blame you,” Bucky murmured in return. “You had every right to be mad at me.”

“No,” Steve exhaled. “No, I didn’t.”

Bucky lifted a hand to comb it through Steve’s hair. He could tell that Steve had more to say, but didn’t know how to say it yet. So he combed through his hair, gentle fingers brushing out faint knots, and let him think.
“There’s one part about the propaganda that’s true,” Steve whispered. “I try to be a good man. And as afraid as I am that there’s no God and there’s no afterlife to give reason to be moral, I’ll always be the kid my ma raised. And my ma didn’t raise me to lash out at everyone when I’m hurting and then blame them for it. That’s why I’m sorry. Not because I was mad or that I was hurting, but that I let it get the better of me and I just hurt you back.”

Bucky kissed his temple. “Then know I forgive that, and I’m sorry that you were hurting. My ma didn’t raise me to abandon the people I love.”

As much as he remembered, at least.

“And as much as I was angry,” Steve said, lifting his head and hands to press his palms to Bucky’s cheeks and lean their foreheads together, “I always loved you.”

Bucky gave him a small smile. “I always loved you.”

He pressed their lips together. Steve held tight to him, almost as tight as Bucky was holding Steve.

“Nothing could make me remember that day bad,” Bucky said gently to him. “Baby, that was the day I got you back. That was the day we got to make vows for the first time. Hell, that was the day I lost my virginity.”

Steve pulled back. “You were a virgin then? Oh, God, that was your first time?”

“Well, yeah,” Bucky said, frowning. “You knew I hadn’t been with anyone before.”

“I mean,” Steve stared, and he looked upset for some reason. “You didn’t tell me that was actually your first time.”

Bucky shrugged. “So?”

“So –” Steve started, then broke off, sighing. “If you’d said something, we could’ve – Bucky, we did
it on the floor, you deserved a better –’"

Bucky cut him off by kissing him. “Shut the fuck up,” he mumbled and Steve rolled his eyes. “There’s no way you could’ve made it better,” he said firmly. “It was with you.”

Steve let out a quiet sigh. “You’re such a sap,” he said frustratedly. “I could’ve fucked your brains out, Buck.”

“Fuck my brains out later,” Bucky laughed. “It was better than thinking my first time was rape.”


The sound of a throat clearing behind them broke them apart. Steve, ears red, ducked to hide his face in Bucky’s neck. Bucky snatched a gun from his waist, until his eyes found Sam and Banner standing by a doorway.

“Sorry,” Sam said with an accompanying wince. “Uh, we just walked in?”

Bucky had been about to ask how much they’d heard, but stopped, a little relieved. He released his grip on the gun to reach around his back again, to hold onto his Steve, his treasure, his favorite dolly, jealously.

“We were about to watch a movie,” Banner said. He pointed to the sofas and TV screen behind them. “Care to join us?”

Bucky looked down at Steve. He shrugged, and Bucky lifted a hand to pet his hair briefly again.

“What movie?” he asked.


Bucky touched a fingertip to Steve’s cheek, brushing at it gently. “You wanna watch a funny movie, doll?”
“If there’s food,” Steve mumbled.

“Popcorn!” Banner said excitedly, then cleared his throat again and sobered a little. “I have vegan popcorn,” he said, “but you guys can have the normal stuff.”

“What’s vegan?” Bucky asked.

Steve shrugged helplessly. Sam answered.

“It means that it wasn’t made with any animal products of any kind.”

“Popcorn is made of corn?” Bucky mumbled. Had the future changed that, too?

“But all the microwave popcorn in the world is buttered!” Banner said, with remarkable frustration for a complaint about popcorn. “And then I found soy butter popcorn on the internet and my life was drastically improved.”

Steve lifted his head and he and Bucky exchanged confused looks. Steve shrugged, Bucky made a what can you do face.

“Popcorn,” Banner repeated, heading for the kitchen. Bucky scanned his trajectory and altered his positioning to put himself between the approaching Alpha and his Omega.

Sam wandered over, less of a threat, and leaned on the other end of the counter. “How you doing, Steve?”

“I’m good,” Steve said. “Bit tired still.”

Sam grinned and flicked his eyebrows up. “You were locked in there for almost a week,” he said.

Steve just shrugged.
“He actually spent the last three days just sleeping,” Bucky said. “He was mostly worn out by Monday.”

“That happens,” Sam said with a nod. “Couple of studies were done in the 80s, turns out Omegas just sleep ‘cause their bodies are letting the immune system catch up.”

“I looked it up, yeah,” Bucky agreed.

“Used my phone,” Steve mumbled.

Across the counter, Banner snorted abruptly. Steve ducked his head, muttering: “Shuddup.”

“What?” Bucky demanded, looking between them.

“Steve spent about a month learning how to use Google,” Banner said. He was digging in a cupboard. “It was hilarious.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t drive a stick,” Steve retorted. Banner just snorted again. Steve rolled his eyes and turned them on Bucky. “He’s making fun of me, Buck.”

“What do you want me to do?” Bucky laughed.


“You’re cute, doll,” Bucky said simply. Steve’s ears flushed red again and he rolled his eyes.

“You’re s’posed to defend my honor or some shit,” Steve said. Banner snorted again, unwrapping a plastic package.

“Oh, I am?” Bucky countered. “Gee, I dunno why you would think that, doll, what am I, your
“Yes!” Steve laughed, backhanding him playfully on the shoulder. “Do your husbandly duty!”

Both Sam and Banner were snickering as Bucky rolled his eyes right back at Steve. “I think you’re more trouble than you’re worth, sweetheart. Hey, Banner?”

“Yes, Bucky?” Banner chuckled.

“Stop making fun of Steve for being dumb,” Bucky said jokingly. “Only I have the right to make fun of him for being dumb.”

Steve made a sound of protest akin to a squawk. “What gives you the right to make fun of me for being dumb?” he demanded.

“It’s right in there with love and cherish, Stevie,” Bucky said, then tickled him in the ribs, making him snort and jerk an elbow down in defense. “In sickness and in health, to have and to hold, to make fun of for being dumb.”

“You’re dumb,” Steve answered.

“See, that was dumb,” Bucky said. “That was the dumbest comeback in the history of comebacks. That was some seven-year-old level dumb.”

“Y’all are gonna kill me,” Sam wheezed from where he’d collapsed onto the counter.


“Sweetheart,” Bucky laughed yet again, “your first word was milis and you were talking about me. I think you just never had the chance to grow any intelligence.”

Steve grinned brightly. Bucky just smiled goofily for a second, until he realized just what he’d said
and he grinned as bright as Steve for having remembered the story of his Omega’s first word. They’d all been gathered for Sunday supper, Steve had been just past a year old and Bucky nearly three. Sarah had been sitting with Steve on her knee, Bucky had been holding on to the arm of her chair so he could wave a paper doll for Steve’s fascination. He’d been clapping his hands and grinning a gap-toothed smile.

“Wait, what’s *milis*?” Banner asked.

“It means sweet,” Steve said with obvious glee. “My ma was asking what I thought about Bucky, and I said he was sweet.”

“*Milis*?” Banner repeated

“It’s Irish,” Bucky said. He remembered more, too. “Steve’s ma hardly spoke English when he was a tot.”

“That’s fucking cute,” Sam declared.

“Steve’s fucking cute,” Bucky said emphatically. He tickled him in the side again and Steve squirmed away, grinning. “Fucking sunshine made human. Like a fucking cherub, you are.”

Steve rolled his eyes. Bucky grabbed him by the waist rather than tickling him and hauled him closer for a short kiss.

“Fuckin’ cute,” he repeated.

“Alright, alright,” Steve grumbled. “You can stop kissin’ up, Buck, I’m already a sure thing.”

“Hey, that’s up there with makin’ fun of you!” Bucky argued good-naturedly. “Love and cherish, dollface!”

Steve rolled his eyes again. Bucky tapped him under the chin.
“Wait,” Banner said, catching his attention. “Are you two really married?”

Steve opened his mouth, his smile failing, and Bucky said quickly: “Close enough.”

Steve flashed him a smaller smile and Bucky kissed his forehead.

“Since when?” Banner asked.

“Since November of 1943,” Bucky answered easily. He smiled at Steve, who broke into a slightly smaller copy. “Vow’s a vow. Don’t need a church or audience to make it.”

“That’s fucking cute,” Sam said yet again.

“It is quite sweet,” Banner agreed.

“Milis,” Steve said, reaching up and brushing a strand of hair off Bucky’s forehead. Bucky grinned back to him, a soft and small smile, hands slipping down to rest at his hips as he leaned forward to touch their foreheads and noses together. Bucky shut his eyes, but heard Sam and Banner creeping away to give them their moment. He was grateful.


“Love you, too, doll,” Bucky answered softly.

Something popped. Bucky yanked out a gun, aiming, but Banner shouted: “It’s the popcorn!” and Steve said “It’s just the microwave!” at the same time. Bucky lowered the gun, then sheepishly put it away.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“I jumped at noises, too,” Steve said. Bucky frowned at the floor. “Loud noises, small noises, anything unexpected. I threw a plate at a teenager who’d started playing this really loud music in a store once.”
Bucky grimaced in sympathy and Steve kissed the corner of it. “It’s okay,” he said.

Banner snuck closer, heading for the microwave. “All good, Barnes?” he asked gently.

“Yeah,” Bucky said. “Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” Banner said with a wave of his hand, opening the microwave and drawing out a bag. “See, it’s just the popcorn kernels.”

Bucky gave a nod and Banner put the bag back in the microwave, starting it again. After a few seconds, the kernels began popping again, but less startling this time. Banner held out a hand, his thumb pointed up, to Bucky, and Bucky nodded again. Banner dropped his hand, wandering back toward the sofas.

“Let’s go join them,” Steve suggested.

Bucky half nodded. He checked that his guns were secure, then reached around Steve’s waist and held him by the hips. He waited, then Steve laughed.

“Are you trying to carry me?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, like it should have been obvious. Steve rolled his eyes, but lifted his knees to wrap his legs around Bucky’s hips. Bucky lifted him, pushing around his hands to hold him by the ass, and Steve hugged him tight around the neck. Bucky turned and headed for the couches. Sam gave him a thumb’s up and a grin and Banner smiled at them. Bucky, as he was unsure what their reactions were for, simply picked a loveseat and set Steve down on it before dropping next to him.

Steve immediately draped his legs over Bucky’s lap. Bucky cupped one of his knees, then stretched out an arm to drape over the back of the couch.

“I’m still hungry,” Steve complained then.
Bucky snorted. Steve, grinning, poked him in the ribs. “Get me food, Buck,” he said, and Bucky snorted again. “C’mon, it’s one of your husbandly duties!”

“Since when?” Bucky laughed.

“Since always,” Steve insisted gleefully. Bucky rolled his eyes and pushed Steve’s legs off his lap, standing up. “Thanks!” Steve called after him, like a child. Bucky waved a hand behind him dismissively, heading for the fridge. He opened it, sorted through the items scattered through it, looking for something high in protein and nutrients.

“I want chocolate!” Steve called.

“Of course you do!” Bucky answered. He shook his head, but started looking for anything involving chocolate. “I found pudding!” he said after a minute.

“Pudding’s good,” Steve said.

The microwave beeped. “Bring the popcorn while you’re there,” Banner called. Bucky grumbled under his breath in a theatrical manner, pulled out the sealed package of chocolate pudding and took the bag of popcorn from the microwave. He grabbed a spoon once he found them, then made his way back to the couches. He gave Banner the popcorn and nudged Steve’s legs aside to sit down.

Steve stuck out his hand for the pudding, wiggling his fingers in a demanding motion childishly. Bucky half handed him the cup, then yanked it away teasingly. Steve made a scoffing noise and shifted onto his knees to reach farther; Bucky held it above his head, but Steve just crawled onto his lap and snatched it from him.

“You’re terrible,” he declared.

“What do I keep telling you,” Bucky said, flicking his eyebrows up. “Nobody said you were smart.”

Steve rolled his eyes, then ducked and kissed him. Bucky found his hands taking Steve’s hips and tried to deepen it, but Steve pulled back and lifted off his lap to drop onto the sofa cushion again, with the pudding and a triumphant grin. Bucky pouted and Steve stuck out his tongue.
“That’s what you get for being smart,” he said, opening his pudding.

“Tease,” Bucky grumbled, crossing his legs.

Steve waved dismissively with his spoon. On another sofa, Banner and Sam were sniggering.

“Shuddup, peanut gallery,” Bucky called.

Banner broke into laughter and Sam shook his head. “Let’s watch the movie,” he said. “JARVIS! As we discussed!”

The TV screen lit up and Bucky turned his attention to Steve. He watched him eat, scraping the plastic cup with the spoon when that was all he’d been left with, and decided that, later, he would have to Google if any diseases caused certain food cravings.

Chapter End Notes

*BLOOPERS! beware, it is long.*

lexi, stopping mid-sentence as discord pings: wait who just joined? nOOOO
me: *is simply wheezing too much to say hi*
ash, who actually has an english accent: hi
lexi: okAY YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO MAKE FUN OF MY BAD ACCENTS
ash: i'll try not to
me: *is still wheezing*

lexi: wait, what does rollins sound like? is he american? can i make him sound like generic american, like hello, i would like to order a burger, please AND thank you.
me: yess
lexi: and what does ward sound like?
me: lmao, idk, a valley girl.
lexi: *proceeds to read all of ward's lines like a valley girl*
lexi, reading in a valley girl voice: "'Rumlow’s plan, like, failed,” Grant announced. “The asset totally escaped.”
me, having agreed to do strucker and lukin: *is wheezing too much to read strucker's line*
ultimately, i read strucker and lukin's lines as an impression of arnold schwarzenegger.

*ash opens the google link i sent them so they can read along. google docs displays users who are viewing a file with their account, but if the user is not logged in, they are shown*
as an anonymous animal. ex, lexi is shown as an anonymous hedgehog.
lexi, stops midsentence again: hold on who's viewing the doc? IS THAT AN ANONYMOUS NYAN CAT?
me: IT'S NYAN CAT!
ash, confused: what's going on?
lexi: you're showing up as an anonymous nyan cat omg i have to take a picture for evidence.
i would show you, but idk how to do that
after an hour, lexi finishes reading the first 500 words.

lexi: ohmygod i have to do a brooklyn accent now -- I AM NOT DOING A BROOKLYN ACCENT
me: try?
lexi: i can't do a brooklyn accent! wtf does that sound like?? no!
me: maybe just do a new york one -- *in an exagerated nyc accent* HEY, I'M WALKIN' HERE!
lexi and ash: *burst out laughing*
me: CAN I GET SUM CAWFEE?
lexi: stop, just stop

lexi: "Bucky ran his flesh palm down Steve’s spine" flesh palm? yeah i read that right flesh palm
me: he's got two different hands!
lexi: fair, fair *continues reading*
me: *sneaks back and changes flesh to meat
lexi: "and--" MEAT PALM! i just spat on my screen.
later... lexi: there's still spit on my screen

lexi: "Sneve --" Sneve? Steve?
me: s n e v e
lexi, again mouth typoing: "the steeetch" steech, stretch!
me: STEETCH

ash, at this point leaves us, bc it's two in the morning in england

lexi: "Kay,“ Steve mumbled.”
me: *adds in like a happy valley girl as it is how lexi read it*
lexi: that's the only way to say it!
lexi: "Steve certainly felt --" ooh, gettin' into the nfw shit here...
me: oh now you can't even swear?
lexi: stahp making fun of me!

note that lexi is also beta'ing another fic for this series (that isn't ready to be posted yet) that contains some rather serious bdsm elements to it and as such is rated e. definitely getting into the nfw shit with "well-fucked."

lexi: [steve] came out
me, interrupting: as bi

lexi, any time steve and/or bucky does something cute: *lovingly* ugh, these gays

lexi: "romanoff... took a long swig of her drink" same
lexi: "Bucky ... felt blood rushing southward"
me, interrupting to clarify: at this point, he's an awkward virgin
lexi: ok-- HE IS???
me: yeah! i mean, think about it! if you were him, would you ever try having sex with anyone???
lexi: i mean -- i guess that's true -- fine, the jury allows it

lexi, who is black: "If HYDRA had intended to silence black people, they failed"
FUCK YEAH THEY DID

lexi: "I threw a plate at a teenager who’d started playing this really loud music in a store once."
me: guess the song
lexi: *tries and fails for five minutes* what?
me: teenagers by mcr
lexi: *bursts into laughter
me: and it was like in the middle of the song, so picture it, steve's in a walmart somewhere, some poor kid's phone rings and starts screaming TEENAGERS SCARE THE LIVING SHIT OUT OF ME and steve just panics and starts chucking plates bc teenagers scare the living shit out of him. it's funny, but it's not. but it is
lexi: *still laughing*

and finally "erskee's syndrome"

and that's all she wrote! imagine being in a walmart and your phone rings and captain america just starts throwing plates at you. i'm making light of it and i feel awful, but it's kinda funny and i'm sure steve would agree in hindsight. pls comment and i'll reply to as many as i can before i head off to camp for a week, see you in a lil more than a week!
Chapter Summary

"not here, in america, in this godforsaken, god-fearing nation"

Chapter Notes

okay, so i vanished to church camp for a week, and now it's tuesday. i had so much fun at camp! guys! i'd been praying about my little brother for about two or three years and that prayer, not to get into details, got answered at camp last week. i still get tears of joy thinking about it. anyway, the point! the chapter is now here. read it, i hope you love it, pls comment when you've finished it. i also recommend having some fluff queued up to read after this bc i got sad again. especially if you listen to the playlist with this chapter. pls enjoy the chapter even tho it's sad.

thanks to lexi for being a godsend (ha, that fits the theme) and reading this chapter aloud again so we both laugh and i could actually hear it being read and edit it from there. again, there are bloopers in the end notes, but not nearly as many, sorry.

here is the cover on my tumblr and the playlist for those of you who want to listen to it.

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Latent HIV may lurk in 'quiet' immune cells, research suggests, Rockefeller University

“When HIV integrates itself into the genetic code of a CD4 T cell, it may produce an active infection, hijacking the cell to produce more copies of itself in order infect other cells, and killing it in the process. Antiretroviral drugs that suppress HIV infection work by disrupting this hijacking. But the virus may also fail to produce an active infection, remaining a quiet, tiny fragment of DNA tucked
within the host cell's genome. If so, the drugs have nothing to disrupt, and the infection remains latent.

“Most often, however, what happens is actually something in between. While the virus does manage to get at least some of itself into the T cell's genome, problems with the process leave it incapable of hijacking the cell to replicate itself. But those few successful integrations still do damage, and the resulting depletion in the victim's immune system leaves him or her vulnerable to potentially fatal opportunistic infections years, or even decades, after the initial infection…”

[october 17th, stark tower]

Natasha called them earlier that morning. She’d woken them up, actually. She said that she had arranged for them to speak with both the nurse’s granddaughter and Rebecca, and the granddaughter would be coming to the tower that afternoon.

They’d talk to Becca on Sunday, at her home in Queens where she lived with her daughter. Steve couldn’t tell from any cue from Bucky what he was thinking about that.

So there they were, in a secure conference room on floor seventy-seven of Stark Tower, Bucky standing just behind Steve’s chair, Steve looking at his white knuckles where his hands were clasped together, and waiting for the nurse’s granddaughter.

At eleven a.m. on the dot, Natasha walked in with another woman on her heel. Steve looked up, wondering if he would recognize the girl from her grandmother, but didn’t. She was slight, narrow in the shoulders and wider in the hips, with pale skin and deep black hair, large green eyes. She didn’t look remotely familiar, except for the fact that she looked like the picturesque Omega.

Steve didn’t think about that. He stood up and offered his hand.

“Steve Rogers,” he said in introduction.

“I know,” the woman answered, but took his hand and shook it firmly. Her palms were rough. It was nice to be reassured that the stereotype wasn’t fully represented in even her. “I’m Alexa Hayle. My grandmother sends her greetings, but she’s currently living in a nursing home and going out is very taxing on her.”
“I understand,” Steve answered. He gestured to the chairs. “I’m told that she has evidence that she’s willing to testify on.”

Alexa sat and Steve did as well. Both Natasha and Bucky remained standing. Alexa flicked her gaze briefly to Bucky, but did nothing else concerning his looming presence just behind Steve.

“She is willing to testify,” she said. “She’s in her 80s, but she’s very sharp-minded still. At the very least, she told me the story ten years ago and I would be willing to testify to it.”

“How come you never spoke until now?” Steve asked.

“To be honest,” Alexa started with a shrug, “I never actually believed it. I thought that there was no way Captain America could be an Omega. But then –” she stopped, then shrugged. “I believe now, clearly.”

Steve just nodded for her to go on.

“I brought the blood sample,” she said, pulling a small freezer pack from her purse. Steve tried not to snatch it from her grip, simply holding out his hand. She placed it into his palm, and Steve retracted, smoothing his fingers over its surface before unzipping it.

Packed amongst reusable ice packs were three small vials of dark red blood. Steve set the bag on the table and pressed a fist over his mouth, looking down on them with a tight jaw. Bucky’s hand landed on the back of his neck, fingers drifting over his shoulder and squeezing reassuringly.

“Nan told me that she was just a nurse,” Alexa said. Steve kept his gaze fixed on the blood vials. “She joined the Army medical unit in 1941, but spent most of her time in recruitment offices until she was assigned to Project Rebirth in ‘43. She only met you the one time, when she took your blood, then a few months later, some men in suits came and told her team to destroy all samples they’d taken for Project Rebirth.”

Steve stared down at the three vials. He had thought there would never be any concrete proof of the then unnamed illness, and now there were three vials of his blood. Would the virus still be detectable in them after seventy years?

“Nan thought that it was suspicious, so instead of destroying all of them, she kept these three,” Alexa
kept speaking. “She knew that you had an unknown illness, and she thought that perhaps in the future, she’d be able to find out what it was. But then you appeared as Captain America and she thought it would be better just to keep them hidden. Then you vanished…”

Steve closed the freezer pack, zipping it again. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

Alexa nodded. “I’m not a nurse,” she said. “So I couldn’t test them myself. There’s still no knowing what it was you had.”

“I have a guess,” Steve murmured.

“But Nan said that she did her best to keep them viable,” Alexa added. “They’ve been frozen since she hid them all those years ago.”

“We can test it now,” he agreed. At any rate, dozens upon dozens of new illnesses had been named since 1943. HIV was only one.

Alexa nodded. “Nan said that if you need her to, she’ll submit to psychological evaluation, to prove she’s not gone batty.”

Steve cracked a smile at that, giving a grateful nod. “Thank you. You and she have no idea how much I appreciate this.”

Alexa returned the smile, a touch of uncharacteristic wisdom – for her age – coloring it cold. “It’s the least we can do,” she said kindly. “It doesn’t look like a lot of people are on your side.”

Bucky’s hand tightened on Steve’s shoulder, and Steve reached up to close his fingers over his knuckles, giving it a squeeze. Steve simply nodded to her words.

“I’ll submit this all to the inquiry,” Natasha spoke up. “And arrange for an evaluation for your grandmother. We may ask her to testify this week or next, but we will ask her to testify.”

“She’ll be ready,” Alexa promised.
She stood again. Steve pushed back his chair, rising to cross around the table, and Alexa held out her hand to shake once more. Steve took it, pumped it once, and let go, for Bucky to catch his hand and hold it securely.

“Good luck,” Alexa said.

“Thank you,” Steve answered somberly.

Natasha opened the door for her, and just outside, a Stark Industries employee was waiting to show her out. As they left down the corridor, Natasha shut the door again.

“The fact that she had three vials gave us an advantage,” she said. “We can submit one to the inquiry for them to run their own tests and we’ll compare it to your own blood now, so there’s no doubt that it is yours.”

“And what’s in it will prove that it’s my blood before the serum,” Steve said. He looked back to the freezer pack, to the three vials of blood sitting so innocently on the table, and tightened his jaw.

“You said something just after the bridge,” Natasha voiced. Steve kept his gaze on the freezer pack. “Your guess. Are you prepared for the world to know?”

Steve shook his head. “But what choice do I have?”

Natasha was silent for a while. Bucky crowded slightly closer, pressing against his back, and Steve let him take some of his weight, leaning back on his chest. It made him a little less afraid.

“You don’t need to give an explanation as to where you caught it,” Natasha said.

“Yes, I will,” Steve sighed. He shook his head, feeling tired. “If we’re going to convince them that Bucky was my Alpha prior to me enlisting, I’ll have to explain. Everything.”

Natasha looked sorry for him. She gave a reluctant nod.
“You’re right,” she sighed.

Bucky took another step closer to him, so their legs overlapped, and Steve leaned more of his weight against his chest, wanting to feel that comfort, that reassurance that he was there. He stared at the freezer pack containing his contaminated blood, feeling as if he were already on trial, being grilled for the crime of being an Omega.

He pressed tighter against Bucky’s chest. Had Bucky never become the Winter Soldier, this would have never happened. It was a thought that had already occurred to him, but it was a reality he was glad to live with, purely for the fact that Bucky was alive at all.

Natasha took the freezer pack off the table. “I’ll take these to Bruce,” she said.

“You’ll need blood from me now,” Steve mumbled.

Natasha gave a nod. Steve, with great reluctance, took his weight back onto his own two feet and lifted off Bucky’s chest. He kept their hands linked as they followed Natasha out of the conference room to the elevator and the private floors.

Bruce met them on the medical floor. He gave the three of them a warm smile, the kind Steve had come to expect and even look forward to from him, which switched to confusion almost immediately when Natasha held out the freezer pack to him.

“We need to run some tests on one of these,” she said without preamble.

Bruce took it and unzipped it. His eyebrows shot up.

“What sort of tests?” he asked.

“We need to compare it to his blood now to prove it is his,” Natasha said, pointing to Steve

“And screen it for diseases,” Steve said quietly.
Bruce looked at him, then at the blood, then back at him with a frown. “What sort of diseases?”

Steve squared his shoulders. There was no time like the present. Then Bucky squeezed his hand before dropping it to push his arm around his waist.

Steve relaxed a little. Maybe if Bucky was standing in his personal space at the inquiry, it would be easier to explain then, as well.

“HIV,” he said. “Or any sexually transmitted disease that has been identified since the 40s.”

Bruce’s eyebrows shot up. He, unlike Natasha or Sam or Bucky, had no clue what paid Steve’s rent prior to his joining the Army.

“I’m guessing there’s quite the story behind that,” Bruce said musingly. He looked down at the blood vials, shook his head and shrugged. “I can do that,” he said, looking up again. “It’ll take a few days for results to come through.”

“A few days is fine,” Steve said.

“And you need a sample of his blood now,” Natasha added.

Bruce glanced at Bucky. Steve looked at him, then glanced down the hallway to the medical facility’s labs and exam rooms.

“Can we –” he started to say, and Bruce cut him off with a nod.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, then turned to go. The double doors swung behind him, and Steve turned to hug Bucky from the side. His Alpha wrapped an arm around his shoulders and kissed the top of his head, dragging his wrist over his shoulder a few times. Natasha looked away.

A few minutes passed and Bruce returned with a rolling cart. Steve withdrew slightly from Bucky to roll up his sleeve and stick out his arm, while Bruce put on gloves and unwrapped sterile tools. He
took Steve by the forearm, swabbed down the crook of his elbow with alcohol, and carefully felt around for a vein before picking up a needle and vial. Steve shut his eyes, wincing at the prick of the needle and the kick his heart gave as his blood filled the vial. After a few seconds, Bruce withdrew the needle and pressed gauze over the break in his skin, taking tape to hold it in place. Steve pulled his arm back, pressing two fingers over the gauze and holding his arm upright somewhat.

“That’s that,” Bruce said, setting the vial on the cart. “I’ll go get started.”

“What you,” Steve said. Bruce just waved a hand, stripping off his gloves and starting off again. Steve turned to face Bucky, gave him a quick smile, and headed for the elevator. Bucky caught up with him quickly, wrapped an arm around his waist and tugged him in, so their gaits lined up and they walked in time. Natasha came up on his other side, stride longer to keep up.

The elevator opened as they approached, JARVIS anticipating their needs. They entered, and without a word from them it rose and set off for the upper floors.

It stopped and Natasha got off. Steve turned into Bucky’s side, pressing his face into his shoulder. Bucky’s fingers slipped under his shirt to graze his skin with his wrist, his lips pressing to the top of his head. Steve exhaled heavily.

The elevator opened again. They exited and Steve aimed for the couch. He dropped onto it, putting his legs up on the cushions, and Bucky folded himself carefully between him and the edge of the sofa. Steve, mindful of the gauze and tape in his elbow, shifted to put his face in Bucky’s chest. Bucky locked his arms around him, put a knee over his hip, and Steve inhaled deeply. He exhaled, inhaled, and tried to shut out the chatter in his head.

He felt like he was already on trial, explaining his life from birth to loss to exchanging crumpled money in dark alleys with faceless men, any number of whom could have slipped the rubber defining the firm line between where they ended and he began to infect him. Steve knew of the so-called trend of stealthily removing condoms, and it certainly hadn’t begun in the 21st century. He tried to shut out the chatter, ignore Congressman Wenham’s looming glower as he demanded every detail of his life and sins, he tried to not think about the judgment in the eyes of every viewer and audience member, he tried not to imagine anything at all.

There was no way Congress could separate Steve and Bucky, yes. And they couldn’t actually imprison Steve for having never been an actual Alpha. And sure, Steve didn’t give a shit whether they closed the exhibit in the Smithsonian or if Captain America was declared a traitor to the United States.
But Congress could find a way to make his and Bucky’s lives hell for having a relationship while serving in the military, let alone the consequences they could work up for the lie that was Captain America. He wouldn’t put anything past them. The politicians serving the country were career men, men who were primarily interested in putting money in their pockets and keeping themselves in office. Steve was most definitely a cynic, and even with all third-wave feminism’s efforts, it was still an Alpha’s world, and he didn’t trust a damn one of those Alphas to take his side when they could make a profit or boost their own positions by making him the bad guy.

The inquiry panel, a collection of Alpha males, was the perfect example. Steve tried not to think about any of it, but it had been shouting in the back of his head ever since his suppressants failed on the bridge in DC.

“C’mon, doll,” Bucky murmured into his hair. “Let me help.”

Steve bunched up the back of Bucky’s shirt as his fingers curled into fists. He pressed his face into his chest, half cutting off his own oxygen supply as he tried to hide from even his thoughts.

“C’mon,” Bucky whispered, “let me, sweetheart. Let me fix it.”

“Can’t fix Congress,” Steve hissed.

“Lemme make it better for now, okay? Congress ain’t here, Congress is just a thing in your head right now. Lemme take you away from it.”

Steve pressed his face from forehead to chin into Bucky’s chest, gritting his teeth while the faceless figures of Congress weighed in on his back. Faceless figures of Alphas smacking him upside the head, telling him to get a grip, to stop whining and be a man, come on, Steve, it’s just the whole damn nation wanting to string you up by the garters you wore on the street. Get a grip, Senator Brandt had snapped at him every time he shied away from the stage to sell bonds. Get a grip, the chorus girls had told him with scorn. Get a grip, he’d told himself with the lights blinding him and the eyes like sharks tracking his every movement through that damn suit that didn’t leave a damn thing to the imagination.

“Ain’t weak to wanna feel good, Stevie,” Bucky whispered. “Lemme help.”

Get a grip, he told himself.
Bucky lifted a hand and gripped the back of his neck. His fingers dug into Steve’s taut muscles, and his whole body went limp. Steve exhaled. He could get a grip. Didn’t have to be his own just yet.

He nodded into Bucky’s chest. Bucky kissed the top of his head and kept up the pressure on his neck. Steve’s whole body was limp, and slowly going lax in earnest as well. Bucky massaged his fingers into Steve’s neck, keeping the hold on him, and Steve inhaled deep before exhaling just as deep. Just breathing with Bucky holding his neck like this was wiping clean his mind.

“What’d you want me to do?” Bucky asked in a quiet, crooning murmur. “You want me to lay you out and make you feel good? You wanna lie in my lap and lemme pet you? You wanna take a bath and let me wash your hair?”

“Wanna feel safe,” Steve mumbled.

“Safe from what, baby?”

“Everything,” he said in a small voice, and Bucky kissed his hair.

“Okay,” he answered. “I can do that, babydoll.”

Bucky raised his other hand and swept it through his hair. Steve huddled closer to him, trying to leech off his warmth and his attitude of calm. He felt cold and naked, and tried to hide in the shadow Bucky’s body cast. He tried to fold in on himself until he was covered by Bucky’s silhouette, but his huge shoulders wouldn’t bow. Bucky’s hands covered the back of his neck, his hair, a knee hooked over his hip shielded his legs and back, but Steve’s shoulders stuck out. Awkward and ungainly, overlarge and unseemly. He tried to hide. He wanted to hide.

“Shh,” Bucky murmured in his ear. “Shh, don’t think, sweetheart. I got you, okay? You’re mine. Nobody else can see you. Nobody else can touch you, okay? Don’t think all that.”

“Since when could you read minds?” Steve whispered under his breath.

Bucky kissed his hair, then tucked his face in, his nose stirring Steve’s hair. “Since you been mine,” he said gently. “Shh, now. Not a soul can touch you, Stevie, not a soul.”
“How’d you know?” Steve asked.

“Know what?”

“That I didn’t want people touching me?”

Bucky’s hand trailed down his back, then curled around his ribs and shoulders. Hiding him from view.

“You always hated it,” he said. “I remember a time, there was this scientist, wanted to see if there was a way to replicate the serum.”

Steve wrinkled his nose, remembering it, too. God, that day had been disgusting.

“Made you do all sorts of tests and took your blood, all kinds of people poking and prodding you, and you were so sick, baby, I remember you all white in the face. They made you take your shirt off and you kept hugging yourself and slouching and when it was over you just ‘bout collapsed.”

One of the nurses had run a hand up his arm, palm moist and fingers tapping lightly, with this look in her eye and Steve had nearly bolted. He would have, except they’d had him tied up to so many wires that he would have fallen over if he tried running.

And, fuck, having to take his shirt off? If he hadn’t been pretending to be an Alpha, if the doctors and nurses had known he was an Omega, they would have never asked him to take off his shirt. It didn’t matter that he was a man, he was still an Omega. Not even while working the streets had Steve ever gone shirtless in front of another person. The only two people in his whole life before that moment had been his mother and Bucky.

Steve wrinkled his nose, remembering one more thing that he’d grown up dreaming would be Bucky’s alone to love and cherish and had been handed over to strangers.

“Shh,” Bucky murmured into his hair. “Shh, sweetheart, listen to me, okay? Not a damn thing anyone can do to take you from me, and that includes you, baby. Not a damn thing you could ever do, on purpose or by accident or whatever. Not a damn thing, sweetheart.”
Steve sucked in a breath and half choked on it. Bucky murmured gently into his hair, his flesh and bone hand at the back of his neck holding tight, the metal digits gently running up and down his back, and Steve kept trying to breathe and kept stuttering on the inhales. He couldn’t help seeing the shadows cast by Congress, lined up and circling to make a ring of ley lines that all lead right to everything he’d ever done wrong in his life. He couldn’t help but imagine how easy it was for news to spread these days. It was so easy to spread information now, one click could put his darkest secrets on the front page of every newspaper, news station, or website. A million people could be experts in the ways he could have avoided what he’d done in only a day, and just as many more would simply know he’d done it in less time.

The second the words I was a prostitute came out of his mouth, the whole world would know. It would be translated into French, Russian, Mandarin, Arabic, Spanish and all its variants, Swahili and Yiddish and his own mother tongue of Irish and he could be sure someone somewhere would probably translate it into Latin or Ancient Greek or Gaelic, and even sign language – Captain America is a prostitute. The news could reach all the way into the unexplored recesses of the Amazonian jungle for the natives still fishing the river full of monsters to say oh yeah I heard about that, Captain America’s a prostitute, ain’t that a shame?

And all the reports, the gossip, the repetitions and the translations, they’d be in the present tense. Captain America is a prostitute. There would be no separating now and then, the past from the present, not in this Godforsaken God-fearing nation.

The whole world would know, and Steve being the cynic he was, he was sure the whole world would shake their heads in tandem, and the breeze of their motions could cause monsoons in India and Japan and somehow he’d be blamed for that, too. His life would become a matter of opinion, and maybe some sympathy would come from other prostitutes and sex workers, the brothers and sisters he had in Rahab, but their voices wouldn’t hope to lift above Fox News shouting that he was a disgrace to the nation. They couldn’t share their sympathy for having been there above the sound of mothers everywhere gasping in shock, teachers covering the eyes and ears of their students, and even if he tried to lie that his then-unnamed illness had been the result of rape, like literally every other victim out there, he would be asked Well, what were you wearing?

His brothers and sisters in Rahab couldn’t speak loud enough to be even heard in America, in a Godforsaken, God-fearing nation that wouldn’t put sex talks on national TV but would vilify him just as quickly as they had turned him into a hero. And like much else in his life according to modern standards, he hadn’t consented to any of that. His life was downright pathetic.

“Stevie,” Bucky murmured quietly to him, “c’mon, quit thinking all that.”

“I can’t,” Steve whispered hopelessly. How could he stop thinking about it, it was only a few days
away, and, God, the HIV and selling his body was only the top of the cake, he’d have to tell on national TV to a God-fearing country that he’d had his first heat at 14 and because of it, he’d lost his Alpha for ten years. And if it were to be believed that Bucky only ever wanted the best for him, they’d have to explain that Winifred Barnes had thought it best to tell him that because of that heat, Bucky had raped him and he’d never looked back after that.

What he’d hoped he’d be able to hold onto and hide above all else, his very first heat, the only thing he’d given to Bucky only, he’d have to expose on national TV. In just a day the whole nation would be experts on his life instead of just the people who’d seen his fictionalized Smithsonian exhibit, and all the experts would be able to agree that it had always been his fault. The feminists would demand why he hadn’t come out sooner and used his position of power to empower other Omegas. The pastors would declare anything with his face or the name Captain America a roadmap to prostitution and the seven circles of hell. The teachers would tell their students that they must never have sex because, like Captain America, they will contract HIV and die. Everyone could know in just one click just how fucked up the lie that was Captain America was.

“It won’t be your fault,” Bucky whispered.

“Yes, it will!” Steve hissed. “You don’t get it, it’s always our fault!”

“Hey,” Bucky said, shaking his shoulder, “it won’t be your fault that Captain America’s a lie. You got testimony that it was Brandt that covered up your life. That won’t be your fault, you can prove that. And anything else isn’t your fault! There isn’t a fault to be had for that, Steve!”

“You don’t get it,” Steve hissed yet again.

“You’re not getting it,” Bucky snapped. “There is no fault to be had! Listen to me!” Bucky added as Steve opened his mouth. “There is no fault to be had! You did what you had to do because you had no other choice!”

Steve shook his head. Bucky gripped it with his flesh and blood palm, squeezed just this side of too hard and Steve found his body inhaling deeply and slowly without his brain’s command.

“You and Sam, you keep telling me that I had no choice,” Bucky said quietly. “So if I had no choice, then the deaths that I caused cannot have been my fault. So if it was no fault of mine that I broke one of the ten commandments, then it’s no damn fault of yours you broke another!”
“I had another choice,” Steve said in a very small voice. “No one forced me to do it. I had another choice.”

Bucky pressed a cold and unyielding palm to his cheek in remarkably gentle touch. “Don’t you say that,” he hissed back. “Don’t you dare say that. That wouldn’t’ve been any better than sex work, that would’ve been the same damn commandment I broke, Stevie, don’t you dare wish you’d rathered you died.”

Steve gulped down air, then Bucky’s palm gripped tighter to the back of his neck and even his lungs went limp to obey his Alpha.

“I know you’re grateful HYDRA kept me alive,” he said. Steve hid his face, feeling ashamed. “No, no, I’m grateful for it; all roads lead to Rome, sweetheart, all my roads lead back to you and HYDRA just kept me on ‘em. I’m grateful you did it, Stevie, ‘cause it kept you walking back home to me. Don’t you dare think it would’ve been better if you died, ‘cause then the same logic means it would’ve been better if I died on you.”

“You never would’ve had any of it happen if I’d died,” Steve mumbled.

“Stevie,” Bucky sighed. He kissed the top of his head. “Stevie. I love you, stubborn ass and damn martyr, I love every bit of you. I’d’ve always missed you, I’d’ve always been looking over the crowd to spot you, I’d’ve always wanted to go back and undo what I did. What I thought I did. I would’ve spent my whole life thinking I wronged you. Sweetheart, I ain’t gonna say I’m sorry that we’re here and we’re alive now, no matter how we got here. Sweetheart,” he cooed, “there’s no fault to be had.”

Steve couldn’t believe him. There would always be fault to be had. There would always be blame plenty to go around, and whoever decided it would go to would pick the option with the best profit or gain. The blame would always go to the Omega in an Alpha’s world, and he was powerless to stop it.

“All roads lead back to you, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured. “What’s it your ma used to say? God’s got a plotline for each and every one of us, and every story’s got its painful ups and downs. God didn’t turn down Rahab, remember? Remember you told me that preacher called you the brother of Rahab?”

“God’s not real,” Steve confessed. “There’s no God. There’s only the bottom line and power and politics. There’s no room for God in Congress.”
Bucky kissed his hair. “You don’t believe that.”

“Yes, I do,” Steve insisted. He sniffed and pulled his face out of Bucky’s shirt, lifting it to try and look him in the eye and failing, shutting his eyes at the last second. “There’s no God. If there is, he doesn’t give a shit about us.”

Bucky’s fingers brushed the crest of his cheek. Steve inhaled shudderingly, exhaled sharply.

“God’s right here, sweetheart,” Bucky said softly. He brushed against Steve’s cheek yet again, the smooth metal taking to the heat of his flushed face quickly, so it felt cool rather than outright cold. “God’s right here,” he whispered.

“Where?” Steve asked disbelievingly.

“Look at me.”

Steve opened his eyes, and Bucky tapped under his chin.

“Right here,” he whispered. “God’s in you, baby. Lemme ask you, if you’d died and never joined the army, where would the other three hundred ninety-nine guys you saved when you went lookin’ for me be now?”

Steve swallowed. He had no answer to that.

“They’d be dead,” Bucky promised. “Three hundred ninety-nine guys dead, three hundred ninety-nine mamas burying their sons, three hundred ninety-nine lovers or best friends or both back home grieving, three hundred ninety-nine sorry ends. If you’d never gotten sick,” he went on, “if you’d never gone looking for a chance to do good before your life was over, never been a hooker, never even seen me leave, where would those guys be? Where would their families be? All them guys, I bet you their gals back home wouldn’t give a flying rat’s ass that you were a hooker before you were Captain America. All you’ll ever be to them is the guy who saved their fellas. And if that ain’t proof to you that there’s a higher power out there that gives a damn, I don’t know what is.”

“Four hundred,” Steve corrected softly.
Bucky gave pause. Steve, his face hidden, didn’t want to look up to see what he was thinking.

“Four hundred?”

“Four hundred,” Steve repeated. He reached forward, eyes hardly open, and kissed Bucky, resting their foreheads together. “You’d be dead, too.”

Bucky nodded. “I’d be dead, too. And I’d see you up in heaven and I’d have to whoop your ass for letting yourself starve to death ‘cause you was ashamed of earning a dollar where you could.”

Steve half shook his head, not wanting to and refusing to believe it. Bucky sighed, cupping his cheek with a cool palm and sweeping his thumb across the bone.

“God had plans for you,” he said gently. “God always had plans for you, and not a thing you did that he didn’t plan for.”

“What was he plannin’ for?” Steve asked belligerently. “Why didn’t he just plan for no war and no sickness and no death never?”

“Think he did,” Bucky said. “Adam and Eve messed it up, remember? Freely choose to.”

Steve didn’t have an answer to that. “What was he plannin’ for?” he repeated darkly.

“Right now,” Bucky said. Steve leaned back, opening his eyes. Bucky smiled sadly at him, brushing his thumb along the crest of his cheek. “Right here, you ‘n’ me in a future where it ain’t illegal to love each other. Right here and now.”

“Could’ve planned to make us rich when we were kids,” Steve said in a quiet, bitter tone. “Could’ve planned to have us born in France, grow up always lovin’ on each other and never bein’ hurt for it.”

“Wouldn’t be you ‘n’ me, then,” Bucky told him. “Sure that happened to someone, but it wasn’t us. God planned you to go out and save three hundred ninety-nine guys just so you could get to one. All
roads, sweetheart.”

Steve didn’t have any more retorts. He didn’t have any more *what if*s or complaints. He shut his mouth and his eyes and tried to hide in Bucky’s shadow. But his shoulders still stuck out.

Bucky kissed his forehead. “C’mon,” he murmured. “I’ll keep tellin’ you that there’s no fault to be had ‘til you believe me, just like you’re gonna keep tellin’ me that food’s for more’n nutrition ‘til I believe it, alright?”

“Alright,” Steve sighed. “You’ll get sick of it.”

“Nah,” Bucky swore. “For better, for worse, sweetheart. ‘Til the end of the line. I mean to keep that vow now.”

“Never broke it in the first place,” Steve mumbled. Bucky kissed his forehead firmly, palms pressing to his cheek and neck like he was afraid Steve would slip through his fingers and vanish. Steve bunched up the back of Bucky’s shirt where his hands were curled into fists, and it was a familiar feeling to him.

“You never broke it, neither, then,” Bucky said hoarsely. “Couldn’t break it when you hadn’t made it yet.”

“But I was yours all along,” Steve answered.

“Yeah, ‘course you were, sweetheart,” Bucky answered in a gentle coo, “always been my baby, my angel, doll, always been mine.”

“Broke that, then,” Steve said stubbornly.

Bucky sighed. He kissed down the line of his nose, shifted his thumb and palm to kiss both cheeks, then caught his lips.

“Can’t break that,” he said. He hardly drew back to say it, so their lips brushed as he spoke. “Not possible, Stevie.”
Steve tried to shrink, to hide in Bucky’s embrace, and his shoulders stuck out. Bucky heaved a long sigh, then, fucking psychic, he rolled them over so his body was blanketing Steve’s and where their combined weight pressed him into the cushions, his shoulders were finally covered. Steve dug his hands into Bucky’s back, sinking into the cushions.

He was taller than Bucky, so his toes stuck out, but they were just toes, covered by his shoes and everything. Nobody could rationally call his beat up, smelly sneakers sexual.

“Only way you could break that is if you loved anybody else,” Bucky swore. Steve blinked. “And you never loved anybody but me or your momma, did you?”

Steve slowly shook his head. Bucky gave a firm nod.

“Then it ain’t no fault of yours,” he said firmly. He kissed Steve on the lips firmly. Firmly, he refused Steve his guilt.

Under his firm kiss, firm grip, firm body and firm manner, Steve went limp.

“There you go,” Bucky murmured in his ear. Steve half shivered. “That’s it, doll. Jus’ relax. Lemme do all the work now, okay?”

“Okay,” Steve whispered.

Bucky’s weight lifted off of him, but before he could whimper in complaint, arms tucked under his knees and his waist to lift him off the couch. Steve turned into Bucky’s collar, nosing at his neck absently, as Bucky carried him away from the sofa.

His weight came down on something soft and firm. Legs. Bucky had rested Steve on his lap. With his eyes closed, he didn’t know where they were, nor did he care. He heard a squeak of a knob turning on metal, then a gush of water.

The laces of his left shoe loosened. Then it slipped off his sock. The right shoe followed it, then his socks, then fingers landed on his stomach and a palm caressed against his abdomen gently before undoing the button and zipper of his jeans. Steve let out his breath, feeling it reflect back on him after
it hit Bucky’s skin.

A palm ran down his calves, then pushed back on his shins until his heels rested on the cold tile of the bathroom floor. The arm under his back lifted up and his jeans and boxers were tugged off his hips. The palm settled back on his ankle, warm and rough, and slowly slid back up his now bare shin. Steve exhaled more sharply, then extended his legs and let them fall open.

Bucky’s warm breath fell on his ear in a quiet laugh. His warm palm slid up Steve’s leg, cupping the knee and slipping to the side at the thigh to come to a stop at his hip. Steve swallowed through his dry throat, licked his lips and swallowed again. Bucky’s lips touched his neck, then his hand slid up from his hip to his waist and dislodged his shirt along the way.

The water was letting off heat already, but it barely matched the heat coming from every point that Bucky’s palm touched, rough and gentle and cherishing. The steam hardly could keep up with the rising warmth of his blood in his veins, the roaring of the water out of the faucet nowhere near as fast as the roaring of his heartbeat in his ear. Bucky dragged his shirt up, until it reached his armpits and Steve raised his arms automatically to get it off. It fell to the floor with a gentle thump, and Bucky’s palm settled back on his stomach. His fingers stretched out, caressed the surface of his skin.

“Gonna keep it jus’ like this, babydoll,” Bucky murmured to him, another gentle coo. His fingers smoothed over the faint hairs covering his body, trailing up and down and all over. “Gonna pet and love on you ‘til you’re fast asleep, okay?”

Steve simply nodded. He relaxed against Bucky’s collar, letting his body go boneless as Bucky lifted him up again and lowered him into the warm water of the bath. He settled into it, waited patiently as Bucky withdrew his touch, then actually sighed in contentment when Bucky climbed into the bath with him. Steve curled into his body, resting his cheek on Bucky’s chest and letting his arms and legs tuck in, almost in a fetal position. Bucky kissed the top of his head and resumed running his hands up and down and all over Steve’s body.

“There,” Bucky whispered. “There you go, dolly. All nice and fuzzy, ain’tcha?”

Steve hummed absently, caused Bucky to chuckle and simply enjoyed how it sent vibrations through his cheek and all the way down to his toes.

“See what I meant? Ain’t weak to wanna feel alright, sweetheart. Ain’t weak to wanna let somebody make you feel better.”
“Mhmm,” Steve murmured.

“Long as that somebody’s me, a’course,” Bucky added. Steve gave a snort and half-heartedly flicked him on the nipple. Bucky yelped a little, started and made the water slosh, sending a new sheen of warmth over where Steve’s body wasn’t immersed.

“Now that’s playin’ dirty, doll,” Bucky scolded him.

“Don’t care,” Steve answered vaguely. “You play dirty all the time.”

“Yeah, but it makes you blush an’ it’s cute!”

Steve flicked him on the nipple again, making him jolt all over. “Makes you squirm,” he said. “It’s funny.”

“Oh, I see,” Bucky chuckled. He kissed at his hair and swept a hand up his shoulder. “You’re only in it to laugh at me.”

“Yup,” Steve mumbled. “‘S funny.”

“Making me squirm?”

“Your face,” Steve said. He yawned and Bucky laughed lightly.

“Want me to wash your hair?” Bucky asked gently.

“Mhmm.”

Bucky repositioned him with gentle hands, until Steve lay between his thighs, floating in the vast expanse of the marble bathtub. With his eyes shut, it felt just like the bath in France. Bucky began spooning palmfuls of water over his forehead, and Steve found himself smiling, because it was just like France.
“Keep talking,” Steve murmured, half exhaling it.

“Like the sound of my voice, sweetheart?”

“Best part’a ya,” Steve answered with a lazy grin.

“Uh-huh,” Bucky replied skeptically. “Sure, dollface.”

“Tell me a story,” Steve amended.

He knew Bucky was smiling without having to look. He could feel it.

“Innit usually me askin’ for a story?”

“Take turns,” Steve mumbled. He felt Bucky smiling wider.

“What kinda story, doll?”

Steve gave a vague hum; low, long, and light. “Nice one,” he said.

“Oh, like, once upon a time there was a stubborn fool who kept jumpin’ outta airplanes without parachutes?”

Steve waved an absent hand in the direction of Bucky’s face, laughing softly when it made contact with his cheek. Bucky snorted and grabbed his hand, squeezing it.

“Alright, alright,” Bucky said. He ran his fingers through Steve’s hair, working the water into the roots. “Once upon a time, there was this kid.”
Steve exhaled deeply. He was half asleep already.

“This kid had the bluest eyes around,” Bucky said, and the corner of Steve’s lip curled up. “Like pure starlight. Not sapphires, not baby blues, not like the oceans or the bluest of blue skies you ever did see. Starlight. They shone bright and blue and clear just like the stars. His eyes were so like starlight that they could guide sailors home. And there was this one sailor. He did some not so good things, he did some good stuff, too, but he kept getting lost. Now, him and this kid, they grew up together, so he knew firsthand what looking right into the heart of a star was like.”

“What’s it like?” Steve asked softly.

“It’s like looking into the heart of a star, dumbass,” Bucky said, and Steve laughed. “It burns but it’s so beautiful you can’t look away. And before you know it, all the bad and all the hurt in you’s been burned off, and all that’s left is the good stuff. That was what looking into his eyes were like, ‘cause all he could see was the good in people.”

“Sounds foolish,” Steve mused.

“Nah,” Bucky answered. He bent and kissed his damp forehead. “He was pure. Just pure. See, no room for bad in the heart of a star, it all burns up ‘cause it’s spendin’ so much effort helping sailors find their way home. And this starlight kid and this sailor, they was in love with each other. The sailor thought he wasn’t good enough for the starlight kid, on account of all the bad things he’d done, but the starlight kid just took all those bad things and burned ‘em up. Left nothin’ but love behind.”

“Do they get married?”

“Am I telling the story or what?”

Steve smiled to himself. Bucky kissed his forehead again, maybe just because he could.

“The starlight kid and the sailor, they had some hard times. Lots of people wanted to keep the starlight all to ‘emselves, see. Lots of other sailors, they was jealous that the brightest star in the sky had fallen for such an ordinary guy. And there were other people who wanted to say that a star can’t belong to any one person, that all mankind’s gotta share it ‘cause that’s all that would be fair. And lots of other things wanted to keep ‘em apart. But nobody ever asked the sailor or the star what they thought, and they got so sick of people tryna tell ‘em what to do that they ran away together.”
“Did they?” Steve murmured.

“Up and left,” Bucky confirmed. “One day, the sun set and the stars all came out, and the other sailors, they was lookin’ for the brightest star. Where’d it go? they asked. But not a one of ’em could find the star. For decades, the world kept trying to find the brightest star, but they only ever looked in the sky. Truth was, the brightest star to ever shine had fallen in love with an ordinary sailor, and he’d come down to earth as an angel so they could be together. They lived in a two-story brownstone in Brooklyn, with a roof garden and this really cool TV. And that starlight kid and that sailor, they lived out the rest of their days always smiling at each other, ‘cause they knew.”

Bucky touched the back of his knuckles to Steve’s cheek, bending over him so their noses nearly touched. “Starlight made an angel made human, and your average, everyday sailor. People’d ask the sailor what always had ‘im smilin’, and he’d always just say that it was a fine night for stargazing.”

“Which one of us is the sailor?” Steve asked quietly.

“Obviously me.”

Steve gave a soft, thoughtful hum. “I think you got eyes like starlight, Buck.”

Bucky kissed the tip of his nose and he broke into a wider smile. “Nah,” he murmured. “You got the starlight eyes, doll. Guided me right back home to ya, didn’t you?”

“Two-story brownstone in Brooklyn,” Steve agreed absently. He reached up to tangle his fingers with Bucky’s. “Roof garden and a lil’ dog and little ones with the brightest blue eyes.”

He felt Bucky smile, felt it color blue, but couldn’t lift his consciousness high enough from the water he was floating in to be sorry just then that he couldn’t give Bucky kids with the brightest blue eyes like starlight. It was there, but no more than an old ache, one that was no more present then than it was all the time. Bucky had always loved kids. He’d been so excited to have a little sister, and was so happy to be a big brother, even when Becca was a brat. Steve’s earliest memories were of Bucky gladly carrying out his duties as a big brother. He’d always be sorry he couldn’t make Bucky a father, too.

“Prettiest kids you ever did see,” Bucky said quietly, sorrily. “All bright-eyed like their daddy.”
Steve squeezed Bucky’s hand. “Y’re the starlight one,” he mumbled.

“Nah,” Bucky repeated, kissing his nose once more. “Ain’t nothin’ shine brighter than your eyes, babydoll.”

Steve was floating, too far to argue. So he hummed absently and pursed his lips until Bucky kissed him and then hummed again, happy and tired.

He fell asleep in the bath. Must have, because he woke up lying in bed wrapped up in Bucky, and Bucky was snoring softly. He was asleep, too. Steve did his best to smile and went back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

now go read something fluffy. i have a lot of fluff, you can read any of that, or lately i've been reading Avaaaricious's meet-ugly series (dis) and it's great, so if you want a rec, there it is. lexi knows that i like rec'ing fics to people, i think i sent her about 10 fics at once bc i mentioned one and saw the other 9 and thought she needed to see them. anyway, pls comment! i love comments! comments validate me! talk to me about steve and if you relate to him, idk if it's obvious but i actually am a christian (the kind that takes love thy neighbor seriously obvs) and god's done a lot to and for me, so if you wanna talk about relating to steve's fall from faith, hit me up on tumblr, i'm there to listen and offer my own experience. i'm not an expert but hey, never hurts to have a shoulder to lean on (STEVE). the next chapter is less sad (ish) and after that there's a helluva lot more cloudy with a chance of buckwild. no other spoilers from me.

bloopers!

lexi: this is so sad, alexa play despacito
alexa: playing despacito on spotify
we spend the next few minutes getting alexa to stop playing despacito. it was that sad.

lexi: *says “bucky” instead of bruce*
me: *highlights bruce*
lexi: what did i say? bruce, bucky? oh, brucey *begins quoting michael with a b*
me: *wheezes*

an unknown male voice enters
me: i hear a male
lexi: oh, that’s my bf
me: hi bf
bf: *distant greeting*
lexi, to bf: this is my friend beth’s potential sister-in-law
me, bc i want my brother and beth to get married: pOteNtiAl???

me: wait is your bf listening?
lexi: yeah but he’s not paying attention
me: well, all he needs to know is that captain america is a prostitute
lexi: *dies*

lexi: “...that damn suit that didn’t leave a damn thing to the imagination.” we know it didn’t leave anything to the imagination, we don’t call you the dorito for nothing
me: bucky knew it, too, “you’re keeping the outfit” is canon

*lexi’s page freezes and she has to reload it. all 500 pages*
lexi: prayers for lexi
*we become distracted while her page reloads*
lexi: what do you have
me: a knife!!
lexi: noooOOOO!!!!!!!!

lexi: “Bucky gripped it with his flesh and blood palm” dammit i thought about the meat palm
me: bloopers!

lexi: “don’t you dare wish you’d rathered you died” ohmygod, fuck it up bucky barnes, go off honey.

lexi: “‘Couldn’t break it when you hadn’t made it yet.’ THAT’S WHY I KEEP SAYING
me: he has issues!
lexi: i know he got issues, he got issues™, he could fill up a magazine with issues and he’d still have more
me: *dying*
lexi: “bucky sighed” bitch me too i just wanna shake his shoulders
me: he is depressed!
lexi: he needs super soldier anti-depressants, dw steve, i’ll recommend you some psychologists

lexi: “Nobody could rationally call his beat up sneakers sexual.” honey
me: no!
lexi: i mean
me: this is not the kinky fic!
lexi: i mean
me: *adds in smelly*
lexi: h o n e y
me: nO!

lexi: “and slowly slid back up his now bare shin” oh myy
me: that is not the moOD
lexi: “Steve exhaled more sharply, then extended his legs and let them fall open.” oh
myyyyyy
me: i mean, it’s a little bit – but that is not the moOD!

lexi: “Oh, like, once upon a time there was a stubborn fool who kept jumpin’ outta airplanes without parachutes?” step aside, it’s bucky bitch
me: omg
lexi: it’s britney bitch, wait does that fit? it’s bucky bitch!
me: i’m writing this down

me: *is explaining how the story of the sailor and the starlight kid is metaphoric and poetic and readers should note how from the telling of it, both bucky and steve could fit the profile of the sailor and the starlight kid and it’s really a great explanation of the whole same story told different ways bc of many reasons and...*
lexi: they’re just gay
me: *wheezes* they’re just gay, yes

me and lexi: *we spiral into quoting vines*
lexi’s bf in the background: *slowly shaking his head*

that’s all folks!
it's different, yet the same

Chapter Notes

guys, this chapter contains lexi's favorite thing in the world. accents. jk, this chapter was a lot of fun to write and then actually even more fun to edit, so yeah, bloopers are gonna be at the end again. thanks again to lexi for being bad at accents and great with helping me visualize what i've written, you're the best. you can find the cover for this chapter on my tumblr here and the playlist is here. enjoy reading

psst, have some bloopers here as well

lexi: you could name this chapter #sad like the song
me: i'm not naming it #sad

lexi, reading comments: “I want to get a quilt roll my lil son Steve into a burrito and keep him away from the world!” honestly! what a mood. you and me, kid, you and me

lexi: am i allowed to comment “it only gets worse from here”
me: *wheezing* you may
lexi: there, my greatest comment ever, iconic, your favs will never –
me: i have to reply to all of these – i am doing just one thing
lexi: i don’t trust you…
*she reads my comments*
lexi: mEaT pALm

*lexi’s doc reloads*
me: DUUUUDE! LOOK! YOU ARE THE ANONYMOUS NYAN CAT!
lexi: OMG I REALLY AM

*we are discussing [redacted bc spoilers]*
lexi: you can’t blame me for not trusting you
me: *dies* no i can’t

*after we have finished...*
lexi: well, that’s it
me: *falling asleep* yep
lexi: what’s it called
me: idk man you name it
lexi: pair of nasty fellas
me: y’know that’s it now it’s a pair of nasty fellas
lexi: *starts waxing poetic about how things have changed yet they’re the same but i’m not actually listening*
me: ooh! different yet the same! you wanted to call it that earlier
lexi: oh yeah!
me: thank you for waxing poetic and reminding me
lexi: yeah, sure *resumes waxing poetic*
me, when she finishes: thank you
lexi: *snorts* you're welcome

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“I was given the privilege of sorting through the archives at Chicago’s register office during my college years and while there, an idea came to me. There are a lot of birth certificates from the late 19th century [and] early 20th century that were stamped, rather coldly, as bastards. I do mean that quite literally; they’ve got an official stamp declaring the child in question fatherless and therefore a bastard. It got me thinking about how the children who were certified by the state as bastards at birth would feel knowing the truth as they grew up. The main character is based off real certified bastard, a James B. Greene born in 1917…”

[october 19th, 507 north bulgaria avenue]

Bucky looked suspiciously up both sides of the street before opening the car door. Steve waited in the driver’s seat as Bucky stepped out and looked around yet again. He didn’t recognize the neighborhood, but there were a handful of teenagers in obnoxious clothing standing around the corner; anything could be hidden in those baggy jeans. He half checked his hip, where a holster rested under his shirt and jacket, then moved around the other side of the truck to open Steve’s door.

“Good?” Steve asked.

Bucky gave a sharp nod. He looked around again, feeling nervous, then took Steve’s hand and helped him step down from the truck. He gathered from Steve’s slow exhale that Steve was only humoring him, and while Bucky was aware that Steve was perfectly capable of getting out of a car, it meant he would be able to shove Steve to the ground and cover him with his body if one of the suspicious teenagers on the corner threw a grenade or drew a gun.

“You ready?” Steve prompted as they approached the door.

Bucky gave a short shrug. He glanced at the teenagers again; they were laughing and passing around a cigarette. Their threat level was still significant.

Steve knocked on the door with the hand not clutched in Bucky’s, then drew back and rocked back on his heels while they waited. Bucky watched the teenagers.
The door opened. Bucky flicked his gaze over to meet a woman in her late thirties, lilting posture to the left, evidence of swelling in the right wrist, purpling under the eyes and faint frown lines –

“Wow,” the woman exhaled. She blinked at Bucky, expression floored. Bucky took a minute to recall what that meant, but it was an accurate description. She looked like she’d seen a ghost.

“Hi,” Steve said, offering his hand. Bucky half stiffened, then intentionally relaxed. He glanced at the teenagers again. “I’m Steve Rogers.”

“I know,” the woman answered.

She didn’t take Steve’s hand. She was still staring at Bucky with huge eyes. It made him a bit uncomfortable.

“You look just like my husband,” she whispered after a long second.

Bucky blinked once. He looked at Steve, highly confused. Steve dropped his hand, looking mildly awkward.

“Are you Rebecca’s daughter-in-law?” Steve posed.

“Granddaughter-in-law,” the woman said. “God.”

Steve half met Bucky’s eye; Bucky shrugged.

“Eliza?” a voice from inside the house called. “Is that them?”

A second woman, considerably older — hair that was more gray than black, shoulders that were hunched, favoring the right leg — appeared in the hallway behind the first. Eliza, assumingly, half turned before stepping aside and letting the second woman approach. She, too, gaped at Bucky.

“I look like her husband, yeah,” Bucky said before she could speak, pointing to Eliza.
“He looked like you,” the woman murmured. She shook herself, then stuck out her hand, a smile curling her lip and eyes watering. “I’m Anna. This is my daughter-in-law, Eliza. It’s good to meet you, Uncle Bucky.”

Bucky blinked once. He tentatively took Anna’s hand, but instead of shaking it, she clasped it between both of hers.

“Ma is so happy to know you’re alive,” Anna said, her voice trembling. “I’ve never seen her happier, I swear.”

Bucky swallowed. He didn’t know how to respond to this. He didn’t know how to feel approaching his little sister’s daughter and granddaughter-in-law. He didn’t know how to feel approaching his little sister at all.

“Come inside,” Anna said, taking one hand away from Bucky’s to reach out and wave them both inside. “She’s waiting in the kitchen.”

Bucky made sure to hold tight to Steve’s hand and did a scan of the hallway as they entered; he could smell the two women, but past that, there was the heavy scent of garlic obscuring whoever else was in the house. It was greatly agitating; he could hear voices, but without scent, he couldn’t pinpoint how many people were in the house. He took care to guide Steve into walking behind him. The hallway was unfamiliar until he saw the wallpaper lining the stairs.

He remembered this house now. He woke up here in January of 1933 with no clue what the past few days had held or why he wasn’t in his or Steve’s bedroom, but an unknown place entirely.

Eliza and Anna lead them into a wide and airy kitchen, the source of the smell of garlic, where a girl in her early twenties and a woman well into her nineties stood over a crowded stove.

“Ma,” Anna said.

Both women looked up.

“Yo,” the girl said simply, then gave them lazy finger guns.
The older woman picked up a handful of onions. Bucky barely had time to duck them.

“YOU ABSOLUTE PIECE OF CRAP!” she screamed.

Bucky positioned himself between Steve and the onion onslaught, but yelled back: “The fuck did I do?”

“You fucking died!” the woman snarled. Eliza and Anna both grabbed her hands to prevent her from flinging more onion slices, but she wrenched one away to point accusingly at him. “I buried you, you absolute asshole, James Buchanan Barnes!”

Bucky wasn’t sure, but he got the feeling Steve was hiding behind him. Whether from the onions or Becca’s fury, he couldn’t tell. Either way, he had his arms spread partly to shield him. From onions.

“I did not intend to die at any point in my life,” Bucky assured her.

Becca, seventy years older than his last memory of her and looking it, glared at him. Bucky didn’t even recognize her, wouldn’t have done if it hadn’t been for the same look of indignation in her eyes as when he told her he was enlisting.

He thought he’d been drafted. The Smithsonian said he’d been drafted, didn’t it? Apparently not.

“Ma!” Anna scolded.

“Oh, don’t you ma me!” Becca retorted. She flicked a few pieces of onion off her fingers towards Bucky, which landed on his chest and stuck to his shirt. “This asshole dies, and then doesn’t have the decency to tell me he isn’t dead after all? I have to find out from fucking CNN?”

“This is why we should have talked to her earlier,” Steve hissed in his ear.

“Shuddup,” Bucky grumbled back.
“The Omega’s always right,” Steve hissed again.

Bucky sent him a sideways glare. Steve smirked.

“I can’t hear you!” Becca snapped to Steve. “I’m as deaf as you were a hundred years ago!”

“I wasn’t alive a hundred years ago!” Steve defended himself. “I was born in 1918!”

“I don’t remember what year it is!” Becca snapped.

“Ma, please,” Anna entreated, “your blood pressure –”

“Oh, yes, my blood pressure,” Becca said in a sarcastic drawl. Bucky vividly remembered being on the receiving end of that sarcastic drawl at least three times in his life. He assumed that it was probably closer to a hundred and he didn’t remember it. “Because Lord knows that I’m going to kick the bucket thanks to my blood pressure after my brother appears suddenly after being dead for seventy years.”

She jabbed a finger in his direction. “Be lucky I didn’t throw the garlic at you!”

“Yeah, it’s pretty hot at this point,” the girl said casually. She also withdrew a second cutting board full of onions to scrape into the pot she was watching. Bucky had to admire her either intelligence or foresight for having prepared a secondary bank of onion slices. Or both.

“You owe me an apology!” Becca said to Bucky.

“Shouldn’t HYDRA owe you an apology?” Bucky muttered.

“Oh, no, not for that,” Becca retorted, “but I’ll whoop this fella’s ass later once the opportunity presents itself. For not calling me the second you were back to yourself!”

“Told you,” Steve hissed in his ear.
“Oh, cut it out,” Bucky said tiredly. Steve rolled his eyes. “And cut that out!” Steve just rolled them again. Bucky scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. “Outgunned,” he grumbled under his breath.

“I didn’t hear that!” Becca snapped.

“I apologize,” Bucky said at last. “Happy?”

“No!” Becca said. She snatched up a spoon and started stirring the far pot on the stove. “Come taste this!”

“What?” Bucky said indignantly.

Becca pulled the spoon out and held it out to him, her expression challenging him not to taste it. Bucky reluctantly opened his mouth and let her push the spoon into it.

His jaw went slack. He blinked, swallowing the broth absently, and Becca’s face broke into a grin.

“I did it,” she whispered. “I figured out the secret ingredient!”

Bucky rolled his tongue in his mouth, savoring the taste of his ma’s famous three bean stew. It wasn’t done, obviously, but it was at the perfect halfway stage, the broth full of flavor and spice and thickened by the proteins of the beans, not quite tempered by the onion or hamhock yet.

“Wow,” he muttered.

Steve poked out from behind him hopefully, holding onto his shoulders still. Becca grinned and plunged the spoon back into the pot before drawing it out and holding it out to Steve. It was a testament to how shocked Bucky was by his ma’s three bean stew on his tongue that he didn’t race to check that none of the food was poisoned before Steve ate it.

Steve grinned as he chewed what was likely a bean, a grin Becca copied. Her face was lined by the
past seventy years, but it was still the same proud grin.

“I’ve been trying to recreate that stew since you died,” Becca said quietly, looking at Bucky.

Bucky felt his face flush. “Um…”

“You’re staying for dinner,” she declared, turning back to the stew. “No excuses!” she added as Bucky opened his mouth again. “You’ve been dead for the past seventy years, so now you have to cram all seventy years of what’s happened into this one evening, because I’m probably going to actually kick the bucket any day now and I want to tell you everything.”

Bucky looked down at the yellowed linoleum, feeling ashamed. Becca didn’t sound angry anymore, nor bitter that it had taken him so long to contact her, just excited to talk with her big brother again. Steve tugged on his sleeve and he looked around, for Steve to raise his eyebrows and jerk his head towards Becca.

It took Bucky a second to understand what he was saying silently. He sighed, then stepped away from Steve and reached out to touch Becca’s shoulder.

She looked at his hand, then up his arm to his face. He smiled tightly and held out his arms. Becca’s eyes suddenly glistened and she sniffed hard before putting the spoon on a dish and stepping in to hug him. Bucky held her carefully, not wanting to damage her old bones, but Becca dug her nails into his shoulders.

“It’s good to see you, Becks,” he murmured.

“I’m glad you’re not dead,” Becca mumbled. She sniffed again. “I have so much to tell you, Bugsy.”

Bucky pecked a kiss on her wiry, thin hair. Becca drew back, then paused to grab his sleeve and rub her eyes on it.

“Hey!”

“Oh, hush,” she snapped. “It’s the onions, and a bit of saltwater never hurt nobody!”
“Still,” Bucky grumbled.

Steve caught his hand and raised his eyebrows at him. Bucky rolled his eyes.

“I might as well start with my kids,” Becca said, turning to the stew again. She pointed behind her at Eliza and Anna. “That’s my daughter, and her son’s wife. This –” she pointed to the teenager “– is Eliza’s little girl, Ellie.”

“‘Sup,” Ellie said, shooting them a sloppy two-fingered salute.

“Hi,” Bucky mumbled.

He looked at Anna, then at Eliza and Ellie. He wasn’t sure how to feel looking at a niece that was twice his age and a great-niece that was at least five years older, and then a great-great-niece who was barely ten years younger. He wasn’t sure how to feel looking at his niece at all.

“Anna is married to Daniel,” Rebecca carried on. “He’s probably somewhere snoring at the moment. And he and Anna had two kids, Roseanna and James.”

Bucky frowned abruptly, blinking as he sorted through that information.

“And then there’s my James,” Becca went on, “and he married Helen, and they just have Edward, who married Regina, and they had Sophia and Paige.”

“Wait,” Bucky interrupted.


“Did you name your kid after me?” he demanded. “And then your other kid named a kid after me?”

“Yep,” Becca said with glee.
“Becks!” Bucky groaned.

“Well, you were dead!” Becca said in her own defense. “What else was I to do? Knit something in your honor?”

“But James Buchanan is the worst name in the whole world,” Bucky sighed.

“I like it,” Ellie threw in. “I named my kid that. But it was after my dad, not you.”

Bucky covered his face with his hands and groaned. Becca sniggered.

“I’m sure Steve would have done the same thing in my position,” she said.

Bucky held up a single, warning finger in Steve’s direction. He was already chuckling, so it did no good.

“You are the worst,” Bucky declared to his sister.

She grinned. “Learned from the best.”

“Steve, how dare you teach her this,” Bucky said, turning to him. Steve spluttered for a second.

“I was only ever following you around!” he insisted.

“With puppy eyes,” Becca added.

Bucky smiled on reflex as Steve’s ears turned red. Becca chuckled.

“Not much changed after all,” she said, looking at Steve.
Steve simply shrugged. Bucky edged closer and took his hand again.

“Anyway,” Becca announced, “Roseanna, Anna’s daughter, she married Steven and they had three kids.”

“Wait—”

“A completely unrelated Steve,” Becca interrupted him before Bucky could start the interrogation. “Do you know how many Steves were born in 1945? Way too many. Too many Steves in the world.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow at his Steve, and his Steve just shrugged. “Weren’t that many Steves when we were kids.”

“Well,” Becca said with a flourish, “thanks to a certain someone becoming a national damn hero, the name Steve became suddenly very popular.”

Steve winced. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, doll,” Bucky said just as Becca added: “Not your fault, honey.”

Bucky turned to his sister with another suspicious look. “Did you just call him honey?”

Becca shrugged. “So what if I did?”

Bucky sighed, then dropped Steve’s hand to push back his sleeves and square up to her. “I ain’t afraid to hit an old lady to defend my fella’s honor, Becky.”

Becca yanked the heavy-looking spoon out of the pot and aimed to smack him with it. Bucky caught it and snapped it in two without thinking about it, then stopped to blink at it.
Steve raised his eyebrows. Becca’s children and grandchildren blinked at Bucky, but Becca laughed.

“I’m shaking in my slippers, Bugsy,” she said.

Bucky gingerly put the two jagged halves of the spoon down. “This ain’t over,” he said, pointing a finger at her threateningly.

“Eh,” Becca said with a careless shrug. “I’ll just make William fight you for me.”

“Oi!” Ellie said. “I can fight him!”

“You are breastfeeding,” Becca scolded her with a wag of her finger. “You will take extra care with yourself. William, on the other hand, is simply nursing a smug attitude. It’ll do him good to get his ass whooped.”

“How about no one gets their ass whooped?” Steve suggested.

“First, you hypocrite!” Bucky said frustratedly. “Second, I gotta defend your honor!” At Steve’s unimpressed look, Bucky protested further. “C’mon, dollface, I can’t let even my baby sister flirting with you slide!”

Steve rolled his eyes. Bucky flicked his cheek, but that only made Steve roll them again.

“William!” Becca abruptly yelled. “Get down here!”

Bucky glanced over his shoulder. He wasn’t actually intending to fight Becca’s grandchild. Or great-grandchild. Or his great-nephew. He had nephews. Fuck.

The sound of footsteps thudding on stairs reached the kitchen, then a lanky teenager entered the kitchen, blinking slowly. He looked like he’d been sleeping.

“I nominate you to fight for me,” Becca said.
“What…” William (Bucky presumed) mumbled.

Becca pointed to Bucky. Bucky waved, now feeling awkward. William squinted, and Bucky could definitely see the family resemblance.

“Fight!” Ellie chanted. “Fight, fight, fight!”

Steve covered his face with his hands. William pointed first to Bucky, then to Steve.

“Did I just walk into Captain America in my kitchen with Bucky Barnes?” he said.

“Bucky Barnes is your great-great uncle,” Anna said with obvious pride.


“Fight!” Ellie chanted again.

“No,” William said with incredulity.

“How old is this kid?” Bucky hissed to Becca.

“I can’t hear you,” Becca said, cupping her ear.

“I’m 18,” William answered. Becca shrugged. She’d selected another spoon at that point and was stirring the stew.

“I’m not fighting a kid,” Bucky told Becca. “You gotta square up and fight me for Steve yourself.”
“How about no one fight anyone for me?” Steve suggested.

“The fuck…?” William mumbled.

Another woman walked in, this one carrying a child perhaps a year old. “Ell,” she called out, looking highly exasperated, “your son wants you.”

“Oh, my son now, is he?” Ellie said, but she stepped away from the stew to go to her. Bucky stepped out of her way, Steve following him.

“That’s Bianca,” Becca announced, pointing to the woman. “She’s marrying Ellie. And that is baby James.”

“This was your fault,” Bucky reminded her. “Too many Jameses.”

“It was your fault!” she countered.

“How was it my fault?”

“You died!” Becca said, as if that were that. Bucky blinked.

“She has a point,” Ellie said, bouncing baby James in her arms. Baby James waved a pair of spittle-soaked fingers at him and Steve both, looking mildly confused like his cousin William.

“I haven’t had enough coffee,” William mumbled, then left the kitchen.

“Wait, but you have to fight Uncle Bucky!” Ellie yelled after him.

“That’s fucking weird,” Bucky muttered under his breath. Ellie looked back at him. “I’m an uncle.”

Steve sniggered and Ellie pointed a finger at him. “You got no room to laugh, Uncle Steve.”
Steve’s sniggering stopped up and Bucky snorted instead, leaning over to plant a kiss on his temple.

“There are more,” Becca assures them both. “There’s Paige and Sophia, they’re Eddie and Gina’s kids, then William’s got Clara and Louise for sisters.”

“And that’s all of us,” Ellie said with a wry smile.

“Most of us,” Eliza threw in abruptly.

Bucky glanced between her and Ellie, then at Becca who was shaking her head as she stirred the stew.

“My dad, James,” Ellie said then, “he died a few years ago.”

Bucky looked at Steve, who quickly shook his head, then back at Ellie. “I’m sorry,” he said. Ellie shrugged. Bucky didn’t know how to feel at the news of not only having nieces and nephews and great-nieces and nephews, but a dead nephew.

He didn’t really know how to feel about a lot of this, let alone Becca’s old features and her descendants, so he just held on to Steve. He held on to Steve tighter whenever he didn’t know what to do or feel. Steve set a hand at his hip, wrist pressed to his clothes, so he knew what Bucky needed at least.

“This is nearly done,” Becca said quietly.

“I’ll take it,” Ellie said. She handed the baby to Bianca, who took him and a seat at the kitchen table with Eliza. Becca handed over the stew to Ellie, then took a cane from Anna and started toward the dining room.

“Ya coming?” she called over her shoulder to Bucky and Steve.

Steve caught Bucky’s eye before they started to follow her. Bucky watched her leaning on her cane,
and he didn’t know what he was feeling, but he didn’t like it.

Maybe it was sad. Steve said sad was feeling a loss, missing something, or like crying. Whatever it was, it hurt.

Becca took a seat at the head of the dining table, where their pa once occupied, propped her cane up and settled her hands on the table. Bucky pulled out a chair for Steve, automatically checking under the table for traps, then when his Omega had sat, seated himself next to him.

“So,” Becca said. Bucky folded his hands on the table, much like she was doing. “I hear you have things to tell me. I have some things to tell you as well, but I think you should go first.”

“What do you have to tell us?” Bucky asked.

“You first!” Becca insisted. She leaned back in her chair and waved to Steve. “Go on.”

Steve glanced once at him, then looked at Becca’s hands, not her face.

“We were hoping you’d testify at the inquiry,” Steve said quietly.

“To what?” Becca asked sharply. Bucky remembered that about her. She was sharp, whether she needed to be or not.

“My first heat,” Steve said. His voice was reluctant, and after the words left his mouth, Becca softened. “That Bucky was there, that it was why you moved away. Mainly that he cared for me.”

“Why?” Becca posed gently.

“He was my subordinate,” Steve said. He looked up at the ceiling, then at his hands and shook his head. “We’re subject to court-martial because of it. But if we were together before I joined the military, then we can’t be reprimanded for it.”

For a while, Becca said nothing. Bucky half shifted in his chair, leaning forward to speak, but then
she nodded.

“I can do that,” she said.

Her tone was cautious, and abruptly, Bucky realized he didn’t know if Becca knew the truth or not.

“Becks,” he started, and she held up a hand, smiling in a pained way.

“I know,” she said. “Ma lied. I know.”

Bucky deflated. He picked up Steve’s hand and squeezed it, just to hold it.

Then Becca sighed heavily. “That’s actually what I have to talk to you about.”

Bucky frowned, looking at Steve, who didn’t look any more clued in as to what Becca could mean. He looked back to his sister, brow furrowed.

“It’s a long story,” Becca said, holding out a hand. “But it’s best if I start in the middle.”

“Okay?” Bucky said hesitantly.

Becca paused, visibly swallowing as she seemed to think. “I have all your letters,” she started. “The ones you sent me, the ones I sent you. Ma’s letters.”

Bucky started. “Wait, but I thought –” He looked at Steve, frowning harder.

“She didn’t write to you,” Steve said, then looked at Becca, lip curled down. “Did she?”

“She did,” Becca said gently. “But you stopped opening them.”
Bucky opened his mouth, then shut it. That would explain why Steve had thought there had never been mail from his mother, and he didn’t remember reading them.

“There’s a lot in there,” Becca went on. “But she takes ages to explain it all, so I’ll just tell you. Mainly, she was sorry she lied to you.”

Bucky blinked once.

“She regretted it almost the day we moved away,” Becca said. “Anybody lookin’ at you knew you were pining and miserable, the whole time we were here. You couldn’t enlist fast enough, and after you got sent overseas, Ma started thinking it was time she came clean.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Bucky asked quietly.

“Just listen,” Becca said. Bucky shut his jaw tightly, then looked at his hand holding onto Steve’s. “Ma tried for ages to explain, but you never answered her letters. Ever. I tried writing to you, and when you didn’t answer me either, we figured something was up. Then the story broke of the Azzano, and Steve rescuing all those guys, and you finally wrote me.”

Bucky tried to think of what he might have written, but couldn’t remember.

“You told me about meeting Steve again,” Becca said. “And that Ma lied to you, that Steve had told you the truth and that some things happened to him while you were gone and you were going to make sure they never happened again.”

He felt Steve stiffen as she began her sentence, then relax as it ended. Clearly, Bucky hadn’t told Becca what had happened. As little as he remembered, he knew Becca wasn’t one to mince words, and if she knew, she would have said.

“You also said you wanted nothing more to do with Ma or Pa,” Becca said. “And no matter how many letters she sent you, you never answered. When you died, we got ‘em all back, and they weren’t even opened.”

“Can you blame me?” Bucky muttered.
Becca shook her head. “No, I can’t. Do you remember Billy?”

Bucky looked at her. Her old eyes were frank. He tried thinking about it, about Becca and Billy, and after a second, a fragment appeared in his mind and he snatched onto it.


“He and I wanted to be together,” Becca said. “We tried to get married, only it wasn’t legal in New York.”

Bucky frowned at the table, then at her. “Yeah, I remember that.”

“We tried to just live together after the war,” Becca went on. “We thought, fuck it, we’ll do it our way. Ma wouldn’t let me.”

Bucky clenched his jaw and Steve squeezed his hand. “Alright,” Bucky grumbled. “So she fucked over both of us. I’m sorry.”

“No,” Becca sighed. “She told me why that time.”

“Does it matter?” Bucky snapped. “What reason could she have to excuse telling her son that he’s a rapist –”

“We’re only half-siblings,” Becca interrupted.

Bucky’s jaw fell open. Steve turned in his chair to look at Becca.

“Your father and mine are different,” Becca added. “Your father was one of pa’s cousins, that’s how Pa met Ma. The family all lived together, as you know. But your father was a Beta.”

Bucky tried to speak and found no air in his lungs to form sound. He made a few faces, opened and shut his mouth, then shook his head.
“I don’t understand,” he said finally.

“His name was James,” Becca went on, “James Greene. You were born in Chicago, James Buchanan Greene. I have a copy of your birth certificate if you want it. It was the Jim Crow era, and it didn’t matter that Greene looked like a white man, the city of Chicago wouldn’t let Ma and James get married because he was a Beta. So when you were born, they stamped it and you as a bastard. They only let you have his surname because Ma didn’t have one.”

Steve looked at Bucky with wide eyes. Bucky just shook his head.

“Ma’s family didn’t want her to be with Greene,” Becca kept talking, perhaps in spite of Bucky shaking his head in denial. “So they disowned her. They’re all still in Chicago, I tried to invite them to my wedding and they refused. I tried inviting her brothers and cousins to her funeral and they refused. It has been a hundred years since Ma left her family to be with a Beta man, and even to this day they deny she ever existed.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Bucky demanded.

“Ma wanted to let me be with a Beta man,” Becca insisted. “But she knew that if I did, my children would all be bastards and the state would try to take them away due to unsafe home environments and Billy’d never be able to claim them or me as his. She told me that I had to be prepared to live my life an outcast for my love, she and pa would support me where they could, but the state and the whole damn world would always be against us. I tried. We tried for a few months and he was arrested for living with me, and I knew we couldn’t do it.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Bucky said again, louder, more forceful.

“Ma separated the two of you because she was afraid the same thing would happen to you,” Becca said before he was even finished. “Only worse, ‘cause Steve could get put in an insane asylum and you’d get locked up for life. Your kids would be bastards and wards of the state”

“So she told me I raped Steve?” Bucky snarled.

“She regretted it!” Becca insisted again. “Bucky, right away, she told me that she wished she could take it back but she knew you’d just go running back to him”
“Would that have been so bad?” Bucky snapped.

“Both of you would have faced worse penalties than you do now!” Becca said. “Would you have thought about the consequences when you were that age? When all you wanted was to love Steve?”

Bucky shook his head, but to say no, to deny what she was saying entirely. “Ma made her choice,” he said, “there’s no changing it now –”

“Her deathbed,” Becca started and Bucky shut his jaw tight, “she told me she wanted me to tell Steve the truth. I tried, but he wouldn’t talk to me.”

Steve avoided both of their gazes. Bucky looked at him, then at their hands latched together and raised his flesh hand to press it to the back of Steve’s neck.

“She died a regretful woman,” Becca said quietly. Bucky kept his gaze on Steve. “Bucky, I wasn’t kidding when I said my time was nearly up. I’m old. I’m on my deathbed. You make of this what you will, but I want to go to my grave with a clear conscience.”

Bucky shook his head. He pulled Steve into his chest, needing to hold him, and shook his head.

“What happened to Greene?” Steve mumbled.

“I don’t know,” Becca said with a shrug. “He and Pa were neighbors. Pa caught him throwing Ma into a china cabinet and he took Ma to New York to get away from him.”

Bucky lifted his head to look at her. Becca’s eyes were still frank.

“Why?” he rasped.

Becca shrugged. “I don’t know for sure. Ma didn’t like talking about it, so I can only guess. Lots of relationships start out great and then turn out toxic, maybe that was it. All I know is you nearly died and your sisters did.”
Bucky’s mouth went dry. “What?”

“When he threw her into the cabinet,” Becca said. “She was pregnant with twins at the time. The babies were stillborn. And, I think, Greene knocked over your high chair or something and you hit your head; Ma told me that you were screaming one second and silent the next. Pa came by ’cause he heard crashing and yelling and you crying, then hit him over the head or something and took you and Ma to the local hospital. Took you both to New York the week after with the family’s help.”

Bucky clutched to Steve, shaking his head. His father was not his father. His mother lied because she knew what would happen to them if they tried to be together? His sister was old and had a great-great-grandson that had been named after him. He’d nearly died as an infant?

“That was 1919,” Becca said. “May.”

Bucky looked at Steve and found him looking back with wide eyes. Bucky would have been just barely two, and Steve ten months old.

“I’m not asking you to forgive Ma,” Becca said. “I still have trouble with it sometimes. Beta/Omega marriages were legalized in 1956, but by then I was married to Arthur.”

“Same-sex Alpha/Omega marriages were legalized in New York before that,” Steve said quietly.

Becca nodded. “Ma couldn’t have known that. She told me she just wanted the best for you both.”

“Well, it wasn’t the best for us both,” Bucky snarled. “Steve –”

He stopped, drew in a breath and cursed. Becca frowned, looking between them, and Steve looked at his hands.

“You should know,” Steve said quietly.

“You don’t have to tell her,” Bucky said with haste, and Steve squeezed his hand.
“It wasn’t the best for either of us,” Steve said. “My mother died in 1940 and as an Omega, I kept getting fired from jobs. I didn’t have anybody to take care of me, nobody wanted me. So I had to become a whore to survive.”

Becca’s lips fell parted, but Bucky caught Steve’s jaw and made him look him in the face, then raised his eyebrows and shook his head. Steve sighed.

“I became a prostitute,” he corrected quietly, and Bucky pressed his forehead to Steve’s temple. “I may have contracted HIV, either way, I was dying and it’s why I joined Project Rebirth. So even if it would have been illegal, it would have been better if I had Bucky.”

Becca looked down at her hands, heavy with distinct blue veins and thick knuckles that made her skin look like it was just laid overtop of her bones, and looked at them with such sadness in her eyes – and there was no mistaking it now – that Bucky abruptly felt the sting of tears. His little sister. This was his baby sister. He’d missed his nephew and his niece and their children and her husband and so much, and now his baby sister was on a deathbed of her own with hands that looked like nothing but blood and bone.

“I’m not asking you to forgive Ma,” Becca said quietly. “I’d never ask you to forgive her. I don’t even know if I’ve forgiven her, and I had a pretty good life even without Billy. I told you because you have a right to know and because I swore to Ma before she passed I’d tell Steve, and I’ll bet you she’s up in Heaven now making a fuss about you being alive, Bucky.”

Bucky looked at her hands with sadness. “I don’t think I’ll ever forgive her,” he said, just as quiet.

Becca gave a nod. “I think she made her peace with that.”

“I don’t care if she had peace,” Bucky snapped, looking up at Becca and she looked back with sad eyes that reflected the veins in her hands. “She deserved to feel guilty.”

“Maybe,” Becca mused, then shrugged. “But she was our mother. She only ever wanted us both to have happy lives.”

“Then she never should have said it,” Bucky said with finality.
Becca shrugged once more. “If you want to know what I think, she should have found a better way to do it but she had a good reason. I don’t know if you two really would have been able to think through the consequences of being together back then. All I know is Billy was dragged off the bus one morning and I didn’t get to see or talk to him for six months and by the time he got out, he hated me.”

Bucky reached out and picked up one of her hands. Becca smiled at him, but when she blinked the light clung to her lashes and reflected off a teardrop that slipped down her cheek.

“I don’t know,” she said in a trembling voice. “Maybe it would have been fine. Maybe you would’ve been thrown in jail or the looney bin or worse, I don’t know. But now you know, and I can pass with my own peace now.”

Bucky squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Becca laughed, then reached up and brushed at her cheeks. “I hope you’re apologizing for not coming to me sooner, anything else, you’d better take it back.”

Bucky returned her pained smile. Becca squeezed his hand, and her grip was incredibly weak. Her bones felt hollow in his hand, fragile, like if he squeezed just so they’d turn to dust. His baby sister.

Then Becca turned toward Steve and raised her empty hand to take one of his, turning her pained smile on him and squeezing his hand. Steve looked at her with a copied expression, swallowing like he was trying not to cry, either.

“Look at you two now,” Becca said, and now her voice took on a touch of awe. “Healthy and happy and allowed to be together! That’s all anybody ever wanted for you, our ma or yours, Steve. Them both are up in Heaven cryin’ ‘cause you two are so sweet together.”

Steve’s smile flashed wider a second, his gaze dropping to the table as Becca shook his hand in hers.

“When you said on TV when you really met,” Becca whispered. “Steve, you’d have to be blind not to know how much the two of you are in love.”

“It definitely feels like the whole world’s blind,” Steve mumbled. Becca shook his hand again.
“They’re opening their eyes now,” Becca promised him. “You gotta be feelin’ so alone, honey, but you ain’t, you got so many people backing you up, I promise.”

“Thank you,” Steve said. His voice was hollow. Bucky, with the hand not clutching Becca’s, put his flesh arm around Steve’s shoulders. It closed the circle, the three of them, out of time or running out.

“I know it won’t mean much to you now,” Becca kept going, “but this is changing things, Steve. You being free to say who you are is changin’ so many things.”

Becca squeezed his hand tightly, enough that Bucky wondered if he would have felt the ghost of it if his left hand had been flesh instead of metal. “

“Ellie’s baby,” Becca murmured, “he’s predicted to be an Omega, you know how much different his life is gonna be ‘cause you lived yours?”

Steve just shook his head. Becca shook his hand.

“So much better,” she swore. “Not a soul is going to get away with ever calling him girl-boy. ”

Steve flashed a tight smile, and Bucky tugged him in to lean on his shoulder.

“I know it doesn’t help you now,” Becca said. “But you’re changing the world right now, honey.”

Steve said nothing. Bucky dropped his forehead against his temple, trying to bring what comfort to him he could in silence. He still didn’t understand fully why it was such an issue, Steve’s designation or gender or both or how they were even linked, only that it distressed Steve and Steve didn’t want anyone seeing him hurting. But Bucky didn’t count. He knew that, too.

Becca, however, counted. So Bucky comforted Steve silently.

“What will help is you testifying,” Steve said finally. His jaw was tight when he wasn’t speaking.
“I’ll do whatever I can,” Becca promised. She squeezed both of their hands. “Whatever.”

“Just tell the truth,” Bucky told her, before he even recognized the glint in her eye as threatened deviousness; she’d do anything, he knew it. “That’s all we need.”


Bucky dropped his gaze, and at the same time, Steve leaned into him.

“That’s the truth,” Becca insisted quietly. “You, Bucky, kept your head and you took care of him until it was safe to let others approach. Didn’t even bow to his very own mother. You protected him. That’s all they need to know.”

Bucky nodded. She squeezed his hand, her grip still so weak, then released both of them to pull her arms into herself.

“And you didn’t go back because you believed it best for him,” she said.

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed. “We have to tell them that.”

Becca nodded yet again, with determination. “Ma can take the fall,” she said. “She’d understand.”

Bucky looked at the table’s surface. He didn’t really care whether his mother would understand or not. It didn’t matter either way. She was dead.

Knuckles rapping on wood behind him made him jerk around, his arm already around Steve, but it was just Ellie standing in the doorway. She didn’t have the child, the one named after someone named after Bucky, but even if she was holding a baby, she could still be a threat. Bucky mentally shook himself. This was his niece.

“Ready to eat?” Ellie asked.

“Yes,” Becca said, not a trace of sadness to her tone now. “I bet you two are hungry, super soldiers
have high metabolisms from what I hear.”

Steve gave a shy smile and Bucky assessed his own state to garner if he was hungry or not. He couldn’t tell.


“Should we move?” Steve asked, but Becca waved a hand.

“We’re in our nineties,” she said with a grin. She was missing a few of her lower teeth. “We’re entitled to sit and do nothing.”

Bucky snorted and Steve shrugged.

The boy of earlier and two other girls, one older and one younger, came in with three identical expressions of displeasure, but began setting the table anyway. Steve pushed his chair back some and Bucky copied them, but they just moved around them. The older of the two girls paused to kiss Becca’s cheek, who gave her a smile and patted her arm as she walked away.

Bucky assumed that the two girls were Paige and Sophia, as the boy had already been identified as William. He watched them from the corner of his eye. The older of the two girls moved more clumsily, and her left wrist was constrained in a brace. Not a cast, indicating some kind of sprain or strain rather than a break. Given how she looked muscular, Bucky assumed that it was some sort of sports-related injury. Not boxing or martial arts, the injury was too flexible as she set the table to be from fighting. Probably baseball or soccer. The younger girl moved stiffly, slightly hunched over and drawn inward. Bucky guessed the cause of her bowed posture to be habit, some unnatural curvature of the spine, or menstrual cramps. She smelled Beta and given the information from the internet saying Betas menstruated monthly, that seemed to be more likely.

Steve nudged him. Bucky dropped his gaze to the plate in front of him. Still, he watched the three young adults in his peripheral vision.

The three young adults set the table for twenty plus a high chair, and Bucky jerked a little out of his musings when he finished counting the place sets.

“Fucking hell, Becks,” he commented, “how many children did you have?”
“Only the two!” Becca said back snarkily. “Then they had children, and their children had children, and one of them had a baby. There’s five generations at this table, Bugsy!”

She waved five bony fingers at him to punctuate her point.

“Very impressive,” Steve threw in.

Becca gave him a narrow-eyed look. “I can’t tell if you’re taking the piss,” she grumbled. “But you better not be!”

Steve raised his hands in defense. Bucky pointed a warning finger at his little sister.

“Don’t go threatenin’ my guy now,” he said.

“I’ll threaten who I like,” Becca countered primly. She stuck her nose in the air and everything. The children exchanged amused glances.

“I’m not afraid to fight an old lady,” Bucky reminded her.

Becca showed him her middle finger. “Fuck you,” she said with a wide grin. She was missing teeth.

“No, thanks,” Bucky said without thought, and Becca laughed. She threw her head back and laughed. Bucky didn’t even remember the joke, but he grinned, too.

Becca wiped at her eyes with a hand. “Oh, Bugsy,” she sighed. She reached back out and patted his hand; swatted it, more like. “I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you, too, squirt,” he answered. Becca merely grinned.

“I mean, I was fine with you not hanging off our elbows all the time,” Steve threw in.
“Oh, shuddup!” Becca laughed, now swatting him in the arm. Steve rubbed the spot like it was sore, an identical grin to Bucky’s gracing his face.

“I’d like to see you try it now,” Steve went on. “You might break something.”


“Unlike some,” he said, drawing himself up, “I respect my elders.”

“I don’t know who you’re insulting with that,” Bucky said.

“Both of us,” Becca said at the same time as Steve answered: “Obviously both of you.”

Becca snorted again and Steve grinned. Bucky leaned over and pecked him on the cheek, and when he drew back, his ears were all red.

“Aww,” Becca murmured. “He still blush like a peach.”

“Phrase is bruise like a peach,” Bucky said, smiling at Steve’s blush because it would only make it worse. Steve’s eyes flicked toward him and the blush crept down his neck and Bucky grinned wider.

“Eh,” Becca declared with indifference. “Same thing.”

Bucky raised a hand and brushed a knuckle over Steve’s cheek; it turned pink under his finger.

“Probably,” he said. Steve looked down.

“Alright, alright, quit it,” he grumbled.
“Aw, but you’re cute when you blush, honey,” Becca said.

Bucky pointed a finger at her. “I’ll fight you, I ain’t got reservations.”

“Fight me, then, ya left-handed jackass,” Becca said, grabbing a butterknife and brandishing it. Bucky blinked. He wasn’t even aware he was left-handed. Or how that was an insult.

“Gran, Nan’s gonna fight Uncle Bucky!” the older girl yelled toward the kitchen. “She’s got a knife!”

“No!” a handful of female voices answered vehemently.

“Respect your elders!” Becca screeched.

Anna came in, wagging a finger at her. “Now, Mama, be careful of your blood pressure.”

“Yeah, Becks, be careful of your blood pressure,” Bucky mocked.

“Bucky, be careful you don’t strain your bad shoulder,” Steve threw in. Becca cackled at him while Bucky scowled.

“Brat,” Bucky grumbled under his breath. Steve laughed at him.

“I’m hardly 30,” he said with a shrug. “You’re somewhere in your thirties.”

“Doesn’t mean you have to point it out!” Bucky snapped. Then frowned. “Wait, how am I in my thirties? I’m only a year older than you!”

Steve shrugged, giving him an apologetic look. “You look almost 40.”

Bucky spluttered while Becca burst into laughter again. Steve’s look morphed to spread the border between smug and sorry. Anna threw up her hands in surrender and walked out again. The two girls sniggered as they set out forks and William frowned into the glass he was putting down.
“None of this makes any sense,” William muttered, probably not intending for anyone to hear him. Bucky easily doubted that if he had had normal hearing, he would have heard him.

“Neither does the future,” he said, just to make William start. He did, fumbling not to drop the other cups in his hands, and it was amusing. Bucky, smirking, turned back to Becca. “They got weird shit nowadays, Becks. You seen a loofah before?”

Steve snorted and covered his face with a hand. Becca raised an eyebrow.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she muttered.

“Exactly!” Bucky answered with triumph. He poked Steve in the shoulder; Steve just shook his head.

Footsteps approached behind them; Bucky jerked around, as abruptly a dozen people or more filed into the room. Bucky tensed up, pushing his arm around Steve’s shoulders, but no one paid either of them any attention. Dishes and the huge pot of soup were carried in, as well as baby James. Baby James reached out as Ellie carried him past and patted Bucky on the head, who stiffened and looked side to side in confusion.

“He likes you,” Ellie remarked as she walked on. Bucky raised an eyebrow at Steve, who shrugged.

“Don’t look at me, I never even held a baby in my life,” he said.

“You held me once,” Becca mused.

Steve pointed at Becca. “I have held one baby in my life,” he corrected. “And look how she turned out.”

“Hey!” Becca protested.

“It’s true,” Bucky said sadly. “You are immensely annoying, kid.”
Becca pointed a knobbly finger at him and scowled. “You need to learn you some manners,” she said. “Respect your elders!”

“Bite me,” Bucky answered.

“No, thanks,” Becca countered, then laughed with a tone of victory. Bucky rolled his eyes.

“You two,” he grumbled, pointing to her and to Steve. “Utter brats. No respect.”

Steve rolled his eyes at the same time as Becca shrugged carelessly.

“This is what siblings do,” a woman remarked to him.

Bucky pointed at Steve. “He is not my brother, lady.”

Steve abruptly blushed. Bucky glanced at him, then rolled his own eyes. Then he looked at Becca, raised his eyebrows, and pointed briefly down the table. Becca frowned heavily at him and shrugged. Bucky repeated the gesture. Steve rolled his eyes a second time and leaned over to whisper in her ear: “Introduce them?”

Becca murmured something in realization and gave a nod. Bucky glanced down the table once more, then shifted in his chair, just reminding himself that he had a pistol stashed under his shirt if he needed it.

“Alright!” Becca abruptly hollered; talk at the table cut instantly. Becca lifted her hands and held them out, one to the man on her left and one to Bucky. The man on her left took her hand, then the hand of the woman next to him, then she took the hand of the girl next to her, and the chain went down the table and back around until the younger of the two girls who had set the table held out her hand to Steve.

Steve took her hand, then picked up Bucky’s and gave it a light squeeze.

Becca bowed her head, and in a wave, everyone else did, too. Even Steve. Bucky just looked around.
“Dear Heavenly Father,” Becca began in a croaked whisper. “We gather here today in celebration of your miracles. Long ago, I thought I had sent my brother and his Omega to your arms, but now today you have returned them both to me and mine.”

Bucky looked up and down the table, then Steve lifted his gaze briefly to meet his before flicking it at the table and closing his eyes again. Bucky looked at the table, then at Steve.

“We are thankful, Lord,” Becca continued to speak with her eyes closed and her head bowed, “for your gracious mercy. We thank you for this meal and for this company.”

It struck him abruptly and Bucky bowed his head and shut his eyes out of deference. They were praying.

“Bless all the hands that put effort into making this meal,” Becca prayed, “those who grew the beans and raised the ham, those who tended them and brought them into this household, those who made the meal itself. In the name of Jesus Christ Our Lord and Saviour, amen.”

Bucky lifted his head as Becca briefly squeezed his hand. It was lucky he remembered prayer already, or the gesture might have been threatening.

Those around the table released each other’s hands. Bucky held onto Steve’s hand.

“Before we eat!” Becca called as the man next to her began ladling soup into bowls. “I want all of you to say hello to your Uncle Bucky and Uncle Steve!”

Bucky exchanged a glance with Steve, who half smiled and half grimaced briefly. Uncle. It felt like a strange title.

“Hello to your Uncle Bucky and Uncle Steve,” the man ladling soup said.

Becca smacked him on the arm and he laughed. “Dick,” she declared. “Now you’ve volunteered to go first.”
“What, say my name, my age, and something fun about me?” the man asked incredulously.

Becca reached over fully and pinched his cheek. “For that, yes!”

Someone down the table groaned. Bucky vaguely understood their discomfort.

“Alright, alright, Ma,” the man chuckled, then grinned across the table at Bucky and Steve. Bucky wondered if that was what he was going to look like in thirty years. “I’m Bucky,” the man added.

Bucky turned to his sister, affronted. Becca smacked her son in the arm again.

“I’m kidding, I’m Jim,” his nephew corrected. “I’m Jim and I am 68 years old and I am a practical joker.”

He looked quite proud of himself, while everyone else at the table excepting Steve and Bucky groaned.

“You’re too old to be a practical joker,” the woman next to him complained. She had a distinct accent, something that triggered a reaction of Jersey…! in the back of Bucky’s head and made him think for a few seconds. What was wrong with Jersey again?

“You’re never too old to be a practical joker,” Jim said happily.

“This is my oldest,” Becca said deadpan. “He got dropped on his head when he was a baby.”

“Hence the joker part,” the woman next to him said. Then she waved. “Hi, I’m Helen, and I don’t like practical jokes.”

Jim beamed continually. Bucky waved a little hesitantly. He now remembered what was wrong with Jersey. Her voice sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

“This is my wife,” Jim added.
Bucky nodded, having gathered that. No niece of his would have a Jersey accent.

Helen waved one more time, grinning. Then she elbowed the girl next to her. The girl put down her phone and waved, albeit with a significantly less amount of enthusiasm.

“I’m Clara,” she said, “I’m 22.”

“She doesn’t like practical jokes either,” Helen said.

Clara simply raised her eyebrows.

“She’s on Anna’s side of the family,” Becca added. “Say something fun about you, honey.”

Clara looked like she’d rather drown in the three bean soup, and Bucky understood a little.

“I am not legally blonde,” she said and returned to her phone. The girl sitting next to Bucky snorted.

“She’s naturally a blonde,” Becca threw in.

Bucky glanced at Clara, then at Becca, then at Steve, who shrugged hopelessly. Clara was rather blonde… Bucky did not understand.

“Okay,” he said. Clara glanced up once and shrugged.

The woman next to her leaned forward and waved. Bucky shifted in his chair to look down the table.

“I’m Roseanna,” this woman said, “I’m Anna’s daughter and Clara’s mom, I’m 46, and I also have a Steve.”
The man next to her groaned and covered his face with his hands.

“They’re very difficult to care for, aren’t they?” Bucky replied.

“Immensely,” Roseanna agreed soberly. “Mine’s awful about remembering to take his vitamins in the mornings.”

“My jumps out of airplanes without parachutes,” Bucky said.

“Your Steve is so much worse,” Roseanna conceded. Becca was quietly wheezing as she tried to hide her laughter.

Bucky caught his Steve looking at him with narrowed eyes. “You’re paying for that later,” he said. Bucky just shrugged.

“So, yes, I am also Steve,” the man next to Roseanna said, waving briefly. “I’m 49 and my father served in the army during World War II and named me after Captain America. The irony was not lost on my family when I married Bucky Barnes’s great niece.”

Bucky blinked, then shrugged again.

“Cool?” his Steve said with a shrug.

Roseanna’s Steve nodded, looking mildly awkward. Then he prodded the girl sitting next to him with a finger, and she sat up a little straighter.

“I’m Louise, I’m 21, and I’m studying to be a nurse,” she said, as though reciting it.

“Say something fun about you!” Ellie called out.

Louise scowled lightly. “I know how to dismember a corpse properly,” she said in a flat tone.
“Uh…” Bucky said.

“She’s a psychopath,” Clara threw in.

“I prefer intelligent,” Louise said haughtily.

“How many people do we know that know how to dismember corpses properly?” Clara demanded.

Louise shrugged.

“I know how to dismember a corpse,” Bucky mused. “Multiple ways. With multiple tools.”

“Since when?” Steve demanded. Bucky shrugged hopelessly. Steve heaved a sigh and Bucky patted his shoulder comfortingly.

“Well, we’re all psychos,” Helen said with a laugh. Bucky smiled a bit tightly; Steve squeezed his hand and Bucky caught his gaze long enough to flick up his eyebrows. It wasn’t what she had said, it was just her accent. Steve rolled his eyes and squeezed his hand again.

“I’m not a psycho,” William, who was sitting next to Louise, announced.

“You play Dark Souls and do it with no armor,” the girl next to Steve said.

William shrugged. “I said I wasn’t a psycho, I didn’t say I wasn’t a masochist.”

“That doesn’t count as your fun about you!” Clara called.

“Ugh,” William said. “I’m Will, I’m 18, and I play video games.”

“I don’t know what video games are,” Bucky said.
William’s eyes lit up. Clara and Louise both groaned, putting their faces in their hands.

“How much time do you have this evening?” William asked, tone clearly gleeful.

“Uh,” Bucky said, then looked at Steve with raised eyebrows. Becca laughed while Steve shrugged.

“You don’t have enough time in a night to learn about video games,” Ellie threw in.

“The basics!” William spluttered.

Ellie waved a dismissive hand. Between her and William sat Anna, who smiled down the table.

“You already met me,” she said. “But I’m almost 70, and I draw children’s books for a living.”

“Steve draws,” Bucky said in reply.

All eyes switched to Steve. Bucky looked at him, too, and found him blushing.

“Not as much anymore,” he said. “Not really since…”

“You should draw now,” Bucky said when Steve didn’t complete his sentence. Steve shrugged. “You’re drawing when we get home,” he announced. Steve rolled his eyes. “Don’t you roll your eyes at me, pal,” Bucky added, “you’re gonna draw somethin’ when we get home an’ you’re gonna like it.”

“Sure, Buck,” Steve said, rolling his eyes a second time.

“This guy,” Bucky sighed to Becca, shaking his head.
“Men,” Becca agreed with a sage nod.

Bucky frowned lightly, then leaned into Steve. “Somehow she agrees with me and insults me at the same time?”

“Women,” Steve sighed.

Becca showed him both of her middle fingers.

“Fight me,” Steve answered calmly, holding out his bowl for soup.

“I thought you respected your elders,” Becca said with primly feigned offense.

“Nah,” Steve retorted, “not if they don’t deserve it.”

Becca gasped in furthered offense and Bucky sniggered behind his hand. Becca pointed a finger at him. “You watch your Omega, James Barnes,” she said in a falsely threatening tone.

Bucky shifted in his chair and propped his head up on a fist, pointedly looking at Steve’s chest. “Got it,” he said. Steve went pink again.

“I hate you,” Becca sighed.

“Becca, you named *four generations* after me!” Bucky pointed out.

“You were dead!” Becca repeated.

“Bite me,” Bucky said.

“No, thanks,” Becca answered happily.
“I’ll bite you, Bucky,” Steve offered pityingly.

Bucky looked at him and wiped away a false tear. “Thank you, Stevie. That’s all I ever wanted.”

Becca made fake gagging noises, which was very unbecoming for a lady of her age, and Steve turned pinker.

“They’re worse than you two,” the girl next to Steve said to the other end of the table.

“What?” Bianca said.

“We have competition,” Ellie answered.

“What?” Bianca repeated, only louder. Then she leaned over the table and pecked a kiss on Ellie’s nose, startling her. “Beat that!” she called down the table.

Bucky gave her a look, then grasped the back of Steve’s chair, tilted it back, and planted a kiss right on his mouth. Steve made a startled noise, grabbing his hair for balance, and Bucky let his chair fall back into place to look back down the table with a smug grin. Steve blinked a couple of times.

“Your move,” Bucky said down the table.

Bianca pointed at him. “I will beat that.”

“Don’t propose again to top my great great uncle in gross couple factors,” Ellie answered immediately. Bianca scowled.

Bucky, now immensely pleased with himself, looked at Steve, who was very pink in the ears and flushed in the face as well. Bucky was now twice as pleased with himself, and accepted a helping of three bean soup.
“Ellie, say your age and something fun about you before Bucky makes me lose my appetite!” Becca yelled down the table.

“I’m 21 and I can’t eat broccoli!” Ellie yelled back.

“How is that fun?” Steve called.

Ellie opened her mouth, shut it, frowned, and shrugged. “It’s funny?” she suggested.

“I don’t get it,” Bucky said.

“She’s breastfeeding,” Becca interjected, “if she eats broccoli, it gives James terrible flatulence.”

Steve looked at the bowl of broccoli on the table, then caught his gaze, smirking. Bucky pointed a finger at him. “Don’t you dare,” he said waringly.

“Skip the broccoli, James,” Steve sniggered.

Bucky just shook his head at him. “No respect,” he repeated in a grumble.

“James, say your age and something fun about you!” Becca called.

“Gah!” James answered.

“Thank you, Jamie!” Becca said.

James smacked a hand to his mouth and made sloppy kissy noises. Becca wiggled her fingers at him, grinning, and James giggled before waving his hand at her. Steve leaned back on Bucky’s shoulder, smiling down the table, and Bucky squeezed his hand.

“He’s eighteen months,” Ellie told them. “And he likes Cheerios.”
“Cheerios are a very good part of a healthy balanced breakfast,” Steve said.

“Literally, all he’ll eat is milk and Cheerios,” Ellie went on. “It’s annoying.”

Even as she spoke, James flung a few Cheerios off his tray at his mother. She didn’t even flinch when one bounced off her nose.

“He’ll eat bananas on occasion,” Bianca added.

“He’s adorable,” Steve commented.

“Isn’t he?” Ellie sighed, turning to grin at her child.

“Aw, now he wants one,” Becca cackled.

Steve lifted his weight from Bucky’s shoulder, still smiling though it seemed a little forced, and Bucky didn’t answer. An abrupt and awkward silence fell over the table.

“Uh, well,” announced Bianca. “I’m Bianca.”

“Noted,” Bucky answered.

“Yes,” Bianca said. “I am 25 and I can eat broccoli.”

“I love broccoli,” Ellie sighed.

“I hate broccoli,” Bianca added.

“She eats it anyway because Ellie can’t,” the girl next to Bucky remarked.
“We’re grossly cute like that,” Bianca finished.

William faked gagging. Anna calmly smacked him on the back of the head and he cut it out.

“Grandma!” he protested anyway.


“Hi,” said the man next to Bianca, leaning forward to wave down the table. “I’m Daniel, I’m Anna’s husband.”

“What’s something fun about you?” Becca asked.


“Dad!” Roseanna groaned.

“He’s good at gardening,” Anna remarked.

Bucky thought it was kinda weird that Anna had a daughter named Roseanna. Then again, maybe he’d had a grandmother named Roseanna. Or an aunt. He wasn’t sure.

“That I am,” Daniel agreed with a nod. “But that is a hobby that doesn’t necessarily make me fun.”

“You’re fun, Dad,” Roseanna sighed.

“I am?” Daniel said, as though shocked. “I’m fun! You hear that, Anna, Rosie thinks I’m fun!”
Bucky looked out of the corner of his eye at Steve, who was sniggering under his breath.

“This is your family,” Steve hissed to him.

“I’m not related to that fella,” Bucky hissed back.

“Blood of the bond is thicker than water of the womb,” Steve answered. Bucky narrowed his eyes at him and Steve sniggered again before poking his cheek. “I think that’s what the kids are calling a side-eye, Buck.”

“I’ll side-eye you,” Bucky answered under his breath.

“If you two are done flirting,” Becca interjected.

“I wasn’t flirting!” Steve defended himself.

Bucky gave him another side-eye. “Sure,” he said, “and my name is Phineas Talbot.”

Steve turned pink in the ears.

“Are you done?” Becca asked. “Are you – Are you done?”

“Bite me,” Bucky said to her, showing her his middle finger. The metal one and everything.

Abruptly, his finger began to whir and vibrate. Steve snatched his hand and folded his fingers, his face gone completely pink, and Bucky stared with wide eyes at his middle finger. Now that his hand was closed, it no longer vibrated.

“I’m not going to ask,” Becca said.

“Stark,” Bucky hissed.
“I’m not asking!” Becca repeated, louder.

“I didn’t ask for this!” Bucky insisted, tugging his hand away from Steve and sticking his middle finger back up. It resumed whirring. “Stark did this of his own volition!”

“No one asked!” Becca half-shouted.

“Put your finger away,” Steve told him.

Bucky waved his vibrating middle finger at Steve, who was still blushing. “Neither of us asked for any of my fingers to vibrate, right?”

“No, Bucky,” Steve muttered. He was looking at the ceiling. There was laughter and giggling coming from down the table and Becca looked like she was about to piss herself from trying not to laugh.

“This is not my fault!” Bucky insisted, now sticking out his middle finger for Becca to see. “Swear on Steve!”

“Swear on Steve!” Becca barked out in a laugh. “Put your fucking finger away, Bugsy! Swear on Steve, my ass…”

Bucky, much more pleased with himself than his subtle smile betrayed, folded his metal fingers. The middle finger ceased its vibrating. His fucking finger indeed. He and Steve were going to have fun with that thing later.

“Not my fault,” Bucky repeated.

“Lord save us,” Becca murmured toward the ceiling, crossing herself. “Eliza, quick, say your name, your age, and something fun about you before he goes back to flirting!”

“Uncle Bucky already knows my name,” Eliza retorted.
“How old are you, then?” Becca said.

“How old are you, then?” Becca said.

“Rebecca Anne Barnes,” Steve interrupted in a stern tone, “you never ask a lady her age.”

Eliza pointed down the table. “I like him. Can we keep him?”

Bucky pointed his metal middle finger at her. It began audibly vibrating. “Mine,” he said.

“Oh, my God,” Becca sighed. Steve covered his face with a hand as he tried not to laugh. “I’m not even a Barnes anymore. I been a Proctor for over sixty years now, and you pull the full name bullshit on me. And you!”

Becca pointed accusingly at Bucky. He hastily folded his metal hand. “You are worse than you ever were!” she said. “And at the same time, you’re exactly the same!”

“I’d say the same for you,” Bucky offered, “but you look your age.”

Becca showed him her middle finger. Bucky just showed her his metal one again so it vibrated, until Steve snatched his hand and clamped it firmly between his own.

“Stark turned me into a Swiss Army knife!” Bucky said to Becca. “I got a fish scaler in my pinky!”

He tugged his hand away from Steve and flicked out his pinky to prove his point. A two-inch fish scaler popped out.

“What kinda Swiss Army knife comes equipped with a vibrator?” Becca demanded.

“This kind,” Bucky said, flicking up his middle finger. The fish scaler retracted and his middle finger resumed vibrating. Steve simply grabbed his hand again and yanked it against his chest. Bucky looked at him, then tried to tug his hand away. Steve held on firmly.
“No,” he said.

“Aw, c’mon, doll,” Bucky pleaded.

“Stop making your finger vibrate,” Steve told him sternly.

“But you like my finger vibrating,” Bucky answered, laughing. Steve’s face was pink all over and he was fighting not to smile, but he held on tightly to Bucky’s hand.

“Stop making your finger vibrate at the dinner table!” Becca snapped.

Bucky broke; he burst into laughter, leaning into his right hand while Steve hugged his left hand to keep him from making his finger vibrate and Becca, ninety years old and looking it, looked down her knobbly nose at him with the exact damn scolding look their ma would give them when they didn’t listen.

What a fool Bucky had been to think that Becca would think any less of him for HYDRA’s actions. She clearly still thought he was a moron anyway. So, nothing had changed. And Bucky wouldn’t have it any other way. This was his baby sister, she was supposed to think he was a moron.

“You’re the worst, Bugsy,” Becca declared.

“Yeah, alright,” Bucky chuckled. “Least I taught you well.”

Becca scoffed, feigning offense again, and Bucky lifted his head to finally tug his hand free of Steve’s grip, only to throw his arm over his shoulders and squeeze him in a hug. Steve shook his head, smiling, and, really, that was all Bucky needed. Steve smiling for him.

“I still have more grandchildren,” Becca scolded him.

“Oh, my bad,” Bucky offered, shifting in his chair to look back down the table. “G’ahead, grandkids.”
It was still weird to think that his baby sister had grandkids.

The actual grandkids, William, Clara, Louise, Ellie and Bianca and the two girls next to Bucky, they all laughed. The adults shook their heads.

“I feel like Jamie should be the only grandkid,” Jim mused.

“You’re just a kid,” Bucky corrected.

Jim made a face as though he was having difficulty connecting Bucky’s statement with the fact that he had already declared himself to be in his 60s. Bucky was also having difficulty connecting it, but he had difficulty connecting a shit ton of stuff in the future, the ages of his nephews and nieces were hardly an issue.

“I have actual grandkids!” Becca insisted. “Gina, Eddie, introduce yourselves!”

Bucky gave a nod, turning back down the table again. He kept his arm around Steve’s shoulders, if only to keep holding him. He didn’t feel threatened by these people anymore; perhaps it was similar to how he felt no threat from Steve, he knew Becca, and therefore her family. They were his family. Some part of him protested that even the infant could be a risk, but this was his family. His actual family. He wanted to know his nieces and nephews and great-nieces and nephews and so on.

Beside Eliza, who Bucky assumed was Gina, a woman waved. “Hi,” she said, blessedly without a Jersey accent. “I’m Regina, Gina. I’m Sophia and Paige’s mom, I’m married in.”

“What’s something fun about you?” Jim asked.

“Uh,” Gina started, then shrugged. “I’m a bird watcher?”

“Very fun, Mom,” the girl next to Steve said.

“Bird watching is nice,” Steve offered.
“It’s calming,” Roseanna’s Steve agreed. Steve pointed down the table to Steve. Bucky disliked how many Steves were in the room.

“We’re bird-watching buddies,” Gina said.

“Yeah, you could have a club,” Clara remarked dryly.

“We have a club,” Gina told her proudly.

“That’s nice, dear,” Becca said.

“Bird-watching is fun,” Steve defended Gina and Steve. Roseanna’s Steve. Bucky wondered if all Steves had a thing for bird-watching, then.

“That’s nice, dear,” Becca told him dismissively.

Bucky pointed a stern finger at her. “I’ll fight you,” he said.

“Yes, yes,” Becca answered just as dismissively. “Eddie! Something fun about you!”

“I don’t like bird-watching,” the man next to Gina announced. Bucky assumed he was Eddie. “I prefer golf.”

“Golf,” Bucky repeated.

“Golf,” Eddie said with a firm nod.

Gina said that she married in, and given that everyone else at the table had claimed a spouse, Bucky could only assume that Gina was married to Eddie and that made Eddie his great-nephew.

“Golf,” he muttered. He vaguely knew what that was. It was just as boring as bird-watching.
“Golf’s cool,” Steve said. Bucky looked at him, squinting from the corner of his eye. Steve gave a shrug. “It is.”

Steve was just trying to suck up to Bucky’s nieces and nephews. He didn’t actually like golf. Bucky thought, at least.

“It’s a science,” Eddie announced.

“He’s an engineer,” Helen piped up. Bucky glanced at her and nodded; he figured Eddie was Jim and Helen’s kid, and Helen’s proud tone of voice just confirmed it.

“Looks like it runs in the family,” Steve said.

Bucky made a confused face, then looked at Steve with furrowed brows.

“You were a mechanic,” Steve told him. “Your pa was, too, at one point.”

Bucky started to nod, then stopped. His pa wasn’t actually his pa. Becca’s father was a mechanic at one point, then.

Steve gave him a light smile and reached up to grasp his hand, the flesh one hanging around his shoulders, and squeezed it gently, then with his other, clasped Bucky’s metal hand. Bucky felt where the pressure differed under his fingers and his palm and remembered that he hadn’t actually thanked Stark yet.

Of course, he hadn’t been able to discuss why there was a fish scaler in his pinky with Stark, either. Both could be accomplished later.

“Engineering is pretty much fancier mechanic work,” Eddie agreed. “But, also not.”

“I don’t remember the specifics of either,” Bucky said.
Multiple people frowned.

“I have some serious memory issues at the moment,” Bucky added.

A soft chorus of *Oh*, and Bucky gave a short nod. He didn’t need to delve any further.

“So, like, short-term memory issues or long-term?” either Paige or Sophia asked. The girl two seats down from him, next to Eddie, the one with the wrist brace.

“I don’t know what those are,” Bucky said.

“That’s an entirely different thing,” Paige or Sophia murmured.

“I had my brain stuck in a blender,” Bucky said shortly. Maybe his nieces and nephews had been watching the news, because they didn’t look all that surprised. Baby James threw more Cheerios, but he wasn’t even a year old and could be excused. “It’s complicated,” he finished.

“I’m studying Alzheimer’s at NYU,” Paige or Sophia said musingly. “Usually, memory problems are localized to personal memories; long-term would be your past, but short-term would be the now.”

“I don’t know what Alzheimer’s is,” Bucky told her, getting frustrated.

“It’s a form of dementia,” she said.

Bucky shook his head. “I don’t know what that is, either.”

“I don’t actually know what kind of amnesia affects general knowledge,” Paige or Sophia said with a heavy frown.

“P, let it go,” Ellie called.
So she was Paige. Paige’s cheeks turned pink and she looked away.

“So, you’re studying psychology, Paige?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” Paige answered. “At NYU. I said that,” she added under her breath. She kind of reminded Bucky of Steve with how she mumbled.

“She just started,” the girl next to Steve, and only Sophia was left so that had to be her, told them.

“I’m 19,” Paige added.

“Tell your uncles something fun about you,” Becca instructed.

“I am a certified lifeguard,” Paige announced. “And that was the first thing to enter my mind, so there it is.”

Bucky didn’t know what a lifeguard was. He just nodded.

“So, I’m Sophia,” said her sister. “I’m still in high school, so I’m the youngest apart from Jamie.”

“What’s your favorite subject?” Steve prompted her.

“Lunch,” Sophia said with a grin.

“Hey, looks like that runs in the family, too,” Steve joked, poking Bucky in the ribs. Bucky cracked a smile for him, shaking his head.

It was then that he remembered that he’d meant to ask Rebecca if he had finished high school. And all her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren had been introduced and half of them had already begun eating, so the spotlight had slipped from Steve and Bucky.
So he turned back to his baby sister. “Did I drop out of high school?”

Becca’s grip on her spoon seemed to slip, because she dropped it with a clatter into her bowl. She looked down at it, blinking, for a second, then picked it up.

“Yes,” she said. She didn’t look at Bucky. “You left partly through your last year so you could start an apprenticeship at a garage owned by one of our cousins.”

“So that’s where I became a mechanic,” Bucky mused.

Becca nodded. “Yes,” she murmured under her breath.

Bucky had so many questions for her that he didn’t even know what to ask next. But Becca looked into her soup with a pained frown, and Bucky decided that the rest of his questions didn’t need to be answered right away, anyway.

He had dropped out of high school to become a mechanic, he had enlisted rather than waiting for the draft, and his father wasn’t actually his father. That was enough for the time being. And really, all he needed to know he already knew. Steve was, and had always been, his. Anything more, that wasn’t as important.

But his father was not his father. Bucky ended up staring into his soup like Becca, frowning in a pained way. His sister was only his half-sister. He might have had another sister, he could have had three sisters, but his real father’s actions had killed those sisters.

He didn’t remember a lot about the man he’d thought was his father. And if Becca’s father had taken their mother and him away from his actual father mere weeks before Bucky’s real first memory, vague and blurry as it was, he doubted he’d be able to remember anything about James Greene even if his brain hadn’t been put through a blender. So what did that leave him?

At least Bucky could be sure he’d never have to worry about trying to do better than either of his fathers. He and Steve would never be able to have children, as much as Steve might want one. In another world, they might have been able to adopt, but what judge would give a child to the Winter Soldier? At least Bucky could safely say he wouldn’t ever need to worry about how to be a father with nothing to base it off of.
“Is it the way it’s s’posed to be?” Becca asked him quietly.

Bucky realized he hadn’t tasted the soup yet. He dipped his spoon into it and raised it to his lips, and a smile broke over his face in reflex.

He remembered this. With the sharp burst of flavor in his mouth, he could see the giant pumpkin Pa always brought ‘round for Christmas, the delicate weave of his ma’s lattice cherry pie, the Yule logs and the holly on his parent’s mantle. He could remember throwing pumpkin guts at Becca and Steve and getting in a helluva lot of trouble for it. He remembered Steve and Becca’s young faces red from laughing with strings of orange flesh and seeds on their hollow cheeks, his ma trying to be serious while she scolded them for making a mess of her kitchen and Becca had a whole lump of seeds piled in her hair. He remembered Steve’s gap-toothed grin, having lost a canine and a front incisor to growing up, with a giant seed up his left nostril and snorting as he laughed because putting things up their noses was what eight-year-old boys laughed at. Hell, remembering that made Bucky remember a completely unrelated thing, that once he stuck chopsticks up his nose just to make Steve laugh.

Bucky nodded to Becca, who slowly smiled, too. Then he squeezed his arm around Steve’s shoulders, smiling at the memory of Steve’s gap-toothed grin at eight years old. Steve glanced at him and nudged his shoulder against Bucky’s, his lip curled happily. Bucky, just because he could, leaned in and kissed him softly. Steve’s smile widened under his lips.

“Gross,” Becca declared. She even flicked a hunk of bread at them; Bucky snatched it up and dunked it into his soup. “Nasty, the pair’a ya.”

Bucky stuck his tongue out at her.

“Fight me,” Steve snorted.

Becca threw a piece of bread at him, too. Steve caught it and copied Bucky, dipping it into his soup.

“Nasty,” she said again.

“I don’t give a shit,” Bucky declared to Becca. He leaned in and planted a loud kiss on Steve’s cheek, startling him. “We’ll be a pair’a nasty fellas, then.”

Becca gave a snort and Steve shook his head with a terribly fond smile on his lips. Bucky hung off
his shoulders, crowding close to him, and grinned into his cheek.

“I love this kid,” he said, still talking to Becca. “More’n anything in the world.”

“I’d be offended but I don’t think even I like you that much,” Becca answered while Steve blushed.

“You’re a close second, Becks,” Bucky told her, glancing over at her. And he honestly meant it.

“Uh-huh,” Becca said skeptically. “You love a whole two people on this whole goddamn Earth, James Barnes. I feel so special for comin’ in second.”

“Language,” Steve muttered under his breath.

Becca cackled again, while Bucky shook his head and kissed his cheek. Steve was still pink in the face, and Bucky definitely adored being able to be this affectionate with him in public. He still remembered vividly standing a room’s length away with his fists clenched at his side while Steve tried to evade wellwishers with too much interest in the fit of his uniform.

“Is it so bad that I’m head over ass for this guy?” Bucky asked Becca. “Look at ‘im, he’s gorgeous.”

“I’ve seen him,” Becca said dryly.

“Fucking precious,” Bucky murmured in Steve’s ear. He loved the way Steve’s entire body shivered at his voice.

“Why do I bother?” Becca grumbled. “Youse two’s tryna win cutest little shits of the year, ain’t you?”

“Steve’s already won that,” Bucky said proudly.

“You and your damn smooth-talking,” Steve laughed softly.
“You love my smooth-talking,” Bucky answered, grinning again.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Eat your damn dinner, Barnes,” he said.

Bucky smacked another kiss on his cheek. “Yes, dear,” he mocked, just to see Steve roll his eyes again.

“Jerk,” Steve muttered under his breath.

Bucky squeezed his shoulders. “Punk,” he answered fondly.

Becca pretended to gag again. Bucky ignored her and dug into the three bean stew. He wondered why he didn’t come to see his sister sooner. She’d brought out all the best parts of him.

Beside him, Steve linked their fingers together. The chatter at the table reminded him of suppers spent with his father’s many cousins, the way his shoulder bumped against Steve’s and Becca threw food, it was all the same. Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or Easter, birthdays or wedding anniversaries. He remembered the chatter and the food, perhaps not the faces or the things said, but what did that matter when he had Steve and his sister right there in front of him?

Bucky had fifth helpings of the stew and thought that if he kept telling himself all that, he might actually con himself into thinking it was true.

Chapter End Notes

so that happened. lexi and i spent a while talking about winifred and whether or not she deserves forgiveness and i’ll tell you what i told her: nobody's asking anyone to forgive winifred. becca's not asking bucky and i'm not asking you. winifred made a hasty decision and it nearly ruined her son's life, but other ill-informed decisions ruined hers. it's in the eye of the beholder. heavy stuff aside, i hope you enjoyed this chapter, please leave a comment, tell me what you thought, comments fuel me more than coffee; which, given my caffeine dependence, says something. see you next week!
lexi: “a handful of teenagers in obnoxious clothing standing around the corner; anything could be hidden in those baggy jeans.” you sound like the public school system
me: i mean – what – i –

lexi: “Bucky gave a jerky nod” ooh jerky beef jerky maybe i’m hungry
me: *not rly paying attention* wait what beef jerky???? where? where’s beef jerky???? where’s the b????
lexi: thErE’s a bEe?????
me: *changes jerky to sharp* fuck you
lexi: wow okay

lexi: “I look like her husband,” Bucky said” wow i love how he’s like a five-year-old he just blurts stuff out he’s like “i look like her husband” like “i have a penis”
me: *dies*

lexi: “I did it,” she whispered. “I figured out the secret ingredient!” krabby patty sauce! the secret to the crusty crab sauce!
me: i’m d ead

lexi: “I’m sure Steve would have done the same thing in my position–”
me: he did! in another universe! he did! [ayyyyl]

lexi: “you are the worst” bucky declared to [moony]
me: wait did you just say my name???
lexi: i did! you are the worst!
me: i’m offended but it's true

lexi: “before Bucky could start the interrogation” i thought that said inquisition no one expects the spanish inquisition
me: no one expects the barnes inquisition
lexi: no one expects the barnes inquisition! i’m dead!

lexi: “I ain’t afraid to hit an old lady to defend my fella’s honor, Becky.” i’m still betting on becca winning
me: y’know why she would win? bc steve would be on her side he’d just let her get on his shoulders and becca would just wail on bucky with spoons and bucky wouldn’t be able fight back bc it’s steve and steve would be like “i’m sorry but i gotta help the underdog” and bucky would just be like “becca this is not fair give me my fella back!”
lexi: i’m just imagining steve squatting down and becca climbing on his shoulders this little old lady and everyone’s just like “please get down” and becca’s like “Noo! fight me bugsy!”

lexi: “sneve’s sniggering” sneve steve s n e v e snake steve
me: snow steve
lexi: this is a meme now

me: *interrupting* eliza’s still salty about her husband’s death
lexi: why?
me: bc he died overseas. in the army. it’s the curse of james buchanan
lexi: *snorting* they should just stop naming them james buchanan
lexi: “We’re only half-siblings,” Becca interrupted. “I’m just imagining Ellie in the background going ‘oooooooooooooooooooooooh’”
me: noooo!
lexi: just eating popcorn and letting the drama unfold
me: nooooo!
lexi: I’ve been watching soap operas and this –
me: it’s an emotional moment! it’s not a soap opera!

me: *goes to type bucky* *accidentally types bucker*
lexi: *breaks off mid sentence* BUCKER
me: it was a typo!
lexi: *dying*
me: it’s to counteract sneeve. sneeve and bucker.

lexi: “You’re too old to be a practical joker~”
me: no you have to do the accent! it’s a jersey accent! you gotta do it!
lexi: i hate you
me: i’ll do her lines hang on *pinches my nose* “hi i’m helen”
*we both die of laughter*

lexi: “Bucky … looked at Steve’s chest” *gasp* not in my good christian household!

lexi: “bucky looked at sneeve” sneeve! again!
me: maybe sneeve will be our always
lexi: PLEASE
me: that or meat palm
lexi: i hate you

*we get to bucky’s metal middle finger*
lexi: oh good lord here we go. brace yourselves, brace yourselves, kiddos!
lexi: “this is not my fault! bucky said. swear on steve!”
me: swear on sneeve
lexi, crying: swear on sneeve!

lexi: “She clearly still thought he was a moron anyway.” is she wrong?? no.

lexi: “oh, my bad go ahead grandkids” oh worm, my bad
me: *changes it to oh worm*
lexi: oh worm!!!

okay now everyone is required to go to lexi’s tumblr and leave an anon in her inbox saying either sneeve and bucker/bucket or meat palm. sorry i don’t make up the rules.
edit: i’m living for how many of you actually did it (also while you’re following her follow meeee)
this is america

Chapter Summary

"This is America / Don't catch you slippin' now"

Chapter Notes

the vibe is gen-z frothing at the mouth for the blood of politicians. thanks to lexi for being the most amazing person on the planet as usual, you're one of my favorite people. you can find the playlist here and the chapter cover on my tumblr here. (speaking of my tumblr, i gave in to my desires to revamp my theme and i'm v happy with it now, follow me bc my blog is pretty.) there are bloopers to be consumed! find some here and some in the end notes.

fun fact! lexi legit broke down in a rant about how awful it was that steve didn't any of his stuff back when he woke up in the future while we were reading this chapter and she brought up a lot of things that i had accidentally written and hadn't realized. the tumblr post at the beginning of the chapter? thirstyforbangtan is lexi's tumblr and all her ranting is her own words that she sent to me on discord (i asked her to remind me of what she'd said). the other tumblrs are also real people! obvs moonythejedi394 is me, but chaosdraws is my artist for the CapBigBang this year, who has been reading this story since the beginning and picked my fic without knowing that it was written by me. so shout-out to them bc i love them. (incidentally, the thing i'm writing for capbigbang is the kinky fic i've been talking about. it's for the same story series and features pre-serum steve like missing in action does and kinks, obvs. i think that's all i'm allowed to say about it for now but HOLY SHIT GUYS AM I EXCITED.) misspeachxs is my internet friend maddie and she's a dear person to my heart she doesn't use tumblr much but you should follow her anyway. happy reading!

mini bloopers

our friend beth, the gf of my brother, has joined us but cannot speak bc issues. we are waiting for lexi to finish playing zelda. i'm eating spaghetti, if that helps. this time, i am the reader bc lexi is not home and surrounded by children.
me: *reading*
lexi: *mumbling*
me: wait what
lexi: gay

me: wait shit
lexi: what
me: i clicked away from the doc. and now. i have to wait. for all 500 pages to load
*actual tears*
lexi: now you know how i feel

lexi: *playing zelda* noo! no no NOT MY ASS! I NEED IT!
me: *quietly dying*
lexi: no. no, no, no, no, nO! QUIT THAT! WE TALKED ABOUT THIS!
me: are you okay lexi?
lexi: LEAVE ME ALONE! oh my god i’m going to die i am physically going to die.
ARE YOU KIDDING ME??? FUCK!
me: you okay?
lexi: no.

*now i’m making the playlist and talking to lexi on discord while setting shit up*
me: the article for chpt17 is gonna be like a blog post asking why all the museums never
gave steve any of his shit back
lexi: i’m happy
me: and thb i’m plugging your tumblr again bc the blog’s gonna be yours. bc i’m lazy
and don’t wanna make one up
lexi: crying. Wow plug my blog I'm flattered!!!
me: yw boo. besides, you know i’m just gonna tell the readers to go annoy you on anon
at the end of the chapter
lexi: jesus here we go
me: language
me: *posting in discord*

*now i’m fucking around with stucky edits on youtube and am reminded of a moment from
intertwined*
me: also, just to be mean, if you don’t remember, in intertwined there’s a mini flashback
to the moment bucky fell from the train and i changed it to be like the scene from mulan
2
lexi: God idk how long it's been since I've seen 2
me: “Steve! I can’t –” “Hold on!” “It won’t hold you and me both, Stevie!” “Don’t let
go, don’t you dare let go, Buck, you promised me, you promised –” “I’m sorry.”
“BUCKY! NO!”
lexi: oh
lexi: that’s rude

*throughout this, lexi is making me a playlist of kpop songs bc i’m giving in and listening to it at last. it should be noted that the playlist is titled “sorry in advance, buddy”*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
thirstyforbangtan:

it's that moment where you're sitting there

Looking at the Smithsonian exhibit

And you realize that this is all fine when the person is dead and there's no close family to take their stuff to remember them by

But captain America is literally alive??????

Anybody think he might want his stuff

chaosdraws:

wait does the Smithsonian still have all his stuff????

thirstyforbangtan:

They do!!!! This is bullshit!!!!! Cap is literally a human being who deserves to have his own damn shit. @ the Smithsonian and demand they give Captain America all his stuff back.

moonythejedi394:

go off honey

thirstyforbangtan:

Oh. I don’t need to be told twice. Clearly, Steve Rogers might as well still be dead and Captain America is the puppet for antiquated, misogynistic and racist ideals of America Steve Rogers has no ability to change that because to the American public he may as well not exist Since we clearly care so little about his feelings

America, get your shit together. You want cap when the world is being invaded, but you don't want the human beneath the suit who has woken up in a new world and you won't give him any of his things because he isn't even human to you. He's a robot to save the day and smile as he kisses babies and then he may as well disappear. His feelings are irrelevant

Hydra is the worst, like Nazis honestly yikes. But it tells you how bad the US is that I think they might
misspeachxs:

Okay I'm new here but surely the US can't be WORSE than hydra?? I mean, hydra literally took the winter soldier and took away so much of his humanity that he wasn't even recognizable as a human to Congress??

thirstyforbangtan:

Obvs Hydra is disgusting and they all need to go die in a pit. But Nazi sentiments aside, at least the Winter soldier had his feelings removed. They were programmed away, he didn't have to worry about people caring about him or being proud of himself. He was an object who performed a task who was put into cryo like a computer being shut off once you go to bed until the next day.

The Winter soldier didn't have to capacity to care that he was being used, they didn't make him suffer through that mental pain. But Steve Rogers still has feelings and had to just disregard them to satiate the American ideal of who he is: superhero when we need him and when we don't he might as well still be dead. At least the Winter soldier was in cryo, Steve Rogers has to watch the world disregard him like a phone you've discarded for the next model and know that his feelings, his voice, his wants for a piece of home are irrelevant to us.

We take his stuff and examine it like he might not care to get his stuff back.

Wouldn't you want your dead mother's blanket when the world is too much?

moonythejedi394

and now we're demanding why he never did anything about the propaganda. honestly, america can die in a pit, too. like did you see his poor face when that dickhead from congress demanded what his relationship with bucky barnes was??

thirstyforbangtan:

#SteveRogersNeedsAHug

[october 19th, leaving Queens]

In the car on the way back to Stark Tower, Bucky held Steve’s hand. Steve drove with just one hand on the wheel and Bucky holding his right hand between both of his like he was worried he might lose him if he let go. It was very late, past ten and nearing eleven, and somehow the roads between
Queens and Manhattan were thinned of traffic. The worst of it was on the bridge crossing to Manhattan, and even then, Steve didn’t need both hands.

Bucky didn’t say much as they drove home. Steve didn’t have anything to say either, so silence filled the car. Occasionally, Bucky murmured quiet observations of the other drivers, and every time he called somebody a dumbass or complimented a lack of a turn signal, Steve smiled softly.

It was past eleven by the time they reached the tower. Steve drove up to the private garage building, to the ticket booth where the night guard didn’t even speak to them, simply scanned the card Steve offered them and waved them on. Sometimes, Steve thought the future was sadder with how little folks talked to each other, at other times he was grateful. This was one of those times.

He drove up the levels to the top, slipped his card into the automated reader, and entered the Hulk-proof garage to park. When the heavy concrete door slid closed with a deep boom, Bucky popped his seatbelt and opened his car door.

Steve waited in the car. That afternoon, when they had left, Bucky had held him back in the elevator and checked the whole garage, every car, corner, and shadow, before letting Steve approach his truck. Even then, Bucky went over the chassis and the engine and the interior body of the car with suspicious eyes.

So Steve assumed that Bucky would need to check again to feel safe, and he waited in the car for his Alpha to give the all clear.

Five minutes went by. Bucky returned to the car, walking up on his side, and Steve released his seatbelt. Bucky opened his door and Steve slid out of his seat, stepping closer to hug him briefly before taking the door from him and shutting it.

He locked the truck out of habit and Bucky followed him to the elevator. Steve called it, checked over his shoulder, then when the doors opened, he waited for them to open fully before he entered. Bucky took his waist and steered him into the corner, then hugged him from the side and dropped his forehead onto Steve’s shoulder.

Steve let him. He didn’t mind putting his back to the wall.

“Hey, JARVIS,” he said, feeling somewhat awkward greeting the invisible computer that ran the tower. “Can you take us to our apartment?”
“Certainly, Captain,” JARVIS answered.

Steve remembered that Stark had intended them to give optical and palm scans for security and that they hadn’t actually done it yet. He made a mental note to find a way for Bucky to give his without feeling like it was a HYDRA facility when they got back from Congress.

Bucky shifted next to him and nuzzled his face into Steve’s neck. Steve tipped his head to the side, dreading Monday morning.

“Stop thinking,” Bucky murmured into his neck.

“What am I thinking?” Steve asked in return.

“Shit,” Bucky answered, and Steve cracked a dry smile. “Stop thinking ‘bout it.”

Slowly, Steve shook his head. “I can’t.”

Bucky let out a soft huff. “I see.”

“It’s not like I want to think about it –” Steve started, and Bucky cut him off with a kiss to his neck.

“I know, baby,” he said softly. “I’ll give you somethin’ else to think about instead, huh?”

Steve let out his breath. “Like what?”

“Pumpkins,” Bucky mumbled.

For a second, Steve didn’t answer. Then he cracked a smile and snorted. “Pumpkins?” he repeated.
“Pumpkins,” Bucky answered surely. He pressed a kiss to a tendon in Steve’s neck and touched his forehead to his temple. “I remembered cleaning pumpkins.”

“Okay?” Steve laughed.

Bucky smiled and reached up to flick a finger at his chin; Steve smiled wider on reflex. “You was eight, ‘cause you’d lost your left canine and the tooth next to it, so I was nine and Becca was six. We made a mess’a Ma’s kitchen cleaning out pumpkins.”

“Did we?” Steve murmured, thinking about how he’d only lost those two teeth a week before that day and he’d lost them because he’d been wiggling them for Bucky to laugh at and they’d just popped out.

“You got it all in your hair,” Bucky said. He stepped closer to Steve, curling his arms tighter about his waist, touching his nose to the crest of Steve’s cheekbone as he grinned. “You dumped a whole pile of ‘em on Becca and she stuffed a bunch down the back of your shirt.”

“I got seeds up my nose,” Steve remembered with a snort.

“Cause that’s what eight-year-olds laugh at,” Bucky agreed happily.

“Your ma was so mad at us,” Steve chuckled. He shook his head as he smiled up at the polished tiles of the elevator. “You got pumpkin on the ceiling and nobody noticed it for months, it dried and stuck there until it got real humid again and it peeled off, landed in your breakfast one morning.”

“Left a stain,” Bucky said, smiling like he was just remembering that bit then. “You fell over laughin’ at me.”

“I fell over laughin’ at you lots’a times,” Steve chuckled.

“Fell right outta your chair,” Bucky said. Steve shook his head again, smiling at the floor now. “You was nine by then.”

“I guess you always been my favorite joke,” Steve mused.
“Ha,” Bucky said softly. “You always been my favorite dolly.”

Steve smiled. He turned in Bucky’s arms and rested his head on his shoulder, on the flesh one, and hugged him around the waist. Bucky kissed his hair and hooked his wrists at the small of Steve’s back.

“Ain’t we a pair?” Bucky murmured.

“Pair’a nasty fellas,” Steve repeated his words of earlier with a grin. Bucky laughed quietly.

“You have arrived,” JARVIS announced. Bucky stiffened at the voice and Steve squeezed the mismatched arms around his waist so Bucky couldn’t snatch a gun from its holster and the elevator doors parted.

“Just the ceiling,” Steve whispered to Bucky.

“Technically, my speakers are in the walls,” JARVIS said.

“Walls, then,” Steve corrected. “Nobody’s here.”

“Sorry,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve kissed his neck. “Don’t be,” he said and pulled back. “Let’s go, come on.”

He tugged Bucky out of the elevator, his Alpha trailing behind him, holding onto his hand with both of his like he was afraid of losing him, and into the kitchen. He used his free hand to open a cupboard and start searching.

“There’s a whole bunch of teas in here,” Steve said. “For a while, I drank chamomile tea every night to fall asleep.”
“What stopped you?” Bucky asked.

“I still couldn’t sleep,” Steve said simply. He found the box he was looking for while avoiding the sorry look on Bucky’s face and put it on the counter to find a kettle. In the process, he lifted his hand from Bucky’s grip. He opened a few cabinets, expecting an electric kettle, something he’d have to plug in to boil water.

Above the stove, there was an old, slightly beat up copper kettle. Steve dropped his hands onto his hips and stared up at it for a very long time, and eventually, Bucky crowded into his space to hug him and look at the kettle, too.

“What’s the matter?” Bucky murmured.

Steve just pulled out his phone. He dialed quickly and raised it to his ear, looking back at the kettle. His nose was stinging.

“Steve-o, my man, what can I do to you?”

“Stark,” Steve said quickly, to mask that his voice was trembling, “did you take my mother’s kettle from the Smithsonian exhibit?”

There was quiet on the end of the line. Bucky looked between him and the kettle, then let go to reach up and take it out of the cabinet.

“I can give it back?” Stark said over the phone.

Steve took the kettle from Bucky. “No, no, don’t. Thank you.”

“No problem,” Stark answered slowly. “Was there anything else?”


He hung up and put the phone on the counter. Then he carefully set the kettle on the stovetop and
turned to shove his arms around Bucky’s waist. Bucky gripped him tightly in return, burying a hand in his hair and the other at the small of his back.

The kettle sat innocently on the stovetop. It even had the once-white now creamy yellow potholder tied to its handle that Bucky’s ma had stitched by hand for Sarah when Steve was a baby.

“Don’t you have anything of your mother’s?” Bucky asked him softly. Steve shook his head. “Aw, baby…”

He said nothing else. Steve drew back after a long moment, sucking in a deep breath, and turned to face the kettle once more. He untied the braided cords of the potholder with tender fingers, smoothed it out between his hands and laid it on the counter next to the box of tea bags. Steve lifted the kettle, took off the whistler and set it down to walk to the sink. He lifted the lid, set it under the faucet and turned on the water. He washed the kettle first, rinsed it and then filled it with clean water. He walked back to the stove, set it down and replaced the whistler. With the same tender fingers, he replaced the hand crocheted pot holder and re-tied the strings.

Bucky put an arm around his waist and leaned his chin on Steve’s shoulder. For a moment, Steve just stood there, staring at his mother’s kettle surrounded by all their modern appliances, then reached up and swiped at his eyes with a hand before turning on the fire.

“She’d be so proud of you,” Bucky murmured.

“Would she?” Steve answered in a whisper.

Bucky pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek, then reached up with a hand and took his chin between a thumb and forefinger. Steve turned his head to follow Bucky’s prompting, though his eyes were downcast.

“She’d be damn proud of you,” Bucky said in a firm but soft whisper. “You’re standing up for what’s right, you’re a hero, you’re keepin’ your head up even though everybody wants you to keep it down.”

Bucky tapped his chin, and Steve lifted his head.

“I’m damn proud of you,” Bucky told him. “You remember that, Steve Rogers.”
“I’ll try,” Steve muttered, “though there’s not much to be proud of.”

Bucky reached up and framed his face with both hands, then gave him a light shake. “Hey,” he insisted softly, “you saved four hundred guys in one night, remember? That’s worth all the pride I got, sweetheart.”

Steve dropped his gaze again. Bucky tapped his chin with a finger, and though Steve sighed, he looked up tiredly. Bucky flicked a finger at his chin again, then closed the gap between them and kissed him with sweet lips. Steve sagged against him, then shifted to hug him and put his head on Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky closed his arms around his back and kissed his hair.

“I’m tired,” Steve exhaled.

“We’ll go to bed,” Bucky promised.

“Not that kind of tired,” Steve said under his breath. Bucky still heard him.

He raised a hand and ran it up Steve’s spine. He dropped a kiss onto the joining of his neck and his shoulder, then pulled back from him just enough to bend his knees and lift Steve off the ground. Bucky threw him over his shoulder, turned off the fire for their abandoned tea, and it was a testament to how exhausted Steve was that he didn’t protest to being carried like a doll.

Bucky turned and strode out of the kitchen, an arm curled around Steve’s thighs and the other planted firmly on his ass. Steve let his head and his arms hang, his hands swaying with Bucky’s step. He actually kind of liked this. Bucky hadn’t been nearly strong enough to throw him over his shoulder so easily during the war, and Steve was actually heavier now than he was then. He’d been able to lift him in a fireman’s carry and carry him bridal style for a short time, and Steve could ride on his back if they were walking on level ground. On the other hand, Steve had been able to lift Bucky with one arm.

Steve liked being thrown over Bucky’s shoulder. He liked the proof that his Alpha was stronger than he was heavy.

Bucky braced him with a hand on his ass and the other grabbing his back and lowered him onto the bed. Steve started to sit up and Bucky pushed him back down, then dropped a knee onto the bed astride his hip.
“Lie back, sweetheart,” he told him, then bent and kissed his cheek. “You want a bath or just to sleep?”

Steve looked at his watch and sighed. “I’d love a bath,” he said.

“I hear a but,” Bucky said, kissing his ear.

“It’s past eleven,” Steve answered. “We have to be up at six.”

“It’s your call,” Bucky murmured, now kissing his neck.

Steve didn’t feel like he was anywhere near to falling asleep, despite how worn out he felt. He loved Bucky’s family, he honestly did, but it had been a long time since he’d been pushed into a crowd like that last.

“Bath,” he mumbled.

Bucky lifted off his neck and took his hand to help him sit up. Steve let him put an arm around his waist, like he was guiding him, and they walked arm-in-arm into the bathroom where Bucky let go to begin drawing the bath. Steve just stood there, looking at nothing and feeling his eyelids drooping, until Bucky turned back to him and lifted the hem of his shirt. Steve started, then went to take his shirt off himself and Bucky gently smacked his hands away.

“Arms up, sweetheart,” Bucky told him.

“Y’re spoilin’ me,” Steve grumbled. He lifted his arms above his head. Bucky tugged his shirt off for him and leaned in to drop a kiss onto his clavicle, then started undoing his belt and jeans, too. “I’m gon’ forget how to do all this myself if you ain’t careful.”

“You’ve uncovered my evil plot,” Bucky quipped with a big grin and a twinkle in his eye.

“What, to make me helplessly dependent on you?” Steve laughed; Bucky’s mirth was infectious.
Bucky reached up and kissed his cheek, still grinning.

“Exactly,” he said, “so that way you can’t ever get rid of me.”

“I’d never wanna get rid of you, Buck.” Steve told him with a light laugh, looking down at Bucky fondly. He threaded a hand through Bucky’s hair when he knelt to pull the jeans and underwear off his ankles. “I’m pretty attached to you, y’know.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow, standing up to shake out his jeans and fold them. Steve grabbed his arm and leaned in to plant a loud kiss on his cheek, and Bucky snorted.

“I’m even physically attached to you,” Steve pointed out, waving a finger at his neck and his scent gland. “Seriously, you know how annoying this thing gets when you ain’t in the room?”

Bucky rolled his eyes as he dropped Steve’s clothes onto the counter and Steve moved in closer to his back, grinning, wanting to suck up his warmth.

“It’s awful,” Steve told him. He hugged him around the waist and put his chin on his shoulder. “It goes all itchy, but it’s not like I can scratch it.”

“If you’re lookin’ for an apology, you ain’t gettin’ one, dollface,” Bucky said and Steve chuckled.

“I’d never ask an apology for the best thing that ever happened to me,” Steve said smugly, then kissed Bucky’s neck. “I always dreamed about bonding with you, y’know.”

Bucky’s hands folding Steve’s jeans slowed. “Really?”

“Mhmm,” Steve answered softly. “When we were kids, I just assumed one day you’d ask me to marry you and that would be that.”

Bucky let out a short laugh, smiling and Steve pulled Bucky around just so he could keep looking at his soft smile. Bucky set his hands at Steve’s waist and Steve framed his neck in his hands, lacing his fingers together.
“I thought everybody married their best friend,” Steve told him. “My ma always swore up and down that Dad was her best friend, your ma did the same for your pa. I think I was about five when I started wondering which one of us would have to wear the veil.”

Bucky laughed again and Steve grinned back, loving his Alpha’s smile and the fact that he was the cause of it. Bucky shook his head as he laughed, then he kissed Steve and Steve let his body relax in Bucky’s arms. It was what he’d been made to do, after all. Bucky separated their lips and instead held Steve’s chin between his thumb and forefinger, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he grinned at him. Steve could hardly remember Monday morning looming over them with Bucky smiling at him like that.

“You weren’t the only one, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured. “I swore up ‘n’ down to my ma when you were five years old that I was gonna marry you one day.”

“That may have been why I assumed we’d get married,” Steve chuckled.

“And you, my pretty,” Bucky added, pecking him on the nose and Steve blushed, “would get to wear the veil, seein’ as you’re the Omega and all.”

“See, I didn’t know that when I was five,” Steve laughed, and Bucky shook his head again before cutting off his laugh with a kiss. Steve continued to giggle into Bucky’s mouth until Bucky pulled back and held him by the waist again. “But I’m not wearing a dress,” Steve tacked on, and Bucky rolled his eyes. “I ain’t no girl, I ain’t wearing no dress!”

“You’d wear a dress if I asked you to,” Bucky said.

“I would,” Steve conceded, “but you wouldn’t ask me to.”

“Not outside our bedroom,” Bucky affirmed and Steve snorted. Bucky tapped his chin, then pulled back to check the water and start tugging off his own clothes. Steve leaned on the counter, watching him unashamedly, until Bucky held out a hand to him. Steve took it and let Bucky guide him into the bathtub, then reclined against Bucky’s chest and set his forehead just under his jaw.

“I can just see it now,” Bucky said softly, “you in a lovely lil’ red number, with pearls and a ribbon in your hair and some kitten heels.”
“Buck, I’m already 6’2’’,” Steve interrupted.

“Shh, this is my fantasy,” Bucky scolded him, “and I wanna put you in a pair’a kitten heels.”

“I can be 6’4’’,” Steve sighed, “that’s totally attractive.”

“Shush,” Bucky said firmly, “or I’ll put you in stilettos. Make your legs look a mile long.”

Steve huffed and lifted a leg from the water, bracing it on the edge of the tub. “I don’t think I’d look good in heels, Buck. Maybe a long time ago.”

“You kiddin’, doll?” Bucky said. He reached out and grabbed Steve by the the thigh, then smoothed his palm up the side of his leg and Steve shivered just a little. “It’s a crime if I haven’t done it already. These muscles deserve all the highlights they can get.”

“Fuck off,” Steve laughed, pulling his leg back into the water.

Bucky shifted his hand, curling it around the inside of his other thigh, and pulled his knee up instead. Steve let him, offering no resistance. He kind of liked it, Bucky moving him as he pleased rather than making Steve think about it. It was nice.

“Now I’m thinkin’ stockings,” Bucky murmured in his ear. “And a garter belt, some pretty lace panties. And that string’a pearls, for my little wife.”

“I ain’t your woman,” Steve grumbled.

“You’re my Omega,” Bucky purred, “I’m your husband, so don’t that make you my wife?”

“Fuck you,” Steve mumbled, trying not to giggle.

“How ‘bout a nice house dress to top it off?” Bucky asked him. “You’d sure be somethin’ swell to
"You're ain't gettin' no sugar from me tonight," Steve complained half-heartedly. "It’s late."

“I'm just fantasizing," Bucky said in a mildly defensive tone, “can’t a man fantasize about his wife?”

“You're a hound dog,” Steve told him, trying to be stern.

“You love me,” Bucky said with a broad grin.

“Dammit,” Steve muttered, laughing. Bucky laughed, too, and kissed his flushed cheek while Steve covered his eyes and tried very hard not to think about wearing a garter and pearls for Bucky. And kitten heels. And a house dress, with his cheeks rouged and wearing lipstick and with his hair in curls, being a loving wife for Bucky to come home to, then happily lying back on whatever surface Bucky wanted to spread his legs for his husband.

“Looks like my pretty’s fantasizing a lil’ bit, too,” Bucky said smugly.

“Fuck off,” Steve said quickly, “that thing’s got a mind of its own.”

“Uh-huh,” Bucky agreed lightly, and his hand swept up Steve’s thigh. “Do you think it’d say yes if I asked to pet it, baby?”

Steve felt the flush creeping down his neck, but he nodded a little. He felt Bucky grinning into his cheek, then Steve let out a sharp breath and flattened his toes against the bottom of the tub as Bucky’s hand swept farther up.

“I can just see you now,” Bucky cooed gently to him as he began a slow rhythm. “All dolled up for your husband, a little lace chemise under your house dress ‘cause you wanna feel pretty while you’re making supper. And you’re just waiting for me to come home, ‘cause you’re a good lil’ wife, ain’t you, babydoll?”

Steve swallowed with difficulty, then nodded with even greater difficulty. Bucky’s lips brushed his ear as he spoke and smiled.
“Maybe you’d have on an apron to keep your dress clean,” Bucky said. “A frilly white thing that’ll just make the colors of your dress pop. And it’d button from the throat to the bottom hem, sweetheart, so when I get home, I can just start slippin’ them buttons and get to see what my little wife’s wearing under it, huh?”

“Fuck,” Steve mumbled as Bucky began twisting his fingers quicker.

“There’s that chemise I was talkin’ ‘bout,” Bucky murmured, like he really was envisioning it, and he spread a palm over Steve’s abdomen to hold him down while Steve started writhing in his grip. “I’ll say it’s pink, sugar, pink satin ‘n’ black lace trim. The lace matches your stockings, babydoll, they’ve got a nice line up the back of ’em that’re just askin’ for me to look up your skirt at that gorgeous ass’a yours. And you’ve got on a garter belt, like I said, some gorgeous panties, that satin’ll feel real good on your cock, sweetheart. And you’ve got that string’a pearls around your neck, real pearls I got you for our wedding, baby. You’d wear ‘em every day, no matter what.”

Steve tried to picture it, panting hard with Bucky’s lips at his ear and hand between his legs, he tried to picture it.

“Satin an’ pearls, sweetheart,” Bucky purred, “only the best for my Omega.”

“You gonna buy me pearls, Mr. Barnes?” Steve said between hard breaths, trying not to think of how stupid he’d look wearing women’s underwear the way he looked now.

“Fuck yeah, Mrs. Barnes,” Bucky gasped, shifting Steve fully onto his lap and beginning to rut against him. “You’re gonna look so damn good in satin and pearls, babydoll, just for me, just for your husband.”

Steve nodded, biting down on his lip to hold in his breath, while he rocked up into Bucky’s fist and down onto his lap. He stopped thinking about how he looked now and lingerie; even though it would only make him feel worse, he pictured how he looked before the serum, dolled up in satin and pearls for Bucky, instead. And that would be just for Bucky, no matter how many times he’d worn stockings and garters, Steve hadn’t been able to afford even fake pearls while he was working, let alone satin chemises. In his head, he was small and delicate again, Bucky towered over him and could fit his waist between his two hands with ease.

“I’d ruck up that pretty chemise and get your tits out, babydoll,” Bucky said in his ear, breathing heavily down Steve’s neck. “Get my mouth on those pretty nipples and suck on ‘em ‘til they’re red
and abused, sweetheart.”

Or maybe he was pregnant, and Bucky would look down on him with a possessive hunger in his eyes. And he’d really have tits for Bucky to suck on then; tender, sure, but malleable and soft for Bucky to play with, not the hard lumps of muscle he had now.

“And I’d start pettin’ you through those soft panties,” Bucky murmured, “maybe reach down the back of ‘em, and I’d find you wet already, wouldn’t I? Just from me suckin’ on your tits a little while – Nah, just from me lookin’ at’cha. You’d be wet from that, wouldn’t you, sweetheart?”

“If you gimme bedroom eyes, yeah,” Steve mumbled. “Don’t think there’s a thing I’d say no to if you looked at me like that when you asked.”

“I’d be givin’ you bedroom eyes walkin’ in the front door,” Bucky promised in a coo. “Seein’ you standing in our kitchen, wearing the stockings and dress and pearls I bought you, baby, that’d make me so damn hard in a second.”

“You gonna buy me the whole damn outfit now?” Steve managed to get out between breaths.

“If you’d wanna wear it, hell yeah, baby,” Bucky purred again. “‘Course, you could be standing in boxers and a ratty tee-shirt and you could get me hard in a second, babydoll, all you gotta do is look over your shoulder with some come-hither eyes and I’d be ready to go right there.”

Steve hummed, imagining himself 24 years old, wearing Bucky’s boxers and undershirt that would be hanging off his skinny frame, making dinner for when his husband got home. *Fuck…*

“Or I’d just look at these shoulders,” Bucky murmured. The hand on Steve’s stomach swept up his chest to cup a pec, then he started rolling a nipple between his thumb and forefinger and Steve gasped, arching up into his hand. “Look down to this tiny waist and then this gorgeous peach of an ass, baby. It’s like the blueprints what’s-his-face put in the Vita-Ray machine said *Made to make Bucky Barnes horny as fuck 24/7, sweetheart.”*

“Oh,” Steve gasped.

“Fuck, I don’t know if I’d wanna fuck you with those panties still on or if I’d rip it all off you right away,” Bucky said in a low growl and Steve’s gut tightened, knowing his Alpha was close to
coming. “I think I’d leave everything else on but take them panties off, I’d fuck you still in your lingerie ‘cause I’d be too impatient to get it all off. Leave them pearls on, too, babydoll, watch ‘em bounce on your tits while I fuck you.”

“Oh, fuck,” Steve muttered, still not recovered from Bucky’s comment about the Vita-Ray machine. “Bucky –”

“God, you’ll look like heaven in lingerie, babydoll,” Bucky gasped out.

The water was sloshing and surely it was going over the sides and getting the floor wet but Steve didn’t care; he couldn’t believe Bucky actually wanted to see him in lingerie, now, with his body built like an Alpha’s and nothing like the delicate Omega he ought to be, he couldn’t understand at all.

“I just wanna dress you up in lace and never let you leave my sight,” Bucky said, growling again. He bit down on Steve’s shoulder, then licked up his neck and started nibbling at his ear while Steve hitched a breath. “You’re all mine and I wanna keep you like that, never let another soul lay eyes on my babydoll, Stevie, fuck –”

“Please,” Steve choked out, “please, Bucky –”

“Getcha silk and velvet, sweetheart,” Bucky said; the water was sloshing faster as Bucky jerked his fist and rocked into Steve’s ass. “A bathrobe with furs and feathers; you can lie around all day, not even scuff your heels, I’d wanna wait on you hand and foot, baby, ‘cause you’re all mine.”

“Bucky,” Steve gasped, “I’m not – I can’t –”

“Yeah, you can,” Bucky growled. “You’re mine and I wanna dote on ya, I wanna pamper you ‘n’ love on you ‘til the end of time, Stevie, my baby, my pretty –”

“I’m not pretty,” Steve sobbed.

Bucky quit rutting into him and jerking him off. Steve sobbed again at the abrupt loss of stimulation, then Bucky was forcibly turning him over until they were face to face, chest to chest, and Bucky gripped the back of his neck with a firm hand.
“You listen to me, Steven Grant Rogers, and you listen good,” Bucky said in a low tone. “You are beautiful.”

“I’m not –” Steve started to say.

“You are!” Bucky insisted. “Listen, baby, you’re gorgeous, you’re perfect –”

“I’m too big,” Steve hiccuped, then dropped his gaze, ‘cause he couldn’t look Bucky in the eye to say this. “I’m – I got too much muscle, too much height, I don’t look like an Omega, Buck –”

“Don’t talk like that,” Bucky said, and even with the firmness in his tone, his voice was cracking. “Sweetheart, no, you’re beautiful, I swear –”

“I’m not,” Steve hissed, “my hands –”

Bucky grabbed one of his hands and held it up, their palms pressed together. “Look at this, baby.”

Steve hiccuped again and Bucky gripped the back of his neck harder. A stillness settled over him and he sucked in a breath, then another, calming somewhat. He looked at their hands touching.

“Tell me what you see,” Bucky said softly.


“Sweetheart,” Bucky murmured. He folded his fingers past Steve’s, intertwining their hands, and Steve dropped his fingers to curl over Bucky’s knuckles. “Look now, pretty.”

Steve shook his head. “Don’t call me that.”

“You have always been my pretty,” Bucky said carefully, tearfully, and Steve tried to hide his face,
hating that he was letting his emotions ruin everything again, but Bucky held on firmly to the back of his neck. “You were my pretty when you were a kid and when you started growin’ up and when you signed up to be a science experiment and I’ll be damned if you ain’t my pretty now. Look at our hands, Stevie.”

Steve swallowed and flicked his gaze up, then away.

“Look at ‘em,” Bucky repeated more forcefully, shaking them. “Tell me what you see.”

“My hand is bigger than yours,” Steve whispered.

“You’re not looking,” Bucky said. “Your hand is the exact same size as mine.”

Steve shook his head, refusing to look.

“Stevie, your hand is the exact same size as mine, look at them, Steve.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve murmured, but couldn’t finish.

“You’re not allowed to apologize for this.”

Steve opened his mouth, shut it, and shook his head. “Why not?”

Bucky let go of the back of his neck, and Steve felt his nose prickling again at the loss of contact, until –

Bucky gently tapped his chin. Steve yanked his hand from Bucky’s grip and surged forward to hug him, his whole body shaking as he sobbed.

“Oh, Stevie, it’s okay,” Bucky murmured, “shh, it’s alright, you can cry, it’s okay.”
Omegas were allowed to cry. Omegas were encouraged to cry, Omegas were emotional and prone to hysteria. Steve, on standing principle, always resented those stereotypes. But Alphas weren’t allowed to have emotions at all and Steve hated that stereotype even more.

“Let it out,” Bucky said softly. “Your hand is the same size as mine, sweetheart. Our hands are the same exact size.”

Steve held Bucky in an iron grip, and it was a miracle that he didn’t trigger the Winter Soldier with his sour vanilla scent or his trapping arms, but Bucky held him just as tightly until his sobs calmed and his grip loosened.

“Here,” Bucky murmured again and took Steve’s hand in his. “Our hands are the same size, baby.”

Steve looked at their hands, their palms pressed flat together, and tried to look at them objectively.

“There’s no overlap,” Bucky told him, reaching across with his left hand to point it out. “My fingers are thicker than yours, even.”

“Mine are longer,” Steve whispered.

Bucky lowered his left hand, then set it at Steve’s back.

“Baby, your fingers were always longer,” he said softly. “I remember that, your fingers have always been longer than mine.”

Steve looked at their hands. He tried, he tried, to see what Bucky was saying.

“Sweetheart,” Bucky said softly, then kissed his temple and said nothing more.

“I think –” Steve started, then hiccuped again. “I think maybe – Maybe I should see that therapist Sam was talking about.”

“Okay,” Bucky agreed gently. “Anything you need, baby, anything.”
Steve let his head rest on Bucky’s shoulder. “Can we run away to France?” he murmured half-heartedly.

Bucky kissed his hair. “I’m sorry, pretty, but you know you’ve got to do the right thing.”

Steve nodded slowly. It had never been hard to do the right thing before, but then again… The right thing had never exposing himself. Speaking up, that had always been the wrong thing.

It would have been so much easier if he and Bucky had really died in 1945.

Bucky kissed his hair again and gently helped him get up out of the bath. Steve didn’t say another word as Bucky dried him off and led him to bed. He was starting to get how Sam was right, really. He couldn’t keep breaking down on Bucky like this. It wasn’t fair to him.

Bucky pulled him into his chest and tucked a leg over his hip, engulfing him. Steve let his eyes fall shut and tried not to pretend that he was smaller in Bucky’s embrace.

Chapter End Notes

so that happened. pls comment if you liked this chapter! steve's "i'm not pretty" breakdown is another one of my favorite moments honestly. again, all the tumbrls are real people you should follow (especially me bc my blog is super pretty.) ily guys and i'll see you next week!

bloopers...

me: “shit,’ bucky answered”
lexi: big mood

*reading “do you not have anything else of your mother’s?” and the rant that inspired the tumblr post*
lexi: i find it really interesting like the parallel between this and what bucky just went through, like steve comes out of the ice and they’re all like this is what we want you to do and how we want you to act and in between you don’t really exist and steve’s just left there just like the winter soldier
me: holy shit you’re right
lexi: did you not even realize this
me: no i have to write this down
lexi: they didn’t give steve the luxury of putting him in cryosleep, like bucky didn’t have the mental capacity as the winter soldier to care but steve did and america just expects him to turn himself off when he’s not being captain america like that’s rough buddy
me: omg steve is sokka
lexi: my boyfriend turned into the moon…
me: that’s rough buddy

lexi: and tony’s the only one that noticed
me: omg tony is the only one that noticed!

me: “you saved four hundred guys in one night”
lexi: that’s not what i read but i don’t know what it was
me: what??? what did you think it said??
lexi: idk i thought it said steve did four hundred guys in one night and i thought “that’s a weird porno”
me: what the fuck! no! you’re awful
lexi: i won’t be kinkshamed in my own home

lexi: *dissolves into discussing the point of plot in porn with her bf*
me: *judging them*

me: “Not that kind of tired,” Steve said”
lexi: he’s got that *CLAP* depression!
me: omg
lexi: like a cheerleader. he’s got that! *CLAP* what *CLAP* depression!
lexi: you might be mad at me
me: *immediately goes to tumblr bc i think she's put something in my inbox* why am i mad at you
lexi: *posting on discord* ~give me a D! give me an E! give me a P! Give me an R! give me an E! give me an S! give me another S! give me an I! give me an O! give me an N! What's that spell? Depression!~
me: *like ho don’t do it* oh my god

me: “… one arm around his thighs… the other planted firmly on his ass”
lexi: wink wink
lexi: dat ass tho

me: *stops reading mid-sentence as discord notifies me of a message*
me: WHAT THE FUCK
lexi: steve: throw me over your shoulder metal daddy
me: WHAT THE FUCK THIS IS NOT THE KINKY FIC, THAT’S NOT EVEN THE KINK IN THE KINKY FIC WHAT THE FUCK

*lexi takes over recording bloopers bc i'm reading*
*lexi finally gets the bloopers page open, only for edges blurred to have to reload*
Lexi: oh COME ON

Lexi: I’m sorry what was that about this not being the kinky fic?
Me: it’s only like 10% kink! The other is 100% kink!

Lexi: *starts singing old time stripper music while bucky takes his clothes off* *but it sounds like the jaws theme*
Me: WHAT KINDA STRIPPER USES JAWS MUSIC
Lexi: *cackling* i was DOING SANTA BABY NOT SHARKS
Lexi: every time he touches his leg in the water, i want to sing the jaws song now
Me: considering what he’s about to go through, there’s a metaphorical shark in the water
Lexi: :

Me: omy? Only? Owe me? Bucky Barnes, you owe me pearls!

Lexi: like he isn’t always ready to go
Me: it’s always in the back of his mind, like is this an opportunity? Let’s go!
Lexi: waiting for the opportune moment like jaws

Lexi: *after the vita-ray comment* LIKE YOU WEREN’T ALREADY HORNY BEFORE THAT
Me: bucky’s a thot. He accepts his thot self

Lexi: *claps* the mood! *claps* it’s ruined!

Me: man the water is everywhere, this bathroom is filthy

Lexi: *amidst sad musings* this is so sad, alexa play despacito *doesn’t have alexa so makes google* cue the sad and sexy violin

*The unofficial chapter name for this chapter is homeboy looks like shark week*

Lexi: okay but look at this picture of this pikachu figure! His eyes are soulless, he looks like he’s gonna eat my family!
Me: oh my god
Lexi: look at his eyes! No!
Me: I see them, but you’re soulless too so
Lexi: did…. Did you just call me soulLESS?
Me: *cackling*

lexi: THE TRUTH DOES COME OUT: DOES CAPTAIN AMERICA GAY MARRIAGE

now go anonymously tell lexi on tumblr what you thought of her bloopers. or anonymously tell me how you feel about this chapter. i'll see you, byyyyyyeee.
hello hello hello my nerds guess what? if you are in d.c. for otakon, look out for your friendly neighborhood angst queen lowkey cosplaying as genderbent draco malfoy on saturday. you can see how cute imma look over on my tumblr. right, selfie time over, it's your favorite time of the week, it's time for steve rogers to get punched in the feels. guess where else steve rogers gets punched in the feels? in my recent fic no widows tonight, the next installment in the same story; told different ways multiverse. did you read chapter 16 of edges blurred and think "well what if bucky's parents didn't jump to the worst conclusions and separate steve and bucky?" no widows gives you the answer: they still don't keep it in their pants. you know me, there's angst, but there's also a soft™ ending wherein our boy steve gets to wear a wedding dress (and bucky gets to stick his head under it bc you know he would). when you're done here, if you haven't read no widows tonight yet, go check it out, i literally stayed awake for three days to write it. this chapter is sponsored by lexi#1, who was given a quality microphone by lexi#2, and for some reason is actually willing to not only read aloud these long ass chapters, but record us fucking around while we do it. i have the pleasure of announcing that at some point in the future, you guys will be able to see behind the scenes of edges blurred as lexi and i read the chapters aloud. i interrupt to quote vines, lexi sighs in pansexual, and those tiny additions that i include in bloopers are actually five minutes of us laughing about something. not only would you get to hear us reading edges blurred, but you get to hear us saying "redacted bc spoilers" too many times bc i can't keep my mouth shut. final things before you read! hey, so you remember last chapter i mouth typo'd over "only" and said "owe me" instead, right? "bucky barnes, you owe me pearls!" okay, well, i fucking got 'em. instead of bloopers, today you my dear readers will be treated to the beauty that is steve rogers wearing pearls. that's right, there is now official art for this fic. my wonderful friend (i hope i can call us friends at this point i'm just sending them heart eyes bc they're making art for edges blurred as well as my cap big bang fic (the kept boy)) chaosdraws actually drew steve wearing a dress. check that out in the end notes. this chapter's cover can be found on my tumblr here and the playlist can be found here. happy reading!
no rest for the wicked or the weary

@sips tea* #SteveRogersNeedsAHug
A sharp vibration jolted his eyes open. Bucky looked around for the source of the noise and found Steve’s phone trembling on the nightstand. Steve was still asleep, his limbs folded close to his body, and he didn’t seem to be waking up any time soon. He hadn’t left Bucky’s arms in his sleep, rather, he’d taken Bucky’s hands and pinned them against his chest; his metal hand was trapped and his right arm was stuck under Steve’s body. Bucky looked at the phone and scowled at it, figuring that the second he pulled his hand away to turn it off, Steve would wake up.

The vibrating stopped. Bucky flicked his eyebrows up and settled back behind Steve, ready to go back to sleep.

And the vibrating resumed. Bucky sighed heavily, then shifted as best as he could onto his elbow and looked down at Steve.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Your phone’s being annoying.”

“Turn i’ off,” Steve mumbled in a heavy voice, sounding hardly even awake.
“Need my hand to do that, sweetheart,” Bucky added.

Steve made a disgruntled face and rolled further onto his stomach, taking Bucky’s hand with him. “Mine,” he said in a voice gravelly from sleep.

“Well, that’s alright,” Bucky told him, a smile growing on his face, “but could I borrow it for a second? To make your phone stop making noise?”

Steve let out a long groan, then disentangled his limbs from Bucky’s left hand. “Give it back when you’re done,” he mumbled.

“Okay, baby,” Bucky chuckled, dropping a kiss to the back of his neck and enjoying the way Steve shivered slightly after he did it. He shifted his knee across Steve’s legs to lean across to his nightstand, picking up the phone, which was still vibrating, and turning it over to look at the face of it. “Natasha’s calling,” Bucky said.

Steve groaned again, rolling onto his side under Bucky to reach for the phone. Bucky let him have it, then gave into his impulse and simply collapsed on top of his Omega. Steve let out air just as he answered the phone, and Bucky heard Romanoff’s voice saying, hesitantly, “Steve?”

“’M fine,” Steve mumbled, “just had a useless lump of flesh flop on top of me.”

Bucky chuckled and nosed at the back of Steve’s neck. He shivered again.

“Okay?” Romanoff said. “Well, I just called to wake you up. It’s 6, we’re meeting at 6:30.”


“No problem.”

With that, Romanoff hung up. Steve sighed heavily and dropped his phone onto the mattress, then made an angry sound and knocked it onto the floor. Steve twisted under him and Bucky shifted his weight onto his elbows and knees so Steve could turn onto his back and look up at him.
“Last chance,” Bucky told him abruptly. “We can still run away to Paris.”

Steve blinked up at him slowly. He sighed yet again, a furrow forming between his brows as his gaze slipped somewhere beyond Bucky.

“We can’t,” Steve murmured.

Bucky bent and kissed the crease in his forehead. “I’m sorry,” he said, and meant it.

Steve just shook his head, then pushed at Bucky’s forearm gently. Bucky tipped off of him and Steve rose. Bucky watched him stretch; Steve lifted his hands above his head and pulled himself up onto his toes, then dropped his arms to stretch out his shoulders and roll his neck, and Bucky lifted onto his knees to shuffle forward and put his hands at Steve’s waist before he could pull away.

Steve leaned back against him and Bucky pressed a kiss to the hollow of his throat.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured.

Steve let out his breath, but not in satisfaction or relief. Bucky circled his arms around him, hugging him tightly, and pressed his lips to Steve’s ear, again whispering: “You’re beautiful.”

Bucky nibbled at his ear, then switched sides of his neck and rubbed his nose along his scent gland. Steve tipped his head back now, back and away from Bucky’s invading touch.

“Why don’t you believe me?” Bucky said gently into Steve’s neck. “You’re the most beautiful Omega I’ve ever seen, Steve. What’s got you thinking different?”

“Not now,” Steve sighed.

“No, now,” Bucky insisted. He kissed another part of his neck, then turned Steve around and framed his face with his hands. “Tell me one thing and I’ll tell you why you’re wrong.”
Steve laughed and rolled his eyes and Bucky kissed his nose. “Seriously, one thing, baby. I’ll keep telling you the truth until you believe it.”

Steve wasn’t meeting his gaze, yet Bucky didn’t want to force him. He kissed Steve’s cheek, then his temple and his forehead.

“C’mon,” he murmured. “One thing, sweetheart.”

Steve let out a long, heavy breath. He lifted one hand and looked down at it with a sardonic smile, then slowly shook his head.

“I’m not delicate,” he said. “That’s the hardest thing.”

Bucky took his hand and kissed his knuckles. He laid out Steve’s fingers flat, then reached for the nightstand and dug around for what he hoped would be there.

He withdrew a pencil. He placed it in Steve’s hand and held it, shaking it gently.

“There,” Bucky said. “Your hands don’t have to look delicate to do delicate work, pretty.”

Steve slowly shook his head. Bucky took his chin in hand and lifted his head to look in his eyes, though Steve still wasn’t looking at him.

“When’s the last time you drew anything, baby?”

Steve shrugged. “1944, maybe.”

“Keep the pencil,” Bucky told him. “Draw something delicate for me and I’ll tell you how beautiful your mind is to have made it.”

Steve’s lips curled in a softer smile, less self-deprecating and less doubtful. Bucky kissed his nose and swept a hand through his hair.
“Your body doesn’t need to be delicate to be beautiful,” Bucky reminded him. “Remember that, pretty.”

“Are you jus’ gonna keep calling me that ‘til I believe it?” Steve grumbled.

“Yep,” Bucky said with finality. “Because it’s true and I reserve the right to shower you with praise, being your Alpha and all.”

Steve laughed gently and Bucky kissed him, wanting to taste it. Steve hummed against his lips, leaning into him for a moment, then pulled away.

“We should go,” Steve said. “Get dressed, I mean.”

Bucky nodded sadly. He put a hand on Steve’s left pec and squeezed it. “Such a shame,” he sighed. “You have such gorgeous tits.”

Steve laughed nervously. “Well, not like we want anybody but you to see ‘em. C’mon.”

“You’re not being fair,” Bucky said as Steve walked away. He stepped off the bed and cracked his neck, then his knuckles, and walked over to where Steve was rifling through his wardrobe to plaster himself to his back. “This ass is too pretty to cover up,” he added, getting two handfuls of it and squeezing, making Steve jolt.

“Well, either I cover it or I don’t leave,” Steve pointed out. “And we agreed that we can’t run away.”

Bucky sighed sadly again. “Still. We should take a honeymoon.”

Steve shifted to look at him over his shoulder. “A honeymoon?” he repeated, smiling. “But we didn’t have a wedding.”

“We can take a honeymoon,” Bucky said self-importantly. “We could briefly run away to Paris. And then come back.”
“I’ll think about it,” Steve said softly. “It… would be nice.”

Bucky kissed his cheek as Steve looked away again. He put his arms around Steve’s waist and just leaned on him, hooking his chin over his shoulder.

“Do I have to wear a suit?” Bucky grumbled.

“An ill-fitting one,” Steve sighed. “We have to buy you clothes.”

Bucky let out a disgruntled huff. “Can we do that online?”

“Sure,” Steve said. “We’ll send back what doesn’t fit or you don’t like.”

Bucky, going on impulse, kissed Steve’s shoulder and tucked his nose in his neck. He breathed in deeply, enjoying the subtle hints of spice to Steve’s typical sweet scent and the layering of his own scent on Steve’s body. He nosed at his neck, dropping his own scent onto Steve’s skin, then leaned his temple against Steve’s head again. Steve pulled clothes from the wardrobe, then turned in Bucky’s arms and pecked his lips before moving away from him. Bucky watched his ass flex with a pout. It really was a shame to have to hide that beautiful ass.

“Stop staring at my butt and get dressed,” Steve announced.

“It’s so pretty, though,” Bucky sighed.

Steve’s ears were flaming red at this point. Bucky grinned and walked over, palming Steve’s ass and squeezing it again.

“It’s so gorgeous,” he said. “Perfect ass, best ass in the whole damn earth.”

“Do me a favor and get me underwear, then,” Steve said.

Bucky rolled his eyes, then smacked his ass gently and walked away again. “I can feel you rolling your eyes, Rogers!” he called over his shoulder, though it was mostly bullshit and he was just
guessing. He just knew Steve that well.

He still didn’t remember a lot, and what he did remember was vague and spotty, mostly flashing images of Steve’s gap-toothed grin at eight and his flushed cheeks at fourteen, but what he didn’t remember didn’t change what he knew. And he knew that Steve was a little shit who would roll his eyes all the way to China if he wasn’t careful.

Bucky took boxers out of the dresser, one for him and one for Steve, then tossed one towards his Omega and stepped into the other pair. He cast a mournful glance toward Steve when he tugged on his own underwear, then walked back over to take the clothes Steve handed him.

They dressed, and Bucky found himself tugging on the front of his slacks more than was decent. It didn’t help that all that staring at Steve’s ass left him more than a little interested. The pants were tailored for Steve’s slim hips and thighs, and were just too tight.

“Can I wear jeans?” Bucky sighed, knowing he had the one pair that fit him.

Steve glanced down at him, blushed, covered his abrupt grin and snort with a hand. “Yes,” he said while Bucky rolled his eyes. “I think that would be more appropriate.”

“Shuddup, these are your pants,” Bucky grumbled as he took them off again. “I’m not wearing a tie, either.”

“Fine,” Steve agreed while Bucky dug out his one pair of jeans. “Just so you’re decent.”

Bucky wandered back to his side while Steve was halfway through buttoning up his shirt and pressed a loud kiss to his cheek. Steve started, looking up, and Bucky took the opportunity to worm a hand into Steve’s half-buttoned shirt and pinch his nipple.

“I’m very rarely decent, babydoll, you should know that by now,” Bucky said in a very serious tone.

“Oh, my God,” Steve muttered, blushing and grinning. “Bucky, I hate you.”

“Love you, too,” Bucky said, kissing his cheek again, then swatted his ass. “Are we going or what?”
“Let me finish getting dressed,” Steve grumbled, then shooed at Bucky’s hand until he pulled it out of his shirt. “Keep your hands to appropriate places later, hound dog.”

“Not my fault you smell like candy,” Bucky defended himself, then stuck his nose into Steve’s neck and inhaled deeply to prove his point. “Swear, sugar, you smell better everyday.”

“Oh, no,” Steve said loudly, pushing at Bucky’s chest, “you’re not allowed to call me sugar until we get home again, ya hear?”

“What, I’m not doing anything,” Bucky insisted, then grabbed him by the waist and yanked him flush against his chest to stick his face into Steve’s neck and nibble at his scent gland. “Not a thing, sugar.”

“I know what you want when you call me that,” Steve said in a high-and-mighty tone, “and here it is, you ain’t getting no sugar from me until after this is over.”

“Aw, but doll,” Bucky whined, “not even a kiss? Or a touch?”

He slid his hands down Steve’s back to cup his ass. Steve grabbed his wrists and yanked his arms back up.

“Don’t make me threaten you with the couch,” Steve said, wagging a finger at him.

Bucky stuck out his bottom lip. “Don’t be mean to me, honey, I’m an old man.”

Steve narrowed his eyes at him and wagged the finger more. “We’re going to be late if you don’t let me get dressed.”

“Fifteen seconds,” Bucky said. Steve frowned and Bucky cupped the back of his head, then, before Steve could protest any longer, he kissed him soundly. Steve let out a muffled squawk, then draped his arms over Bucky’s shoulders and went slack in his arms, letting Bucky explore his mouth with his tongue and slide his hand back down the curve of his ass.

And Bucky kissed him for precisely fifteen seconds. Then he pulled away from Steve with a wet sound and took a step back, panting. Steve swayed for a second, his eyes glazed, then shook himself and blinked several times.
“That might hold me over until lunchtime,” Bucky said, smiling at his Omega.

“Huh?” Steve mumbled. Bucky grinned and took a step in to kiss his cheek. Steve shook his head again, then looked around the room before dropping his gaze down to his half-buttoned shirt. “Oh,” he added, and hastily finished buttoning it. Bucky smirked, trying not to think of the rest of their day and the prying eyes that would be sizing up his Omega, and Steve fixed a button he’d put through the wrong hole.

“You got a jacket for that?” Bucky asked, eyeing the way the shirt clung to Steve’s shoulders.

Steve nodded once, then yawned as he reached for his tie. Bucky pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans, watching Steve do up his tie, then pivoting on his heels when Steve walked away to take a jacket from the wardrobe.

“Ready?” Steve asked him. Bucky nodded, grabbing his leather jacket and shrugging it on, then held out a hand for Steve’s and pulled him against his side.

Bucky wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulders and squeezed gently. Steve dropped his temple against Bucky’s shoulder and pushed an arm around his waist in return as they approached the elevator.

Bucky cast a sidelong glance to the refrigerator. “We’re gonna get food along the way, right?”

Steve nodded and yawned again. “Coffee, too, probably.”

“Caffeine wouldn’t do nothing for you, anyway,” Bucky said.

Steve shrugged. “Nat gave me an iced coffee last time that had, dunno, maybe 10 shots of espresso in it? Might’ve helped a little bit.”

Bucky tugged Steve’s phone from his pocket while Steve called the elevator and he promptly used Google to find out what excessive caffeine intake could do to an Omega post-heat.

“Don’t do that,” Bucky remarked. “Might mess up your digestion.”
Steve made a face at him. “My digestion?” he repeated faintly.

Bucky put his phone back in his pocket. “It might give you diarrhea,” he said simply.

Steve made another face. “Ew,” he said.

“So don’t do it,” Bucky told him. Steve shook his head and shrugged.

“Fine,” he said, then yawned. “Not like it would do anything for me anyway.”

Bucky, without even thinking about it, angled their path to put Steve in the corner of the elevator when it opened. Steve put both arms around Bucky’s waist and leaned his head on his shoulder and Bucky hugged him back gently.

“Helipad, JARVIS,” Steve said toward the ceiling.

“Right away, Captain,” JARVIS replied softly. Bucky wondered if Stark programmed the AI to detect when people needed quiet tones because they were half-asleep still. Then he wondered why Stark would go through the trouble to do so.

He considered Mrs. Rogers’ copper kettle sitting in their kitchen, something old amongst everything new, and wondered if, perhaps, he judged Stark a bit too quickly.

The elevator doors parted again less than thirty seconds later. Steve lifted his head and dropped one arm, but left one wrapped around Bucky’s waist and Bucky did the same, leaving one arm to cover Steve’s shoulders. They crossed the kitchen and living room and pushed open the glass doors leading to the helipad, walking out into the early dawn light.

Bucky blinked and squinted, pulling Steve a little closer. There already were Barton, Romanoff, and Wilson, standing by the still helicopter speaking in quiet tones. Rather, Romanoff and Wilson were talking. Barton looked like he was asleep standing up.
Romanoff broke off when he and Steve approached. She nodded once to them and climbed into the helicopter, snapping her fingers at Barton as she passed him. Barton shook himself awake and followed her, while Wilson stepped near them.

“Morning,” he said, glancing between them. “Long night?”

Bucky didn’t answer, though Steve shrugged. Bucky looked down at him, wondering if Steve would ask Wilson about the therapist he’d recommended, but Steve said nothing and Wilson simply nodded before getting into the helicopter himself.

“Come on, then,” Wilson called to them. Bucky dropped his arm to the small of Steve’s back, then reached over and took his left hand with his left, to help him into the chopper.

“I got it,” Steve mumbled, but didn’t turn down Bucky’s hands. Bucky followed the small of his back with his hand as he climbed up, but was forced to let go of his hand in order to get in himself. To compensate, Bucky put an arm back around Steve the second he was settled into the back of the helicopter.

“Seatbelts,” Romanoff called out as she passed out headsets. Bucky took his arm back to pull on the earmuffs, then Steve nudged him and he automatically put it back.

“No, your seatbelt,” Steve said, his voice repeated over the comms. Bucky glanced down, then tried not to feel like an idiot and put on his seatbelt. Steve took his hand once it was free, and Bucky squeezed it.

“Barton, put up your microphone,” Romanoff said as she powered on the chopper.

“Why?” Barton questioned, looking confused.

“Because you’re just going to start snoring and it’s not fair to these guys to make them put up with that.”

“Rude,” Barton answered, but put up his microphone. Steve caught Bucky’s gaze and rolled his eyes. Bucky responded by tapping his chin and Steve just rolled his eyes again.
“Brace for liftoff,” Romanoff announced.

Bucky pressed Steve’s hand into his flesh hand instead of the metal one, then put his arm around Steve’s shoulders and gave him a brief squeeze. Steve squeezed his hand in return as the helicopter left the ground.

Bucky found his gaze turning out the window to his right, to the gray sky painted orange by the dawn. Romanoff curved the helicopter west, taking them south toward Staten Island and Jersey City. Bucky kept an eye on the skies, wary for enemies taking advantage of their transportation method. He swept an eye over the helicopter and saw rifle cases loaded into the cab behind them and felt reassured for their presence. He didn’t question why Romanoff had them, he could guess.

There would be no rest for the weary or the wicked, after all.

Steve was looking at his feet. Bucky moved his hand to his neck and pulled him in to lean on him; Steve parted his lips in an inaudible sigh and let his head rest against Bucky’s shoulder, his eyes closing. Bucky cast another glance around the cab. Barton’s head had fallen back and his mouth was open as he snored, Wilson and Romanoff sat stiffly in the front seats, silent. No one was paying attention to them. Bucky pressed a kiss to Steve’s hair and let his cheek rest there, his arm dropping to hold Steve’s waist instead of his neck.

Steve squeezed his hand again. Bucky looked back out the window, to the left now. Lady Liberty stood tall against the dawn.

Bucky kissed Steve’s hair again, feeling his fatigue. It would be over soon. They passed Lady Liberty by as she heralded the land of the free, eternally and inescapably.

[@moonythejedi307 ; 10/21/2014 12:47AM]

#SteveRogersNeedsAHug
The cafe she liked was swamped by media, so Natasha made the choice to skip it. She had told the cab driver to keep going and they continued to the senate building, ahead of schedule and uncaffeinated. Clint and Wilson were really the only ones affected by this; Barnes looked like he hadn’t slept in days and Rogers looked nearly worse, with heavy bags under his eyes, but none of them processed caffeine properly. Natasha half wondered if Steve would appreciate concealer.

The taxi stopped outside the senate building. Media still swarmed it, but now they were held back by ropes and the Secret Service was spread out over every inch of the building, visible and not she suspected. Natasha unclipped her seatbelt and got out of the taxi, followed readily by Wilson and Clint, but it took a second for their other two companions to leave the taxi.

The media were already screaming for their attention. When Barnes emerged from the taxi and paused to help Rogers out, they doubled their frenzy.

“Ignore them,” Natasha shot over her shoulder to Barnes; his eyes were flying, looking everywhere at once, obviously overwhelmed. Rogers clapped a hand to his shoulder and squeezed, and Barnes pushed an arm around his waist, hugging him almost.
The gathered reporters and journalists cried louder. Natasha jerked her head at them and began a brisk walk to the steps of the building. Clint fell instep beside her, hands behind his back, and glanced at her from the corner of his eye. Natasha flicked her gaze backward and saw Barnes still holding Rogers by the waist as they approached the Capitol building. She looked away. She had meant to warn them against that sort of behavior. Too late now.

Natasha grabbed an attendant and asked for someplace to wait for the inquiry to begin. The attendant, skittish, showed them an empty conference room and vanished right after. Clint searched the room for coffee and sighed sadly when he found none.

“Sit,” Natasha snapped at him, dropping into a chair. “You three, too.”

Wilson took the head of the table. Barnes pulled out Rogers’ chair for him, then just stood behind him. Natasha steeled her nerves and met his gaze.

“Sit,” she said firmly.

Barnes remained standing.

Clint dropped into a chair beside her, yawning, and Rogers reached up to touch Barnes’s hand. He said nothing, but a vein twitched in Barnes’s temple and he pulled out the seat next to Rogers. He sat.

Natasha hefted her briefcase onto the table and opened it. “Your blood sample has already been submitted to the inquiry panel,” she said. “Mrs. Hayle has been evaluated by their people and she’s being flown in to testify later this week. Mrs. Proctor has been asked to testify this week, as well.”

Rogers nodded shortly. Barnes made no response.

Natasha checked her email on her phone while she pulled out papers. “I’ve called in some favors and an attorney is meeting us this afternoon to discuss your case, Rogers. In the meantime, I’ve been told to tell you to keep your mouth shut.”

“Not like that’s not what I’ve been doing this whole time,” Rogers grumbled.
Natasha ignored his comment. “Answer direct questions only and with as few words as possible. If you’re put on the stand to give testimony, keep it brief, keep it vague. My job is to keep them focused on HYDRA until your attorney can meet us.”

“Does he need an attorney?” Barnes interrupted.

Natasha glanced at him. “Unfortunately,” she said shortly. Barnes’s expression clouded and he picked up one of Rogers’ hands, squeezing it.

“And stop doing that,” Natasha added, pointing to their clasped hands. “No PDA, especially no scenting.”

Barnes scowled. “Why?” he said gruffly.

“You’re trying to preserve his image,” Natasha said. “The worst thing you could do is scent him on TV.”

“What’s so wrong with scenting?” Rogers snapped.

Natasha sighed. She flicked her gaze over her inbox, put away her phone and sorted through papers. “It’s antiquated,” she said, going for the polite version. “Overly possessive, too. It reduces you to property, Rogers. Alphas that scent-mark their Omegas in public tend to abuse them in private.”

Barnes gripped Rogers’s hand tighter. “But –”

“Just don’t do it in public,” Natasha interrupted. “Keep your hands to yourself in court.”

She dug out a box from the bottom of her briefcase and pushed it towards Barnes. “Put those in your ears,” she said.

Barnes let go of Rogers’s hand and opened the box. “What is this?”

“Specialized hearing aids,” Natasha told him. “Only they’ll block out all sound instead of amplifying
it. If any media involving you is displayed, it may include triggers. Activate those and you’ll be rendered completely deaf until you turn them off.”

Barnes pulled out the hearing aids, then the remote. “Thanks,” he muttered. Natasha nodded shortly.

“We’re gonna try and keep the focus on Project Insight,” Natasha went on as Barnes hooked the hearing aids up to his ears. “Rogers, I need you to prepare to discuss what happened when we took the helicarriers down.”

Rogers nodded once.

“Wilson, you may be asked to speak as well,” Natasha said. Wilson coped Rogers’ nod. “Barnes, you just try not to say anything. The more we can project wounded vet, the better.”

Barnes scowled. “Then why can’t I cling to Steve like he’s my teddy bear?”

“I said wounded vet, not child,” Natasha snapped.

“Anyone can need a teddy bear to cling to,” Wilson threw in placatingly.

“Just try not to say anything,” Natasha insisted. “Let one of us speak for you.”

Barnes did not lessen his scowl. “What if I have something to say?”

“Wait until you speak with the attorney,” Natasha said, thinking he was just like Rogers. Why are there two of them?

“What if they ask about us?” Rogers interrupted. “Or – Or my past –”

“Politely remind them that your business before your time as Captain America is not the point of this inquiry,” Natasha said firmly. “There’s no point in letting the cat out of the bag before we absolutely have to.”
Barnes looked frustrated and Rogers looked disheartened. Natasha fixed her gaze on her paperwork and tried not to let either of their emotional states affect her.

“We’re meeting the attorney at recess,” she reminded them. “If we can, we’ll find a way to not talk about your past at all, Cap.”

“They’ll want to know –” Rogers started and Natasha shrugged simply.

“If we have to say, then so be it,” she said. “But if we don’t, then we don’t.”

“No offense,” Rogers said, looking at the table, “but you’re not the one having to come out as a reformed prostitute.”

Clint’s cheek slipped off his fist where he’d been resting it, but the rest of them ignored him. Natasha fixed Rogers with a firm gaze.

“You’re not the only one with secrets, Cap,” she said. “Yours just weren’t on the books.”

Rogers dropped his gaze, jaw tight. Natasha shook her head and shuffled through her papers some more. There wasn’t anything else she had to say to them.

* 

[ @june_clark, 10/21/2014 1:26AM]

The United States of America after hearing that Captain America has secretly been an Omega this whole time. #SteveRogersNeedsAHug
The same aide that had led them to the room at eight o’clock knocked on the door at ten to nine. Natasha put away her papers without a word and stood. The others followed suit, and Bucky offered a hand to him as Steve stood up. Natasha had told them to avoid PDA, but Steve didn’t have the resolve to not hold onto Bucky’s hand even after they’d left the room.

They left the conference room without a word. Steve expected the aide to take them back to the courtroom at the front of the building that the inquiry had been held in previously, but instead of turning right out of the conference room, the aide turned left.

“Where are we going?” Natasha asked immediately.
“Uh, you should have received a memo,” the aide said, pointing down the hallway. “They’re meeting before the Senate now.”

Steve shot Natasha a hard look, but she didn’t return it. She steeled her jaw and nodded once.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Bucky squeezed Steve’s hand. Steve squeezed it back, then, taking a deep breath, let go.

Bucky shoved his hands into his pockets, his gaze dropping. Steve wanted to snatch his hand back, but instead held them firmly at his sides. His jaw tightened as well. A molar in the back of his mouth began a faint, pulsing ache.

The United States Senate met in an impressive, tiered room. Steve would have taken a moment to admire the architecture, having never been there before, had it not been for the massive lump of anxiety in his chest that grew with every step he took into the room. The aide fell behind as they entered, Natasha taking the lead, and the Senate looked down at them with hardened gazes and harder hearts.

Steve felt like they already knew what he had to tell them, and they were already judging him for it.

“Please take a seat,” Congressman Wenham announced.

In the center of the room, the inquiry panel had taken center stage in a semicircle. Before them was a pulpit, and behind that another panel for Steve and his companions. The desks formed a ring, with the pulpit at its center. Steve, looking up at the rising seats of the Senate, was reminded of the Roman Colosseum.

At the second ring of desks, Natasha took the centermost seat and Clint went for the one on her right, so Steve sat at her left. Bucky took the seat next to him and Sam was left on Clint’s right. The Senate’s eyes bored down on them.

And then there were the gathered media. Ringing the players of the inquiry were bullpens, full to bursting with different reporters, camerapersons, journalists, and other spectators. Like dens of lions.
The cameras flashed as they filed in and took their seats, the clicks of the shutters deafening in the otherwise silent room.

Wenham lifted his gavel and hit it once. It echoed throughout the chamber and Steve flinched reflexively.

“This session of the inquiry into Project Insight and the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. is now begun,” Wenham announced. “We resume where we left off after Captain Rogers had to retire due to injury after the terrorist attack on this building two weeks ago. Agent Romanoff, any opening remarks?”

“Thank you, Congressmen,” Natasha answered, and while she sounded completely respectful, she managed to make it sound woefully disingenuous, like she was thanking him for granting her a God-given right. She took a moment to shuffle her papers, sort through them, arrange them on the desk before her, and Steve admired that quiet power move. Natasha had the microphone in that moment and she was prolonging it while maintaining calm.

Finally she folded her hands and looked up with a smile. “I’d just like to say how lovely a surprise it is to be meeting before the whole Senate,” she began. “I had no idea that the United States government was finally taking a sincere interest into the infiltration of an eighty year old Nazi cult into one of the most powerful branches of our military.”

Steve had to give her props. Natasha was ballsy and unapologetic. Congressman Wenham did not look impressed. Cameras flashed around them and Steve fancied he could hear the pens scratching as they notated Natasha’s every word.

“You were sent a memo about the change in meeting places,” Wenham said coldly.

“Ah, yes, I was,” Natasha said, picking up her phone. “At eight-forty this morning. Did you shut down your computer before it left your outbox, Congressman, or did you intend to spring this on me?”

A vein pulsed in Wenham’s temple. Steve looked at him judgmentfully. They were not respecting him or Natasha. Thus, he owed them just the same.

“Do you have anything else to say before we begin?” Wenham demanded.
“Yes, you will see I have brought with me this morning Sergeant Major Barnes,” Natasha said. Steve was a little startled to hear her using Bucky’s full rank; most people just said sergeant, but Bucky had gotten to to E-9 by the time he’d – Fallen. Cameras flashed in their direction and Steve tried not to feel like a deer in headlights. “And his counsellor, former Master-Sergeant Samuel Wilson of the Air Force, who was instrumental in the halting of Project Insight’s launch in September.”

Bucky gripped Steve’s knee under the table. Steve let his hand come to rest on top of Bucky’s and squeezed it.

“Sergeant Major Barnes, as has been shown, suffered severe mental conditioning while in the hands of HYDRA, so he has been equipped with a noise cancelling device for use during any media played containing potential triggers,” Natasha was saying. “In the event that the Winter Soldier is triggered, he and Master-Sergeant Wilson will leave the Senate chamber.”

“Will Captain Rogers attend his Alpha?” Congressman Wenham asked snidely. Steve tightened his jaw. Say nothing, Natasha had insisted.

“Wilson is a perfectly capable therapist,” Natasha answered calmly. “He has worked for the VA counselling veterans suffering from PTSD for the past five years now. Captain Rogers’ exit from the hall would only be necessary if the hall were evacuated en masse.”

“Is that a possibility?” Wenham snapped.

“You asked me to bring a brainwashed and barely-stable assassin to sit before an inquiry,” Natasha answered sharply. Steve curled his hands into a fist, his nails bit into his palm, but she had a point. She wasn’t wrong, even if her words were harsh. “An inquiry, not a trial. Sergeant Major Barnes is the longest serving prisoner of war to date and his triggers can be extremely violent.”

Steve could tell Bucky was gearing to open his mouth and squeezed his hand again to placate him. They needed pity and a little bit of fear then, no matter how much Bucky disliked it.

“You asked,” Natasha concluded, then spread her hands. “I obeyed.”

Wenham suffered another vein twitching in his temple. The way Natasha phrased it, if Bucky was triggered and posed any threat to those gathered, she put the blame on the inquiry panel for insisting on his presence. Steve wondered if Natasha would have refused Wenham’s request if Bucky hadn’t wanted to accompany them anyway. And how she would have spun it then.
“Very well,” Wenham said. He chewed on his tongue for a moment, looking like he regretted his decisions in life so far. “You say Sergeant Barnes has been equipped to block out audio?”

“He has,” Natasha answered. “Reverse of hearing aids, so to speak. S.H.I.E.L.D. developed them for my use when I was being deconditioned after defecting from the Red Room.”

Her words jarred Steve. He had forgotten that Natasha had once been in Bucky’s shoes. How could he have forgotten that?

“They are remote controlled. Sergeant Barnes has it.”

“Then we will give him a moment to activate them before playing any audio concerning him.”

“Thank you, Congressman,” Natasha answered, again sounding like she hardly meant it. “No further remarks.”

Wenham gave a slow nod. He lifted his gavel and let it fall heavily once more. Steve flinched.

“Today’s discussions will focus on the crimes of the Winter Soldier,” Wenham began. “Since its appearance –”

“His,” Steve interrupted angrily.

“My error,” Wenham said. He picked up a sheet of paper. “Since his appearance in Russia during the cold war, the Winter Soldier has committed an estimate of eight hundred and fifty murders, two hundred and eighty kidnappings, three hundred acts of arson, four hundred and ten bombings, and perhaps another three hundred violations of the Geneva Convention.”

Bucky’s fingers tightened on Steve’s hand. Steve matched it, praying he would remember that it was not his fault.

Wenham set down the paper and folded his fingers. “And I think it’s fair to say he has also
committed at least one act of domestic violence,” he said, looking coldly at Steve and Bucky.

“Do you think so?” Natasha countered. “I assume you’re discussing the events of the downfall of Project Insight.”

“Clearly,” Wenham said.

Bucky’s hand started to pull away. Steve squeezed it tighter, drawing it closer to him. “It wasn’t your fault,” he hissed out of the corner of his lips.

“I really think that depends on what you define as domestic violence as opposed to regular violence,” Natasha carried on. “As Sergeant Barnes was not in control of his person at the time, I wouldn’t call it domestic.”

“You could say a drunken Alpha isn’t in control of his person,” Wenham argued, “but I would say that even then, if he hits his Omega, it’s domestic violence.”

Steve glanced at Bucky and clenched his jaw, grabbing his hand with both of his now and holding tightly. “It wasn’t your fault,” he whispered again. Bucky was looking sorrowfully at the desk in front of him.

“I wouldn’t say a drunken man isn’t in control of himself,” Natasha answered coldly. “Alcohol only lowers your inhibitions and if a man is willing to hit his spouse while drunk, then the urge must have originated in his sober moments. Secondly, I would like to point out that drunkenness is nothing like the extreme psychological conditioning Sergeant Major Barnes suffered.”

“I guess that brings us to the point at hand,” Wenham said. “Should the Winter Soldier be brought before trial for his crimes?”

Natasha leaned forward in her seat. “Before we can ask that question, we need to discover if the Winter Soldier is really a man at all or rather the product of decades of endless physical and psychological torture. If that is the case, then I believe that would be cause for diagnosing Sergeant Major Barnes with Multiple Personality Disorder.”

Bucky’s gaze never left the desk. Steve wished he could put his arm around him, or pull Bucky’s hands around his waist, or even run his wrist over Bucky’s skin. But he couldn’t do any of that without being noticed and Natasha insisted it would hurt their case more than it would help. Steve just squeezed Bucky’s hand.
“What’s your point, Agent Romanoff?” Wenham asked sharply.

“I think the real question that you should be asking is, should Sergeant Major Barnes be brought before trial for the crime of succumbing to the decades of physical and psychological torture?” Natasha said. “And if you’re asking that question, then I ask, should Sergeant Major Barnes be held accountable for the crimes of the people who broke down his mental facilities until he no longer knew who he was?”

“Obviously we cannot blame Sergeant Major Barnes for the acts of others,” Wenham said. “But we must ask if Barnes truly wasn’t in control of his person.”

“You’ve seen his files,” Natasha argued in return. “You’ve seen the experiments and testing and abuse he was put through. Sergeant Major Barnes hardly remembers who he is, who his family are, his mind has been left with severe damage let alone the physical scars he bears. I don’t believe there is a question as to whether or not he was in control of himself while in the hands of HYDRA.”

“What you believe, Agent Romanoff, is not the discussion of this inquiry,” Wenham insisted.

Natasha leaned back. Steve cast another glance at Bucky and found him staring listlessly now. Steve took Bucky’s fingers and pressed them to the scent gland under his wrist, not rubbing it, but drawing a little of the oil from his skin into Bucky’s. It was all he could do.

“What do you propose?” Natasha asked. “That Sergeant Major Barnes be tried for HYDRA’s crimes?”

“I propose he be tried for his crimes,” Wenham said, lifting his list of Bucky’s estimated atrocities. “And that the question of if Sergeant Major Barnes should or should not be held responsible for his actions while in the custody of the terrorist organization known as HYDRA be asked before a grand jury to be indicted for these crimes.”

“Is that what you suggest?” Natasha asked.

“That is what I suggest,” Wenham said firmly. “In fact, I pose it to the Senate’s vote. Should the Winter Soldier –”

“His name is James Barnes,” Steve cut in.
“Should the Winter Soldier,” Wenham repeated – louder this time, crueler, and Steve cupped Bucky’s hand between his palms – “be brought before a grand jury? Show of hands.”

Steve looked anxiously around the room. The first hand lifted. Steve looked at Bucky and then at Natasha as Senators lifted their hands in a tidal wave.

Wenham didn’t even look. He lifted his gavel and let it fall, echoing harshly throughout the room. Steve reflexively flinched.

“Majority rules,” Wenham said. “A time and date shall be arranged for the Winter Soldier to be brought before trial. Given his violent nature and Captain Rogers apparent lack of concern, Sergeant Major Barnes should be kept confined to house arrest until further decision.”

“Do you plan to arrest Sergeant Major Barnes?” Natasha demanded.

“Sergeant Barnes should remain under house arrest until a decision is made,” Wenham repeated.

“Make that decision now,” Natasha snapped. “Sergeant Major Barnes has the right to know if you plan to arrest and house him in government facilities.”

Wenham looked to his left and right. He covered his microphone and his words were lost as he whispered to the rest of the inquiry panel.

Steve took the opportunity to lean closer to Bucky. “It’s going to be alright,” he murmured.

Bucky did not respond. He stared blankly ahead. Steve gave up. He withdrew his left hand from Bucky’s grip and pushed it around his waist, squeezing lightly.

“Bucky?” he pressed gently. “Can you hear me?”

Slowly, Bucky nodded. Steve let out a careful breath.

“Do you need to leave?” he asked.
Bucky shook his head. His grip abruptly doubled on Steve’s hand and Steve let out a sigh of relief; he briefly put his forehead on Bucky’s shoulder, then withdrew his arm and covered the back of Bucky’s hand with his left hand again, squeezing it back.

Wenham uncovered his microphone. “Sergeant Barnes will be kept under house arrest until a decision is made before a jury. As this is an indictment trial, he will not be taken into government custody.”

“Thank you,” Natasha said, with an air of *that wasn’t so difficult, was it?* “Sergeant Major Barnes will be represented by Nelson and Murdock, attorneys at law, all proceedings should be run by them.”

“You seem very prepared for this,” Wenham remarked.

“I had them on retainer,” Natasha answered calmly.

Wenham raised his eyebrows, then began sorting through his papers.

“Mr. Nelson and Mr. Murdock will be joining us this afternoon as well,” Natasha added before Wenham could open his mouth again. “Just to be prepared.”

Wenham did not look pleased. “Very well,” he said. “You have the right to legal counsel, Agent Romanoff.”

Natasha smiled sweetly. Steve was starting to feel a bit sick.

“Moving on,” Wenham said. “Remaining to be discussed, the involvement of members of the group known as the Avengers in the downfall of Project Insight. The involvement of members of the group known as the Avengers in the releasing of classified information to the public. Captain Rogers’ deceitful campaign against the American people, and lastly, Captain Rogers’ illicit relationship with Sergeant Major Barnes.”

Steve felt the molar in the back of his mouth starting to ache a little more urgently. His jaw refused to release pressure.

“As I have already reminded you, Congressman Wenham,” Natasha started, “I released the
information to the public to expose HYDRA and as such, am considered a whistleblower.”

“Yet you released information that was not related to HYDRA as well,” Wenham said. Steve tried to relax his jaw a little, seeing that Natasha had done as she promised and was keeping the spotlight off of him and Bucky.

Well, as much as she could.

“At the time, I had no way of knowing what did and did not contain information the public had a right to know,” Natasha said. “And I understand that not even your associates have been able to fully sort through all the information I released to determine what is and what is not a threat to the public trust.”

“Agent Romanoff, you have a history of turning your back on your country,” Wenham said, lifting a new piece of paper now. “You openly admit to having been a former agent of the Soviet Union before its dissolution as well as an agent of the Red Room, which, as you have so thoroughly said, is an affiliate of HYDRA.”

“I was an agent of the KGB when I was a child,” Natasha answered. “I was only seven when the Soviet Union dissolved.”

“Yet you did not join SHIELD until 2006,” Wenham said.

“With all due respect, Congressman, my actions while in the custody of the Red Room are not subject to this inquiry,” Natasha said. “I was granted pardon and citizenship upon my entry to SHIELD.”

“Much like Operation Paperclip,” Wenham remarked.

Natasha smiled tightly. “Unlike Operation Paperclip, I was kept under observation and supervised throughout my time serving at SHIELD.”

“Until you decided to take it down,” Wenham answered. “You see how I’m suspicious here.”
“She was acting under orders,” Steve interrupted.

Natasha shot him a look. Steve ignored her.

“It was my order to release all SHIELD’S information to expose HYDRA,” he said. “I made the call to take out SHIELD.”

“Why?” Wenham asked. “And what gave you the right to do that?”

“HYDRA had infected SHIELD,” Steve said. “There was no way to salvage what would be left after the fall of Project Insight without risking giving HYDRA just another dark corner to hide in and grow.”

“What gave you the right to make that call?” Wenham asked again.

Steve didn’t bite back, he took a second to breathe and keep a sharp retort from letting loose. Fury had allowed him to make that call, except Fury was for all concerns dead and he couldn’t betray that.

“I was the ranking officer,” he said. “Everyone higher up that wasn’t HYDRA was dead, I was the only one left.”

Steve looked at Wenham and silently dared him to ask what made him the ranking officer. Steve had been officially awarded the rank of Captain and was the most decorated World War II veteran in the United States. He glared at Wenham and dared to him to suggest that all of that meant nothing because of his designation.

“Then I’ll return to the question of your deception,” Wenham said. “Do you deserve to be the ranking officer with how you’ve lied to the American people throughout your career?”

“If I could, please,” Natasha said before Steve could answer, “remind the panel of the blood sample I submitted yesterday and the testimony from Mrs. Susan Hayle, which we’ll be hearing later this week, that it was the United States government which decided to bury Steve’s designation in lies.”

“On the off chance that it was actually a United States Senator that chose to manufacture such a massive lie,” Wenham said sarcastically, “I’d like to ask Captain Rogers why he kept the secret even after entering this century.”
“Is that the subject of this inquiry?” Natasha demanded.

“Captain Rogers is subject to answer any question—”

“Is whether or not Steve Rogers was ever in a state, mentally or physically, where he could betray the manufactured image of Captain America the subject of this inquiry?” Natasha said loudly. “If you would like to interrogate Rogers and dig up his whole life, call to put him on trial,” she challenged.

The room was silent. No, not quite; camera’s shutter went off. A pen scratched. Someone was tapping a pencil. It was that silent in the Senate.

Steve held his breath. Wenham said nothing.

“But in the meantime,” Natasha finished, her voice a hushed tone in the reverent silence, “can we stay on the subject of this inquiry?”

“Was Captain Rogers responsible for the deception?” Wenham asked.

“He was not,” Natasha answered coldly.

Wenham tipped his head to the side. “We shall see.”

Steve let his gaze fall to the desk. Bucky twisted his hand in his grip, not pulling away, but pushing toward him. Bucky rubbed the inside of his wrist against Steve’s fingers and Steve let out the breath he’d been holding.

“What is the subject of this inquiry is Captain Rogers illicit relationship with Sergeant Barnes,” Wenham said. “Let’s discuss that.”

“Captain Rogers’ relationship with Sergeant Barnes began a long time before either of them joined the military,” Natasha said. “To testify to that, Sergeant Major Barnes’ sister, Mrs. Rebecca Proctor, will be joining us.”

“Didn’t Captain Rogers admit that he and Sergeant Barnes were separated?” Wenham asked. “What
“Did he say, in the early 30s?”

“Mrs. Proctor will testify that their relationship began then,” Natasha said.

“In order to be excused from reprimanding for having a physical relationship, Sergeant Barnes must have cared for Captain Rogers during a luteal phase in his fertility cycle,” Wenham said, his voice sounding triumphant, like he’d won already, “and if they separated in the early 1930s, I highly doubt that that had happened.”

“Mrs. Proctor will testify that it did,” Natasha answered calmly. “In January of 1933.”

Wenham’s vindictive look flicked into shock. Someone behind them dropped a pen. Steve saw Senators turning and whispering to one another, reporters exchanging harsh whispers, more than one person trying to fathom: How old was he then?

Bucky gently shook Steve’s hand. His eyes never left the desk’s surface, but his grip remained strong.

“You have eyewitness testimony to that?” Wenham challenged.

“Sergeant Major Barnes’s younger sister,” Natasha said. “Captain Rogers presented in January of 1933. Sergeant Major Barnes was present and cared for him.”

“That’s impossible,” Wenham said, looking horrified.

“It is possible,” Natasha said, “the World Health Organization has reported young girls in starving countries presenting at premature ages. The Great Depression was in full swing in 1933, America was a starving country then. It happened, to more Omegas than just him.”

“We will speak with Mrs. Proctor tomorrow,” Wenham said. “We will – We will return to the information released at the fall of SHIELD. This subject is tabled until tomorrow.”

Steve felt relief course through him. Then guilt, remembering that Bucky had to go before a grand jury and prove that he wasn’t at fault for what HYDRA made him do and Steve was just getting out
of telling his life story for another day. Bucky squeezed his hand back.

At least they weren’t asking to prove HYDRA was real anymore. Thank God for small mercies, after all.

Steve zoned out while Natasha argued paperwork with the inquiry panel. He kept leaning toward Bucky, meaning to put his head on his shoulder, then jerked upright again when he remembered they had to refrain from displaying physical affection. Though, it was by then obvious that he and Bucky were holding hands under the table. Steve couldn’t summon the energy to feel guilty about that.

Finally, they breaked for lunch. When Steve stood up, he cracked his neck and rolled his shoulders, feeling painfully stiff from sitting tensely for so long.

“We have places to be, let’s move it,” Natasha snapped, pushing on his shoulder.

Bucky let out a quiet growl. Natasha jerked her hand away, but shot him a glare. Steve gave him a reproving look and Bucky dropped his gaze.

“Sorry,” he muttered, squeezing Steve’s hand.

Natasha shook her head. “Just go.”

Upon exiting the Senate building, Steve felt nearly deafened by the media swarm. At least this time they were held back and couldn’t rush them. Natasha hailed a couple of taxis, then shouted something over the yelling of the media to Sam; Steve couldn’t hear it. He edged nearer to Bucky, feeling anxious.

Sam turned back and waved them to the second taxi. “We’re gonna follow them,” he called. “Get in.”

Steve climbed into the back of the taxi, taking the far window seat and feeling grateful for the four walls of the car. Bucky climbed into next to him and grasped his knee, holding tightly, while Sam got in and shut the door.
“Follow that cab, please,” Sam said to the driver.

“No problemo, hoss,” the driver answered, putting the car in drive.

Steve put his head on Bucky’s shoulder finally. Bucky wormed an arm around his waist and let his cheek rest against his hair.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Bucky murmured. “We can get through this.”

Steve said nothing. The driver was listening.

As the taxi driver made his way into traffic, Bucky began sweeping a thumb in a pattern over Steve’s knee. Steve shut his eyes and exhaled a long breath.

“So, uh, I been hearing you guys on the radio,” the driver started. Making small talk. Steve opened his eyes to look in the rearview mirror, finding the driver looking back at him.

Bucky made a soft growl deep in his chest. Steve pinched his leg and he cut it out.

“Y’all good back there?” the driver asked.

“We good,” Sam answered. “What’re they saying on the radio?”

“Nothin’ nice,” the driver answered darkly. “But hey, Cap saved my niece way back in New York when them aliens ripped open the sky, so I just turn the radio off.”

Steve lifted his head. “How is she now?”

“My niece?” the driver said. “Shoot, she wants to be Miss Captain America when she grows up, man.”
Steve gave a little smile. “Maybe she could do it better than me.”

“I don’t know, man,” the driver answered with a shrug. “She’s blind now, but ya never know.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve said then and the driver gave a shrug.

“She alright,” the driver said, “she’s doin’ good with Braille and all, and she keeps insisting she gon’ be an Avenger anyway.”

Bucky squeezed Steve’s knee gently. Steve rested his head against Bucky’s shoulder again.

“Y’know, I keep sayin’ it’s criminal how they treating you guys,” the driver added. “You save the planet, what, a thousand times, and one little thing comes up and they trying to crucify you. Criminal.”


“It’s common decency,” the driver insisted with a firm nod. “I keep sayin’ it, and y’know, plenty of people are mad about this whole inquiry shit, I signed a petition over at that Change dot org the other day sayin’ y’all deserve medals and a cushy retirement.”

Steve didn’t know how to respond to this. This… He didn’t realize the people would sympathize with him… He hadn’t expected…

“Thank you,” Steve said a second time. “You don’t know how reassuring that is to hear, really.”

“That says something for how we is as a nation,” the driver added. “If our own Captain America don’t believe the people be at his back – That’s sad, man. See, my niece swore up and down since you pulled her outta the rubble that you’s an Omega, I don’t know how she knew, but she did, and nobody ever believed her ’til all this came out!”

Steve tried to think back, trying to remember the child. But there had been so many…
“What was her name?” he asked, leaning forward.

“Diya,” the driver said. “She’s turning seven in a couple weeks.”

“Tell her happy birthday for me,” Steve said. “And that when she grows up, if she still wants to be an Avenger, all she’s got to do is try her best.”

“That’s gonna make her day,” the driver said with a grin. There was a rest in traffic and the driver twisted around to look at him. “Hey, do ya think I could get a video to show her?”

“Sure,” Steve said. The driver grinned again and grabbed his cellphone. He opened up his camera and Steve leaned his elbows against the partition, smiling. Bucky’s hand rested on his back.

“Hey, Diya,” the driver started. “Guess who takin’ a ride in my taxi?”

“Hi, Diya,” Steve said, wondering what to say to a little girl whose life he had saved, but not her vision. “It’s Captain America. Your uncle tells me you’re nearly seven, happy birthday.”

“It’s Captain America!” the driver repeated. “Happy birthday, squirt!”

The light turned green and the driver put away his phone to pull forward. Steve leaned back against his seat.

“What’s your name?” Steve asked.

“Jay,” the driver answered. “Short for James, my momma wanted to call me Jim but my dad said e’ry James was gonna go by Jim and Jay’d be unique.”

“Too many fuckin’ James’s,” Bucky said abruptly.

“Too many fuckin’ James’s,” Jay agreed happily.
“That’s why this lug goes by his middle name,” Steve said, jerking a thumb at Bucky.

“Nah, I go by Bucky ‘cause you couldn’t get your mouth around James when you was two!” Bucky insisted.

Steve grinned at him and leaned back in his seat, putting a hand on Bucky’s thigh. “Details,” he said.

“Lucky you’re fuckin’ cute,” Bucky grumbled.

In the other corner of the car, Sam had begun quietly wheezing. Steve glanced at him and rolled his eyes; he was just laughing.

“You’re like an old married couple,” Jay laughed.

“They are,” Sam wheezed.

Jay glanced in the mirror. “No shit? Thought gays was illegal in your time, Cap.”

“It was legal in France,” Steve insisted. They were in Italy, but it was close enough.

“That’s amazing,” Jay said, laughing again. “Captain America got gay married way back when my great-granddad was preaching that gays were goin’ to Hell. I tell ya, y’all’s given the best story I ever heard in twenty years driving a taxi. Twenty years!”

Steve, grinning, leaned into Bucky’s side while Bucky wrapped an arm around his shoulders and squeezed. He felt the relief in Bucky as strong as he felt it in his own chest. The people weren’t against them. The people weren’t against them!

“My sister, lil’ Diya’s momma, she used to swear up and down that there was somethin’ in those old newreels of the two’s of you,” Jay told them, “somethin’ in the way you looked at each other. She was a shrink, but one of them fancy ones that only ever deals with people’s sex lives. She be dancin’ up in Heaven knowin’ she was right.”
“She passed away?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Jay said sadly. “Same thing that blinded Diya. Now, don’t go gettin’ that long look, Cap,”
Jay added, even before Steve’s grin could fully fade. “She kept Diya from gettin’ killed, when you
came along you just finished what she started. My cousin’s a war vet, he got all kinds of survivor’s
guilt comin’ back from Iraq, so I know you gotta have somethin.’ Don’t feel bad.”

“I’ll try,” Steve answered, feeling touched.

“That’s some wisdom, right there,” Sam threw in. “You boys should listen.”

Bucky squeezed Steve’s shoulders again, saying nothing. Steve flashed him a smile and let his head
rest on his shoulder, trying to take their driver’s advice. Don’t feel bad. It wasn’t his fault.

He had been telling Bucky that this whole time, it was time he start telling it to himself.

“I think we’re here,” Jay said a moment later. “Your pal’s pulled off, here we go.”

Jay pulled the cab up to the curb and put it in park as Natasha got out of the other taxi. The curb was
on Steve’s side of the road, so he popped open his door and slipped out to let Bucky and Sam get
out.

Natasha paid both taxi drivers and Steve took a moment to thank Jay; he really couldn’t understand
how much that ten minute drive had lifted his spirits. Natasha lead them inside a restaurant, loud,
dark, and Bucky held onto Steve’s hand tightly as he looked around nervously.

“We’re in the back room,” Natasha said over her shoulder. No one offered to lead them to their table
and Natasha simply walked straight back to a private room, the doorway shielded by a curtain of
beads.

Two men sat at the third in a row of tables. They looked young for attorneys, which did not bolster
Steve’s faith in them. One of the two wore sunglasses despite the dark interior, but as they
approached, the cane at his side made it plain that he was blind.
“Nelson and Murdock,” Natasha said, taking a chair. “You know who these people are.”

“Uh, yeah,” the not blind attorney answered, looking between Natasha and Bucky with slight concern. “Uh, I thought that it would just be you and Captain Rogers?”

“Please sit,” the blind one said. “We have a lot to discuss in a very short time frame.”

“Which one’s Nelson and which one’s Murdock?” Bucky asked abruptly.

The not blind one pointed to the blind. “Murdock,” he said, then pointed to himself. “Nelson. Foggy Nelson.”

Bucky squinted. “And I thought I had a weird ass name.”


“No, it’s okay,” Nelson answered, “I’m used to it.”

“Still,” Steve said. He had meant Bucky insulting his own name, but didn’t think it polite to actually say that.

“Sit,” Murdock said, lifting a hand.

“How do you know we’re not sitting?” Bucky asked suspiciously.

“Bucky!” Steve hissed.

“Your voices are coming from over there,” Murdock said, pointing directly at them. “The chairs are here.”

He shifted his finger to point at the chairs. Steve shot Bucky a reproving look, then went to pull out a
chair. Bucky beat him to it and pulled it out for him; Steve rolled his eyes, but sat.

“If you’re done being cute,” Natasha said sharply. She said nothing else. Bucky took the end seat at
the table and Clint and Sam sat to Natasha’s right.

“We were watching the broadcast,” Nelson said, lifting his phone, “well, I was watching, Matt was
listening –”

“We know Sergeant Major Barnes is going to be brought before a grand jury to be indicted,”
Murdock interrupted. “Which is the point.”


“We’ve reviewed the information you sent us, Ms Romanoff,” Murdock continued, “and I believe
we’ll be able to garner enough sympathy that Captain Rogers should be spared having to submit to
the blatant infringement of his privacy that this inquiry had been so far.”

“I signed away my right to privacy,” Steve said.

Murdock’s head tipped toward him. “You did sign a contract, yes,” he agreed. “But to lead a
transparent life the rest of your days? No.”

“What are you suggesting?” Natasha asked.

“Did you receive legal counsel before signing the contract, Captain?” Murdock asked.

“Did you receive any counsel?” Nelson added.

“No,” Steve said, thinking back. It had been a long time since Project Rebirth, even for his enhanced
memory. “I think they just gave it to me and told me to sign it.”

“Did you read through it?” Nelson asked.
“Not really,” Steve said, looking between them. “I – uh, I couldn’t really…”

“Couldn’t what?” Nelson prompted.

“See it,” Steve said, feeling awkward. “I had astigmatism, it was really small print –”

“And was Senator Brandt or whoever wrote the contract aware that you were visually impaired?” Murdock asked, while Nelson took out a thin journal and began to take notes.

“It was written by Brandt, yeah,” Steve answered. “I think he knew. Why would that matter?”

“It can cast doubt on his character,” Nelson said, looking at his notes. “A guy gives a blind man a contract and doesn’t offer him any way to read it before signing it, seems pretty shady. Makes you look better, too.”

“What about the contract itself?” Natasha interrupted. “Is there any way to get him out of it?”

“Yes, actually,” Murdock said, “if he dies.”

Bucky glared at Murdock, who did not seem bothered. Murdock gave them a dry smile.

“Or,” Nelson added, pointing his pen at Steve, “if you withdraw from the US military.”

“It can’t be that simple,” Steve said.

“Yeah, actually,” Nelson insisted, “you retire, you fulfil the contract.”

“But he can’t just retire in the middle of this inquiry,” Natasha said.

“No, he cannot,” Nelson agreed. “So, we gotta shame the panel into admitting that they’re just bullying an old man who just wants to go home and yell at kids to get off his lawn.”
“I don’t have a lawn,” Steve spluttered, “I’m living in Manhattan.”

“Metaphorically,” Nelson said. “But the point stands.”

“That’s your plan?” Natasha asked, dumbfounded. “Tell Congress that they’re being bullies and they should leave Rogers alone?”

“To put it simply,” Murdock answered.

“You told me you could actually win this,” Natasha snapped. “This is not a plan!”

“But it is,” Murdock told her. He spread his hands, raising his eyebrows. “Are not Congress governed by the people? Are not the people drama lovers who are obsessed with their national heroes? If we garner enough sympathy for Captain Rogers, Congressman Wenham will have no choice but to back off on his grilling of the Captain or face losing the next election. It is that simple.”

“If this doesn’t work –” Natasha said angrily.

“Hey, we got a kid off of murder with this tactic,” Nelson cut her off. “It works.”

“So, I make people pity me,” Steve said bitterly. “Should we remind them of the fact that I was dying by the time I joined the army and Project Rebirth saved my life? Or just parade the list of my physical shortcomings for their consumption again? You could show them actual photos of me at school, the dress I had to wear was pitiful enough.”

“That would help,” Murdock told him. “But I was thinking that the tragic star-crossed lovers story would be a better option.”

“The what?” Bucky said.

“Star-crossed lovers,” Nelson answered, leaning down the table. “Like Romeo and Juliet?”

Bucky looked at Steve, who just shrugged. “I still haven’t read Shakespeare,” he said.

“You guys didn’t study Shakespeare in school?” Nelson said, stunned.
“I dropped out at 16,” Bucky said.

“I learned how to make doilies,” Steve added.

“You can make doilies?” Bucky asked him, stunned. “Why the fuck did you learn how to make doilies?”

“I went to an all-Omega school,” Steve defended himself, “the only reading we did was the Bible and cookbooks.”

“That would garner sympathy,” Murdock threw in. “Are you religious, Captain?”

Steve stiffened. He looked at his hands, at his broad knuckles – No. His hands were the same size as Bucky’s. He looked at his hands, folded on the table, and thought about his answer.

“I’m Catholic,” he said eventually. It was still true, even if he questioned God’s existence.

“Again, sympathy,” Murdock said. “What we need to do is take the picture perfect image that’s been created of Captain America and remind the people that there is still a man behind the mask, a flawed man, an emotional man.”

“And that you never read Shakespeare, apparently,” Nelson threw in.

Mudrock elbowed his partner. Nelson winced and rubbed at his arm.

“You’ll need to give testimony about what it did to you to have to keep so much secret,” Murdock continued. “The people already see you suffering, if you can tell them something about it, you can take the spotlight off the fact that you agreed to the lie.”

Steve looked down at his hands again and gave it a moment’s thought.
“What’s the statute of limitations on prostitution?” he asked.

His lawyers looked confused.

“It depends on the state,” Murdock said, frowning.

“Where is this coming from?” Nelson added.

Bucky reached over and took one of Steve’s hands, squeezing it. Steve tried to see the proof that Bucky’s fingers were thicker than his.

“We gave the inquiry panel a sample of my blood from before the serum,” Steve told them. “And there’s a nurse from Project Rebirth coming to testify that it was Senator Brandt that wanted my designation covered up. But it’s likely that it will be noticed that my blood is infected with a sexually transmitted disease. I think it’s HIV, but until the tests come back, I can’t know for sure.”


“And when Becca testifies that Bucky took care of me in my first heat,” Steve added, “she’ll admit that we were separated and didn’t see each other again until we were in the Army because Bucky’s mother lied to him and told him he raped me. But if they’re going to believe me that I never had another Alpha, then I have to admit to prostitution.”

“You don’t have to admit to that,” Murdock said slowly. “There are other options –”

“But that’s the truth,” Steve said. He didn’t look up. “Great Depression and all. It was the only reliable income I could find.”

“Okay,” Nelson said. “Okay. We can work with this –”

“So what’s the statute of limitations on that?” Steve asked again. “In New York?”

“A year,” Murdock answered. “It’s only a class B misdemeanor.”
Steve flicked up his eyebrows. *A misdemeanor,* he mouthed. Thank God for small mercies.

“Don’t even worry about that coming back to bite you,” Nelson assured him. “It actually might even help.”

“How could it help?” Steve demanded.


“This humanizes you,” Murdock told him. “And if you did suffer an STD, due to your profession, it’s more likely to be the fault of knowing carelessness or maliciousness on the part of the person who infected you.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Steve said, wanting to move on.

“The people are mostly on your side already,” Nelson added, “ever since you said that thing about why Brandt would have hidden your designation, feminist and civil rights and gay rights groups have been claiming you as *their* hero.”

Steve thought back to Jay, and found that a little easier to believe. Still shocking, though.

“Honestly, I think people like you better now that you’ve come out as an Omega,” Nelson continued. “My generation? We all figured you were another musty Alphas-are-the-head-of-the-household wacko and a pillar of toxic masculinity. We flip that on its head, reveal you as the victim just as much as the rest of us?”

Nelson shrugged. He leaned in to Murdock. “I just shrugged, by the way.”

“I heard you,” Murdock sighed. “You need to get that tennis elbow looked at.”

Nelson made a face, looking at his elbow. Steve looked around, confused.

“You heard him shrugging?” Bucky spoke up, sounding suspicious again.
“This is the reason they’re representing you,” Natasha cut in. “Murdock owed me for not telling SHIELD that he’s enhanced.”

“Why didn’t you?” Steve asked.

“I’m not enhanced the way most are,” Murdock answered instead. “It was a result of my blindness and then a lot of rigorous training.”

“He’s the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen,” Nelson said. “I used to think that sucked, but it’s pretty cool now that people don’t think he’s a terrorist.”

“I haven’t heard of you, sorry,” Steve replied apologetically.

“Eh, he’s a local hero,” Nelson said, shrugging. “Kinda like that new Spiderman kid over in Queens. Plus, his fifteen minutes of fame were ten years ago.”

Murdock gave another dry smile. “Nine years.”


“Nine years and five months is not almost ten,” Murdock said simply.

“It’s closer to ten than eight!” Nelson insisted.

“Can we focus, please?” Natasha interrupted.

Nelson shrugged again. Murdock inclined his head.

“The point is you’re not Captain America anymore,” Nelson said.

“I’m not?” Steve replied, confused.
“You’re not just Captain America anymore,” Nelson corrected. “People need to look at Steve Rogers.”

Steve leaned back in his chair, blinking at Nelson and Murdock. They looked completely serious.

“People haven’t looked at Steve Rogers since the 30s,” Bucky said quietly. “You ready for the world to know how much of a little shit you are, Stevie?”

Steve let out a quiet laugh and shook his head. Bucky caught his gaze and smiled softly at him, then squeezed his hand. Steve squeezed it back, now grinning.

“We ask the world to look at Steve Rogers,” Murdock reiterated.

“And then to mind their own damn business,” Nelson concluded.

“I’d like that to happen,” Steve said honestly.

“What will he do if that doesn’t work?” Natasha interrupted.

“Get through the trial and retire,” Nelson said. “Then you’ll fully be within your rights to demand that the world mind its own damn business.”

“And if they court-martial them for their relationship?” Natasha asked.

“I’m working on that,” Nelson said, pointing a finger at her. “If they are, we can probably work out a deal that both of them retire from military service before continuing their relationship.”

“You’re not married, are you?” Murdock added in.

“Not legally,” Steve muttered.
“Then the penalties won’t be astronomical,” Nelson said. “This suit has come up a million times before, and, on top of that, Sergeant Barnes is the longest serving prisoner of war! He’s due an honorable discharge anyway!”

“If they don’t hang me for what I did for HYDRA,” Bucky said.

“We don’t hang people anymore,” Nelson said. “And they’re not trying you for those crimes yet, they’re asking if you should be tried.”

Bucky frowned. “They can’t do that at the inquiry?”

“The inquiry, as an inquiry, can only investigate certain subjects,” Murdock said. “The original subjects of inquiry were –” he began to list them on his fingers “– the information released to the public at the fall of SHIELD, the existence of HYDRA and what allowed it to grow in America, and Captain Rogers loyalties.”

“My loyalties?” Steve repeated quietly.

“To the people of the United States and the extent of them,” Murdock said. “It’s what allowed Wenham to pry into your personal life.”

“But they can’t actually try or charge you for anything,” Nelson said. “They can ask if you should be tried for improper fraternization because of the loyalties thing, but nothing about Sergeant Barnes and his involvement with HYDRA because he wasn’t remotely mentioned until your personal life came up.”

“So I’m being tried another day,” Bucky said. “Yippee.”

“You’re appearing before a grand jury to be indicted,” Nelson said. “That means we have to prove that you shouldn’t be charged for the crimes at all, not whether or not you’re guilty.”

“I don’t follow,” Bucky said.

“It’s like what Wenham said just before he called for the vote,” Murdock answered. “The question is
not if you did them, the question is were you in control of yourself or was someone else? Therefore, should you be charged for the crimes or should the someone else be charged?”

“Given the whole brain wipe thing,” Nelson said, “I’m confident we can prove you weren’t in control of yourself.”

“It would help if we had current brain scans to show the damage,” Murdock added.

“Okay,” Bucky said. “I’ll get those, whatever they are.”

“And testimony from you about your fights,” Nelson said to Steve. “On the bridge and on the helicarrier.”

“I can do that,” Steve answered. “What about that accusation about domestic violence that Wenham brought up?” he added quickly. “Is that real or –?”

“I doubt it,” Murdock answered. “And if it was, they’d have to wait until he was indicted to ask it again, which he won’t be.”

“You’d better win this, Murdock,” Natasha said then. “I’d hate to see these two vanish into thin air.”

Steve cast a glance at her. Natasha caught his gaze and looked back evenly. “You’d do that for us?” he asked.

She nodded once.

“We didn’t hear that,” Nelson threw in.

“I saw nothing,” Murdock said with a shrug.

It took a second, then Nelson snorted. “Dammit, Matt,” he muttered and down the table, Clint and Sam sniggered. Steve cracked a smile and glanced at Bucky, who gave an agreeing shrug and smiled, too. Natasha rolled her eyes.
“She just rolled her eyes at you,” Nelson said to Murdock, “if you didn’t hear her eye juices squelching.”

“Eyes don’t squelch, Foggy,” Murdock answered with an air of incredulity.

“Okay, well, whatever noise they make,” Nelson said.

“They don’t make noise at all, they’re eyes,” Murdock insisted. “The muscles, yes, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard eye movement before.”

“Ah-ha!” Nelson crowed abruptly, throwing up his arms in victory. “I found something you can’t hear! I’m just going to roll my eyes at you for the rest of our lives.”

Murdock sighed heavily. “If you say so, Foggy.”

“This is exciting,” Nelson added to the rest of them.

“What ever,” Natasha said. “Is there anything else they need to know?”

“Uh, stop leaning towards Barnes and then leaning back,” Nelson said to Steve. “It looks weird.”

Steve blinked. “Natasha said we should refrain from PDA.”

“At this point, that’s not the case,” Murdock said.

“Is the leaning thing you wanting to lean on him and then changing your mind then?” Nelson said at the same time.

“Yeah,” Steve answered, confused.
“Lean on him,” Nelson told him with a flick of his pen. “Again, humanizes you.”

“But Barnes is—” Natasha started and Nelson waved his pen.

“Barnes is a PTSD-ridden torture victim,” he said, “we can turn Rogers into his teddy bear.”

“That’s what I said!” Bucky threw in.


“Thank you, Foggy,” Murdock said with a longsuffering tone.


“His natural instinct is to be a sarcastic little shit,” Bucky said.

“Thanks,” Steve sighed.

“You’re welcome, baby,” Bucky answered with a smug grin.

“Be a sarcastic little shit, then,” Nelson told him. “You’ve been wronged by the system, let out the rage.”

“In moderation,” Murdock added. “With the respect that the inquiry panel is due.”

“I like the not standing thing, though,” Nelson said. “Solid solidarity, Miss Black Widow.”

“Romanoff,” Clint snapped abruptly.

Natasha just nodded shortly.


“Fine,” Sam answered.

“What else,” Nelson muttered, looking at his notes. “Matty?”

“What did pretending to be an Alpha do to you, Captain?” Murdock asked. “What did that experience do to your emotional and mental health?”

Steve opened his mouth, then found he didn’t have the words yet. He’d ranted and raged over this a thousand times to Bucky during the war, but, since then…

“It was hard,” he said. “I felt very alone.”

“And why didn’t you ever come out?” Murdock asked gently.

“Natasha said this morning –” Steve started and Murdock waved a hand.

“They might press it again,” he said. “It was a good move, though, put Wenham back in his place, but they are within the bounds of this inquiry to ask that question. Why didn’t you?”

Steve looked down, frowning. “I didn’t ever think I could,” he admitted. “Before – During the war, I couldn’t risk being discharged. I had a duty and I couldn’t fulfil it if I said anything.”

“And now?” Murdock asked.
Steve shrugged. “When I woke up, I was too occupied on trying not to show how much I wished I hadn’t.”

“You felt isolated by it, didn’t you?” Murdock said gently. The noise of the restaurant now seemed distant. “Rejected by the world? The Smithsonian exhibit, for example, embellished your life because it wasn’t good enough for them. Nobody wanted plain ol’ Steve Rogers.”

“Yeah,” Steve answered softly. “Nobody ever wanted me. They only ever wanted the – the suit, the shield. The symbol.”

Bucky lifted his hand and kissed the back of it. Without speaking, he reminded Steve that he’d always wanted him. Steve shot him a tired smile and squeezed his hand.

“Maybe you wanted to come clean,” Mudrock said. Steve looked up, but not quite to his face. Somewhere off to the left. Murdock wasn’t quite looking at him, either, just in the direction of his voice, so perhaps that made it fair. “Maybe you considered it, but you thought no one would listen to you. You felt like you didn’t have a voice.”

“I thought no one would listen,” Steve agreed, “but anyone who did would just… Judge me.”

“You thought you would be condemned,” Murdock replied. “Which would have happened when you were a child. I’m sure you were raised to keep quiet, to not speak out of turn, never rock the boat.”

Steve nodded once. “It wasn’t my place,” he whispered.

“This is what you need to say,” Murdock told him gently. “This is what you need to tell them the next time they ask why didn’t you speak up. You said nothing because you were afraid that you would just be hurt for it.”

“I am only getting hurt for it,” Steve answered.

“Yeah, they’re bringing into question everything you’ve done because of this,” Nelson agreed. “Ask them if they would do the same if it was the other way around, if you had really been an Alpha and Captain America was an Omega.”
“Captain America would have never existed,” Steve said.


“Don’t be afraid of offending anyone,” Murdock advised him. “You have the right to equality, you have the right to speak, to be heard. Remind the inquiry panel that you are still the same man you were when they thought you were an Alpha.”

“And that it’s sexist of them to even suggest any of this _do you deserve your title_ bullshit,” Nelson said. “They can try and ram that up their asses if there’s any room left by those iron rods.”

“Assholes have a lot of stretching power,” Bucky remarked.

Steve felt his face go very red and hid it in his free hand. Groans could be heard down the table and Bucky was chuckling to himself.

“I hate you,” he muttered in his Alpha’s direction. “You utter dickhead.”

“You love me,” Bucky said smugly. “Especially my –”

Steve slapped a hand over his mouth. Bucky started cackling behind it, the noise muffled. “I’m sorry he exists,” Steve said towards the rest of the table. “I swear, he used to be a polite, upstanding young man.”

“When I was in diapers!” Bucky mumbled behind Steve’s hand.

“You shuddup,” Steve told him, trying not to smile.

Bucky lifted his metal hand. Steve snatched it and held it firmly, but Bucky just wriggled it away and stuck up his middle finger. Steve snatched it again, hoping no one noticed the vibrating.

“Hold on!” Sam called out. “Barnes, does your finger _vibrate_?”
Bucky threw Steve’s hand off his mouth. “Yep,” he said, sounding much too proud. “I didn’t even ask Stark to do that.”

“Oh, my god,” Clint whispered in awe.

Steve covered Bucky’s metal hand with both of his. “Behave or I’ll make you sleep on the couch.”

“Yes, dear,” Bucky chuckled.

“Assholes aside,” Murdock said. Bucky broke down in quiet laughter again, as did Sam and Clint. Nelson was chuckling, too. “Just remember that you don’t owe the inquiry anything. It’s their job to investigate the subjects of the inquiry, but not to act as judge and jury for your life.”

“Right,” Steve answered, sobering.

“And you do have the right to privacy,” Nelson added. “Your career is subject to invasion by the U.S. military, by them and your career only. Your past and your relationships with anyone are not related to your career.”

Steve nodded. Bucky squeezed his hand.

“Are we gonna eat?” Clint asked. “Cause, we got, I don’t know, an hour before we’re due back.”

“One hour and seven minutes,” Natasha said.

“Point still stands,” Clint said.

“We should eat,” Bucky agreed, no longer giggling to himself. “Steve needs foods high in iron.”

Steve felt his cheeks go hot all over again. Natasha cleared her throat.
“I’ll find a waiter,” she said, rising.

“The public doesn’t have a right to know jackshit about your personal life, though,” Nelson went on while Natasha slipped through the beaded curtain. “In fact, there’s nothing in your contract that says the public must be included in any information about you at all.”

“They do deserve to know the truth, though,” Steve argued gently. “That they’ve been lied to.”

“Yes, to an extent,” Nelson answered. “Again, your life is your life, but three’s a crowd, especially if one of them’s the entire nation.”

“I don’t get it,” Bucky piped up.

“He’s referring to the two of you,” Murdock explained, “you, Rogers, America, makes three.”

“Oh,” Bucky murmured. “Yeah, I don’t share.”

Steve closed his eyes and half-smiled. Bucky squeezed his hand.

“Three’s a crowd if one of them’s a country,” Nelson reiterated.

“Dammit,” Murdock hissed.

“What?” Steve asked, now worried.

“Nothing,” Murdock answered quickly, “there’s just this TV show – I think it’s stupid but Foggy and Karen –”

“Three can keep a secret if two of them are dead,” Nelson said in a sing song voice.
“That’s true,” Bucky answered.

“I think it’s a stupid TV show,” Murdock repeated.

“Me and Karen like annoying the hell out of him with it,” Nelson said triumphantly. “Karen’s our secretary, by the way—”

“His wife, to boot,” Murdock added.

Nelson reflexively grinned, ducking his head. Steve shook his head and metaphorically washed his hands of whatever this TV show was.

“Cute,” Bucky remarked.

“Now you know how people feel around you and Mrs. Barnes,” Sam said.

Steve dropped his gaze, both trying not to blush or remember their disastrous night before.

“Shuddup,” Bucky answered, sounding flustered. Probably remembering last night, too. Steve had said he’d start seeing a therapist last night. God, he had to talk to Sam about that.

“Karma’s a bitch,” Sam sniggered.

Bucky flicked up his flesh middle finger. Steve shook his head and covered his eyes with a hand.

The beaded curtain parted and Natasha re-entered, followed by a waitress and a tray of cups.

“Water,” the waitress said as she approached the table with her tray.

Natasha took her seat again, flipping her hair back over her shoulder. The waitress started to pass out the cups of water, and Bucky stayed his hand when Steve reached to pick up his. Steve sighed, but
waited for Bucky to pick it up and examine it suspiciously while the waitress’s back was turned. Bucky took an experimental taste, then put it down and pushed it toward Steve. Steve took it and took a large gulp.

“May I take your orders?” the waitress asked once she’d finished passing out the cups of water.

“Could we get some menus?” Sam started to ask.

“Oh, yes,” she said, then pulled sheets of laminated paper from her apron and passed them down. Steve took his and looked over both sides. His stomach rumbled quietly; they hadn’t actually eaten yet that day.

“Do you have a Braille menu?” Murdock asked.

“Oh, no, no, sorry,” the waitress answered.

Murdock sighed and passed his menu to Nelson, who simply nodded and took it.

“You need a minute?” the waitress added.

“Yeah, please,” Nelson told her. She bowed slightly and made her way out. Nelson leaned in to Murdock and started muttering a fast overview of the menu and Steve dropped his gaze to his own. He propped his face up with his fist and looked over it. Mostly Chinese food, but there was a kids’ menu with mac and cheese and chicken fingers. Steve cast a glance over the lists of lo mein and the different kinds of Kung Pao and wondered if he could just ask for a large order of chicken fingers.

“Where’d you find this place, Romanoff?” Bucky spoke up.

“I’ve been coming here for a few years,” Natasha answered. “You don’t have to check everything for poison.”

Nelson glanced up. “Wait, is that what you did with the water?”
Bucky didn’t look up from his menu. “’S not safe,” he muttered to himself. Steve reached out and tangled their fingers together.

“I don’t mind,” he assured him. Bucky gave a short nod.

Steve shifted his chair a little closer to the end of the table and peered around Bucky’s menu to look at what he was looking at. The chicken menu. Sweet and sour chicken didn’t seem so bad.

“What’re you getting?” Steve asked.

Bucky glanced up, then back down. “Oh, yeah,” he said under his breath.

Steve squeezed his hand. “You wanna share stuff?”

Bucky nodded. “What do you want?”

“Sweet and sour chicken,” Steve said. “And fried rice.”

Bucky nodded, then put down the menu and pulled Steve’s hand closer to cover it with both of his. “Sounds fine.”

Steve, despite the awkward angle, put his head on Bucky’s shoulder. He felt tired. He wanted chocolate.

“I’m getting hot tea,” Natasha announced. “Anyone else want some?”

Tea sounded good. Steve lifted a hand, staying where he was leaning on Bucky.

“Tea would be nice,” he heard Murdock say. “And how’s the moo shu pork here?”

“Some of the best,” Natasha answered. “Tea for the whole table, then.”
“I don’t want tea,” Clint said.

“Yes, you do,” Natasha countered. “Get your own so you don’t drink mine.”

“Geez, fine,” Clint muttered.

“This is what this century has reduced marriage to,” Steve muttered. “Get your own damn tea.”

“Kids these days,” Clint agreed.


“Thank you,” Murdock sighed.

“Personally, I agree with Romanoff,” Bucky said.

Steve squinted up at him. “We just agreed to share.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t say no to that face,” Bucky answered with a smirk.

Steve rolled his eyes.

“Rogers just rolled his eyes,” Nelson said to Murdock.

“You know, I think there might be a way to hear eye movement,” Murdock said tiredly.

“You just said you couldn’t!”
“Maybe if I listen hard enough –”

The beads rustled and Steve sat up as Murdock stopped speaking. The waitress smiled nervously as she neared.

“Ready to order?” she asked.

“I think so,” Natasha said. “You wanna start, Wilson?”

“Uh, Kung Pao chicken, please and thanks,” Sam said.

The waitress tugged out a book and pen and started scribbling down the order. “White or fried rice, sir?”

“Fried,” Sam said.

“Mac and cheese for me,” Clint said.

“Kids’ menu?” the waitress asked, looking confused.

“Yeah,” Clint answered, shrugging. The waitress flicked up her eyebrows, but said nothing else.

“I’ll take the number 7 combo from the lunch menu,” Natasha ordered. “White rice.”

The waitress nodded, wrote it down, and looked at Steve.

“Uh, sweet and sour chicken,” he said, “fried rice.”

“Same for me,” Bucky added.
“Two order sweet and sour chicken,” the waitress repeated, writing it down.

“Can we get extra chicken?” Bucky asked.

“Uh-huh,” the waitress said. “For you?” she asked of Murdock.


“We out of egg drop soup today,” the waitress said apologetically. “Sorry.”

“No problem,” Murdock told her, “hot and sour instead, then.”

“Okay.” the waitress answered, turning her head to her notepad again. “Oh, and I tell Chef we need Braille menu. Very sorry we don’t have it.”


“Though it would be nice if there was one the next time we come,” Nelson added.

“I tell Chef,” the waitress assured them. “Your order, sir?”

“The lo mein combo,” Nelson said, “hot and sour soup, as well.”

“And can we get a pot of tea for the table?” Natasha asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Coming right up,” the waitress answered with a cheerful smile. She put away her notepad, bowed, and left the room again.

“They really oughta have a Braille menu already,” Steve remarked.
“They really should,” Murdock sighed. “C’est la vie.”

Steve shifted his chair closer to the end of the table again and leaned onto Bucky, closing his eyes.

“I’m hunting for your birth certificate again, Rogers,” Natasha said. Steve reluctantly opened his eyes to look at her. “I’m trying to at least find your mother’s records.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Steve said.

“I’m doing it because you deserve to have them,” Natasha countered.

Steve wasn’t sure what to say to that. So “Thank you” was all he answered her with.

“I started at the beginning,” Natasha added. “Trying to find your mother’s family in Ireland. Sometimes it’s easier to do it that way.”

“Thank you,” Steve said again. “That’s really kind of you.”

Natasha shrugged. Steve wondered if she was doing it for him because she didn’t have records of her family. Or herself. She probably didn’t, given she worked for the KGB before the Soviet Union’s dissolution when she was seven.

“You don’t happen to know where you were born?” Murdock asked. “It might make your associate’s search easier.”

“I don’t,” Steve said with a shrug. “Probably born at home, if I’m honest. My ma didn’t trust hospitals until she started working for them.”

“I’ll find her past, at the very least,” Natasha said with finality.

“I appreciate that,” Steve told her. “My ma never mentioned family, so… I don’t know where to point you.”
“I’ve found people with less to work off of,” she said. “I’ll find her.”

Steve nodded once, then leaned back on Bucky and let his eyes shut again.

“Let’s talk about your indictment trial, Barnes.”

Steve stayed where he was, the exhaustion of the day catching up with him at last. It was times like these that he wished caffeine would work on him. He felt like he hadn’t had sufficient sleep in days.

Nelson and Murdock were giving Bucky advice, similar to what they’d done with Steve. What to tell, how to say it, what to project. Earn a fair amount of pity and a little bit of fear. The food showed up just when they were finishing.

Steve sat up at the sound of the beads moving. The waitress had a tray and another waiter followed her, carrying a second tray.

“Hot tea,” the waitress said, putting down a teapot and several cups. “Moo shu pork.”

Steve waited for the waiters to pass out all the food before unrolling his napkin roll to get his fork. Bucky nudged him.

“You wanna pray, Steve?” Bucky asked.

“Yes, let’s,” Mudrock added, folding his hands.

“Uh,” Steve said.

“You wanna do the honors, Cap?” Sam asked.

“Are we actually praying?” Natasha muttered.
Clint shushed her gently. Bucky picked up Steve’s hand and shook it a little.

“I’m not feeling very eloquent right now,” Steve said, quietly begging off. “Mr. Murdock?”

“Sure,” Murdock answered. He folded his hands instead of taking his neighbors, and bowed his head even though he was blind.

Steve reached over and took Natasha’s hand automatically. She jerked a little, almost like she was startled, but didn’t pull away. Steve bowed his head and shut his eyes.

“Bless us, oh Lord, and these, thy gifts,” Murdock began to recite. Steve remembered that prayer. It was one of the first things his mother learned, and then taught him, in English.

She learned English first through the Bible and prayer. Steve picked it up easier than she did, being so young, and even to her deathbed, she sometimes struggled to remember the word for anything in English as opposed to Irish. Steve sometimes struggled to remember what she was saying when she fell into rants in only Irish. The older he got, the less he remembered of his mother language.


Steve released Natasha’s hand and crossed himself out of habit. Murdock and Nelson both crossed themselves, but they probably had intention behind it. Steve dropped his gaze to his plate, feeling a little lost.

As they began eating and Natasha poured out the tea, Murdock tipped his head toward Steve again. “Have you found a church in Manhattan yet?”

“Uh, no,” Steve answered. “I haven’t really… been looking.”

“There’s plenty of churches from when you were a kid still standing,” Murdock went on. “Not as many in Brooklyn, as far as I know. I know there’s St. Michael’s –”
Steve fumbled with his fork and it clattered as it hit the table and bounced off. “Shit,” he muttered, shifting his chair back to duck under the table and grab it. “Butterfingers,” he said, trying for humor.

“Here,” Natasha said, passing him hers, “I use chopsticks anyway.”

Steve put the fork he’d dropped near the middle of the table. “Thanks,” he said to Natasha, taking the new fork and shifting his chair in closer to the table. “Sorry,” he said to Murdock.

“Not a problem,” Murdock answered. “I was just saying, St. Michael’s is still open. I think it was a black church when you were a kid, but since the sixties, it’s been open to all people.”

Steve shifted the fried chicken around on his plate, his appetite gone down. St. Michael’s was always open to all people, really. Never turned him away, at least.

“I’ve been there once or twice as a guest,” Murdock went on. If his enhanced hearing could pick up the change in Steve’s breathing or heartbeat, he didn’t let it show. Steve couldn’t decide if that was suspicious or kind. “The reverend there, Franklin Elliot, he’s the son of the man who headed the church in your time. Actually, Elliot, Sr., just made the papers, he turned a hundred and fifteen not too long ago.”

Steve thought he saw Sam looking down the table. He knew Bucky was looking at him.

“Really?” Steve said, hoping he didn’t sound as shocked as he felt. “That’s a miracle.”

“That’s what Father Elliot told the papers,” Murdock answered as Natasha handed him a cup of tea. “Thank you, Ms. Romanoff.”

“He’s the oldest person in New York,” Murdock added. “Before him was – Actually, I think it was your mother, Barnes. She died in 2011, a hundred and eleven years old.”

“I know,” Bucky said quietly.

“Did you go to her funeral, Steve?” Nelson asked, putting a forkful of rice in his mouth.
“No, I – I missed it,” Steve said. A half truth. “What did – What did Father Elliot tell the papers?”

Murdock held up a finger, chewing something. “He told them that God made a promise to him a long time ago,” he said when he’d swallowed. “He’s waiting for a young man to receive absolution.”

Steve dropped his gaze, then took a shaky breath and reached for his water. He took a long gulp and put it back down. Natasha set a small cup of tea, a thin spiral of steam rising from it, next to his plate and Steve murmured a thanks.

“I haven’t visited Brooklyn in a while,” Steve answered Murdock eventually. “Not since – Not since I left it, actually.”

“Really?” Nelson spoke up. “You should visit, it’s probably not all that different.”

Steve gave a non-committal shrug. “Maybe.”

“You don’t have to go,” Murdock said. His tone was gentle once again. He seemed a gentle man, at the least. “I go to a small church in Hell’s Kitchen you might like.”

Steve shrugged again. “We’ll see.”

“Just a suggestion,” Murdock added.

Steve felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He pulled it out, waking the screen, and found a text from Sam. A link to something. He glanced down the table and Sam wasn’t looking at him. So he opened it, clicked on the link, and the New York Daily News loaded.

_Catholic Priest In Brooklyn Turns 115_

Steve hastily put his phone away. He could read it later, if at all.
“I never understood the point of religion,” Natasha mentioned. “Devotion to something you can’t prove exists.”

“Well, that’s the point of faith,” Murdock answered her. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

Natasha shrugged once. Steve looked at his plate, picking at his food with his fork. Murdock’s words rang a bell.

“That’s from one of Paul’s letters?” he asked.

“Hebrews,” Murdock said. “Chapter eleven, verse eleven.”

Steve simply nodded, remembered Murdock was blind, opened his mouth, and then remembered he was enhanced. Murdock probably heard the bones in his neck grinding.

So he just nodded again. Evidence of things not seen. Well. Steve hadn’t yet seen death and he believed in it.

“Eat your food, Stevie,” Bucky prompted him then. Steve jerked, nodded a third time, and stabbed a piece of chicken with his fork.

“So, on the subject of small talk,” Nelson piped up a few minutes later, “what’s your least favorite thing about this century, Cap?”

“Tony Stark,” Steve answered immediately, though he was mostly joking. Stark wasn’t that bad, after all. He’d gotten Steve’s mother’s kettle from the Smithsonian.


“Tony Stark having my phone number,” Steve said.

“That’s great,” Nelson sighed. “Always great to have a frenemy.”
“Is that a mix of friend and enemy?” Steve asked, having heard the word before but never learned its meaning.


Bucky frowned for a while, looking at the table and chewing intently. Eventually, he swallowed.

“Stark having Steve’s phone number,” Bucky said in a deadpan tone.

Nelson burst out laughing and Steve held his face in his hands while he tried to hold in his own laughter.

“I love you,” Steve said weakly to Bucky.

“Love you, too, punk,” Bucky answered happily.

“They’re so cute it’s gross,” Sam declared, “and that’s my least favorite thing about this century.”

“It’s my absolute favorite thing about this century,” Clint added.

“Having heard this, I feel like God did me a favor in blinding me,” Murdock said.

“Hey, ain’t nothing more beautiful than this punk smiling,” Bucky announced. “You’re missing out.”

Murdock shrugged while Steve blushed. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“Okay, so what about your favorite thing about this century?” Nelson asked.

Steve thought about it, trying to wrestle up something he had liked enough in the past three years to
call it his **favorite**. He thought about it, frowning hard, and eventually shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I was kinda… preoccupied.”

With lethargy. The itching need to move or burn alive. Draining numbness. Things like that distracted oneself from finding a favorite thing.

“You don’t have a favorite thing?” Nelson asked, looking incredulous.

“I mean,” Steve said, “he’s alive.”

He pointed to Bucky, who paused mid-chew to smile at him, his cheeks stretched like a chipmunk. Steve looked at him, slowly shook his head, and sighed: “Gross as he his.”

Bucky swallowed. “I wasn’t hearing any complaints once I started calling you sugar.”

Steve turned pink and looked away. “Never mind,” he said quickly. “I don’t have a favorite thing in this century.”

“I’m sure you’ll find one,” Nelson assured him as Bucky exclaimed: “Hey!”

“Maybe,” Steve said, picking up his napkin and reaching over to wipe a spot of sweet and sour sauce off Bucky’s face. Bucky waved him away but Steve did it anyway, dropping the napkin onto the table when he was done. “We’ll see,” he finished, glancing at Nelson.

“I like the Internet,” Bucky announced. “And online shopping.”

“Buck, nobody asked you,” Steve said kindly to his Alpha.

“I was about to ask him!” Nelson laughed.
“You’re awful,” Bucky told Steve matter-of-factly. “See if I give you any of this later,” he added, flipping up his metal middle finger.

Steve grabbed it and covered the vibrating, red in the face again. “You’re awful,” he answered.

“You’re a pretty face with no brain,” Bucky countered.

“Well, you—” Steve started, then scowled. Bucky, having called him pretty, smiled victoriously. Steve felt his neck and ears getting hot and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “You’re an asshole,” he said firmly.

“Love you, too, sugar,” Bucky said smugly. Steve glared furiously at his food, feeling the blush going down his chest.

“Hey, there are children present,” Sam called out.

“It’s real ballsy of you to call yourself a child,” Clint answered.

“Hey, I was talking about you, you ordered off the kids’ menu!”

“Cause I don’t like Chinese food, that’s all!”

“Yo, Romanoff,” Sam called, “why’d you pick a Chinese restaurant if your partner doesn’t like Chinese?”

“He likes mac and cheese just fine,” Romanoff said simply.

“We could’ve gone to Applebees,” Sam told her.

“I don’t like Applebees,” Clint said.

“What do you like?” Sam asked, flustered.
“This mac and cheese.”

Steve shook his head with a long suffering sigh. “I don’t know them,” he told Nelson and Murdock.

“I saw nothing,” Murdock said a second time.

Nelson started choking on something. Murdock thumped him on the back, looking quite pleased with himself, and Nelson shook a finger in his direction.

“I hate all your blind puns,” he rasped. “I hate every pun you’ve ever made in your life, Matthew Michael Murdock!”

“Who names their kid Matthew Michael Murdock?” Bucky asked, mouth partially full. “M.M.M., that sounds like it oughta be an organized crime group.”

“Perhaps the same sort of people who would name their child James Buchanan Barnes,” Murdock answered simply.

Bucky swallowed. “My legal last name is apparently Greene, but sure.”

Steve made a face in the direction of his chicken. Sam and Clint stopped arguing to look down the table. Murdock frowned.

“Really?” Nelson spoke up.

Bucky nodded. “Yeah, my pa wasn’t actually my biological father. I found that out yesterday.”

“His sister told us,” Steve mentioned.

“I was born in Chicago,” Bucky added. “So, J.B.G.”
“That sounds worse than J.B.B.,” Murdock said.

“Yeah, it does,” Bucky agreed, a tone of offense entering his voice. “Another reason to hate my ma.”

“She seems sort of, y’know,” Nelson said with a side-to-side wave of his hand.

“So, your birth certificate would be filed in Chicago?” Natasha asked. “Greene was your mother’s name?”

Bucky shook his head. “Her family disowned her because she wanted to marry a Beta man. I guess she just wouldn’t say what her maiden name was, ‘cause legally my name is Greene.”

“Wait, how did you get an I.D.?“ Nelson asked. “How would you get into the army?”

Bucky shrugged. “I showed up, said I’d be happy to die for my country, they let me in.”

“I mean, that’s what I did,” Steve added.


“Something like that,” Steve said, looking down again.

Silence fell again, and they finished eating before anyone spoke again. It was Natasha, and she had just risen from her seat.

“We’d better get going.”

Steve had eaten all of his chicken and actually a bit of Bucky’s by then. He pushed back his chair and stood up, stretched, and put his chair back while Bucky stepped up behind him and plastered himself to his back. Steve leaned back against him, tipping his head to the side instead of letting it fall back the way he wanted to, and Bucky pressed a kiss to his temple.

“Let’s get going,” Natasha called to them, and Steve reluctantly put his weight back on his own two
Outside, they flagged down two more cabs. Nelson and Murdock rode with Natasha and Clint while Steve, Bucky, and Sam shared their own taxi again. Steve took the far window seat and when Bucky climbed in next to him, promptly put his head on Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky wormed an arm behind his back and pressed a kiss to his hair.

“Where to, sirs?” their driver asked.

“Follow that taxi,” Sam answered. “We’re going to the Senate Building.”

Steve shut his eyes. This driver didn’t attempt to engage them in conversation the way Jay had done, and Steve didn’t mind. He felt full and a little sleepy from the combination of chicken and hot tea. Bucky leaned his cheek against his hair and began to quietly hum an old tune.

It sounded like Louis Armstrong and Steve smiled lightly just to remember how much his mother had loved listening to American jazz when he was growing up. Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five had probably taught her just as much English as Mrs. Barnes did reading from the Bible.

The taxi rolled to a stop. Steve lifted his head and took in a deep breath. Sam opened his door and the shouting of the media swarm filled the interior of the car.

“Our friend’s gonna pay you!” Sam called to the driver.

“Okay!” the driver answered.

Sam climbed out. Bucky followed, turned back and held out his hand. Steve took it, steeled his nerves, and pushed himself out of the taxi.

Chapter End Notes

*are you ready? to see the glory that is chaos's art? i don't think you are. it's the most beautiful thing i have ever laid my eyes on. ([link](#))*
were you ready? i bet you weren’t. your life is now forever changed. go forth, knowing that steve rogers will return wearing a dress, and spread the gospel that is: happiness is dresses with pockets.

psst if you wanna annoy lexi about how amazing she is her tumblr is here, you can also
delight me by following my tumblr or even dropping something into my inbox. the memes included in this chapter and more can be reached here. apologies for any grammatical errors, i'm traveling and wifi is shitty, i'll go back later tonight to fix shit. remember, if you're at otakon in dc this weekend (8/10/18) hmu. have a great day!
hello, hello, hello my ducklings. you are all now my ducklings btw. how's your week been? good? good. i've got some fun stuff for you today, namely, some fucking dank memes. this chapter of edges blurred is brought to you by: The Memes Of Edges Blurred, you read that right. lexi and i put wayyy too much fucking effort into creating period-accurate memes for this fic, and thanks to this, YOU have a chance to be featured! that's right, your twitter could be featured in upcoming chapters of edges blurred as the post of some salty memes dragging the us and its collective shit for the way it's treating steve and bucky. you could be the poster of meme gold such as...

do yourself (and me) a favor and head over to my askbox on tumblr and leave your twitter handle (and a meme request if you so wish) for a chance to be the reader(s) of the week. as a bonus, you can accuse me of torturing steve and bucky while you're there, which, to be fair, i am doing. this week, yes we have one already, the reader of the week is! @bioticpigeon/commanderpigeon.

last thing: i have too much world-building data, so i have a question for y'all: should i compile a list of science-y/social/evolutionary/etc info into its own separate post as like a primer for alpha/beta/omega 'verse? like how male omegas and female alphas become people and why beta would be a recessive gene. plus, like social etiquette patterns, like
how bucky's constantly scent-marking steve and everyone else is concerned bucky's abusing him bc of it. so, the history of the entire alpha/beta/omega world, i guess. hmu on tumblr or leave a comment if you'd like to know all these random but unnecessary world-building details.

you can find this chapter's cover art on my blog here and the playlist is here. happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“This weekend, we at the New York Daily News had the privilege of visiting with Father Franklin Elliot, Sr., on his 115th birthday…

“When asked what his secret to long life was, Father Elliot simply laughed. “I ain’t lived this long for any human reason,” he said. “God told me a long, long time ago that I was gonna have to wait a while before I could take my chariot of fire. He told me ‘Son, there’s a young man who came to confessions once a long, long time ago, but couldn’t receive absolution. You told him that he’d get it one day, one day he’d be free of his lot in life, but not that day. Now, he’s still waiting and it’s my will that he get his absolution from you.’ I hope he’ll come to confession again soon, now, being 115 ain’t all it’s cracked up to be, but I’ll wait. God has taught me patience…”

“When asked about this young man, Father Elliot said this: “Now, that’s between him and God, but I’d like to think he’ll see this so I got one thing to say to you, brother. God used you, and you’re still here now, so I’d hope you’ll know that he never turned his back on you. That door you were looking for opened up a long time ago, and now it’s time to come home.””

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[october 20th, 2014, capitol hill]

The yelling and shouting of the media circus outside was cut off the second the doors fell shut. This time, Steve held tightly to Bucky’s hand, their arms brushing as they walked, and their footsteps echoed up and down the corridors. When they reached the Senate again, most people were still standing and chatter filled the room. No one looked at their group or even noticed them as they entered and took their seats at their half of the panel. Nelson and Murdock sat between Natasha and Clint this time, and Bucky pulled out Steve’s chair for him yet again.

A few minutes passed. Steve held Bucky’s hand under the table again. The seats of the Senate filled, until finally, the inquiry panel streamed in once more.

There was the call for the all rise. Bucky squeezed Steve’s hand before standing, and Steve remained in his seat. Natasha did not move, either.

But, surprising him, they were not the only ones. Several women in the media bullpens remained in their seats, and even one or two Senators refused to stand. Steve felt something strangely like hope.

“All may be seated.”
Congressman Wenham was glaring at Natasha and at Steve, but that mattered little right then. Steve took Bucky’s hand again as he sat down, and this time, let their clasped fingers rest on the table’s surface.

“We resume examining the information released by Agent Romanoff on September 20th at the fall of Project Insight,” Wenham declared. “Agent Romanoff, the floor is yours.”

It had been nearly two o’clock when they had resumed, and Natasha went back and forth over the little details of the different files that had been released with the panel for the next six hours. The attorneys she’d hired interjected frequently, and Steve was definitely seeing why Natasha trusted them enough to hire them. When they ended the session for the night, Steve was feeling exhausted and wanted nothing more than to return to New York.

“We’ll meet again at seven o’clock tomorrow,” Wenham announced, then his gavel fell and Steve flinched. “Dismissed.”

Steve pushed himself to his feet and rubbed at his eyes with a hand. Bucky put an arm at the small of his back and squeezed his hip briefly.

“Nobody wants to get back at midnight and get up at four A.M. tomorrow, do they?” Natasha asked tiredly.

“Nope,” Steve sighed.

“I’ll get rooms at that hotel,” Natasha said. “Murdock, Nelson, do you need –”

“We’ve got a hotel already,” Nelson said. “Thank you, though.”

“Alright,” Natasha said. “Let’s move.”

“The same hotel?” Bucky asked as they started out.

“Alice Wright’s the best,” Clint muttered. “Her friend that works there. God, what wouldn’t I do for a hot shower right now.”

“Come on,” Natasha insisted, clapping Clint on the shoulder. “Move your feet.”

“I could use a shower,” Steve said under his breath. “And food. I’m starving.”

“When are you not?” Natasha asked.

Steve tipped his head. They made their way outside, where Natasha and Nelson both hailed cabs.

“Let’s meet for coffee in the morning,” Nelson told them.

“Six?” Natasha asked.


“I’ll text you where,” Natasha added.

Nelson gave a nod. He succeeded in hailing a taxi and helped Murdock into it. They drove off. Steve wanted to lean on Bucky, but there were still reporters hanging around, cameras still at the ready. Natasha flagged two cabs and again, she and Clint took one while he, Bucky, and Sam piled into the second.

“Heading for the Gaylord,” Sam said to the driver. Steve leaned against the window, closing his eyes. “We’re with that other cab.”

“Good to know,” the driver answered. “Here we go.”
Bucky touched Steve’s shoulder. “You okay, doll?” he murmured.

Steve nodded. “Headache,” he said. Bucky put an arm around his shoulders and Steve dropped his head onto the crook of Bucky’s neck. Bucky kissed his hair and let his cheek rest against his head.

The drive didn’t seem to take so long this time. At the hotel, Natasha paid both taxis and waved them inside. Steve, feeling exhausted, kept his feet going in a straight line by leaning on Bucky. Natasha spoke briefly with the receptionist, then the same woman who had attended them last time came out to talk to her. Steve dropped into an armchair in the lobby and scrubbed his face with a hand. Bucky came to stand next to him and Sam wandered over as well.

“You okay, there, man?” Sam asked him. Steve nodded once. Bucky cast him a look and Steve ignored it. Now wasn’t the time to ask about finding a shrink.

Natasha crossed to them. “They only have two rooms available tonight,” she said. “Wilson, you mind shacking up with Barnes and Rogers?”

Steve froze up. Sam said: “Sure,” and Natasha gave a nod before tossing him a keycard and walking off. Steve looked between her and Sam, his mouth partly open.

“You guys don’t mind, do you?” Sam asked.

Steve was at a loss for words. Then:

“Nah,” Bucky answered. “Another pair of hands in case the room gets attacked.”

Steve looked up at him. Bucky seemed to notice his distress and looked down with a frown. “What?”


“You sure you’re okay?” Sam asked.
“I’m fine,” Steve insisted. He pushed himself up from the chair and took the keycard from Sam. “Let’s just go.”

Sam shrugged and Bucky wound an arm around his waist to walk to the elevator. Natasha and Clint had already left. Steve called the elevator and shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket to wait.

They were on the 16th floor, room 20. Steve unlocked it and went in first, Bucky and Sam trailing after him. Steve dropped the keycard onto the TV stand and looked around the single room and the two beds, then turned and headed for the bathroom. Bucky caught the door before he could shut it and followed him in.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky asked.

“Nothing,” Steve said again. “It’s fine. It’s fine.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” Bucky said gently. He took Steve’s arm and pulled him closer. “What’s wrong?”

Steve let out his breath, then pushed his arms around Bucky and dropped his forehead onto his shoulder. “It’s dumb,” he said.

“Tell me anyway,” Bucky said. “I promise, it’ll be okay.”

“I don’t like having to sleep around other people,” Steve muttered. “Without – Without walls, or doors, or even a tent. It’s just… weird.”

“Sam’s your friend,” Bucky reminded him gently.

“Yeah, well, he’s not you,” Steve complained. Bucky laughed softly and hugged him tighter. “I’ll be fine, it’s not like I don’t trust Sam and you’re here –”

“That’s right, baby, I’m here,” Bucky promised. “I’m gonna keep watch, alright? You’ll be fine.”
“You don’t need to keep watch,” Steve sighed. “You need to sleep.”

“How about I do it anyway?” Bucky said. Steve lifted his head and rolled his eyes. “Look, just let me, okay?”

Steve didn’t like it, but he nodded. Bucky brushed at his hair, then grasped his chin and pulled him in for a kiss. Steve let himself relax, leaning on Bucky, and when the kiss broke, he put his head back on Bucky’s shoulder.

Sam knocked on the bathroom door. “I’m gonna order room service,” he called. “You guys want anything?”

“Well, just a second,” Bucky answered. Steve squeezed him and pulled back, but Bucky caught his arm and touched his cheek. “You sure you’re okay with this? We can ask Sam to bunk with Romanoff and Barton.”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” Steve sighed. “Just – I get the side of the bed with the wall.”

“No problem,” Bucky said. He tugged Steve in and pecked his lips. “C’mon, you need to eat.”

“So do you,” Steve told him as Bucky opened the bathroom door.

“Man, I could eat an elephant,” Sam said as they walked out. “These guys got fancy shit, I just want a burger.”

“Is there another menu?” Steve asked, looking over the room. It was the basic hotel room, if not supplied with more luxuries. There was a flat screen TV on a low dresser and a desk in the corner, a couch on the wall with the bathroom and a wide nightstand between the two beds. Sam stood by the desk, holding up what was presumably the room service menu.

“Nah, just the one,” Sam answered. “You guys feelin’ quinoa salads?”

“I don’t know what that is,” Bucky said.
“Actually, neither do I,” Steve said. “I never found out.”

“Don’t,” Sam advised. “Ha, burgers! They got the classic, a mushroom one, a barbecue one, and an avocado jalapeño one.”

“Avocado?” Bucky repeated, looking confused.

“You’ve never heard of avocado?” Sam asked him.

“Brainwashing aside, no,” Bucky said.

Sam looked at him with pity. “I’ll get that one and you can have a lil’ bit of it,” he said. “Man, you’re just all kinds of sob stories rolled up into one poor child.”

Bucky looked confused. Steve shook his head and went looking for the TV remote.

“Rogers, what do you want?”

“Peace,” Steve complained.

“That’s not on this menu,” Sam replied casually. Steve sighed and dropped onto the far bed, having found the remote.

“The barbecue one,” he said. “And fries. And a chocolate milkshake. A big one.”

Sam gave a nod. “I respect that, man,” he said. “But they don’t got milkshakes.”

Steve gave a heavy sigh. “Why bother?” he murmured.
“Do they have anything with spinach?” Bucky asked.

Both Steve and Sam turned to look at Bucky with confusion, and a little bit of revulsion on Steve’s part.

“Steve needs foods high in iron,” Bucky said. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t want spinach,” Steve said insistently.

“But –”

“I don’t want any spinach!” Steve repeated, then turned his attention to the TV and started flicking through channels.

Sam abruptly began laughing. “What?” Bucky demanded, while Steve ignored them.

“He’s like a child,” Sam wheezed. “Refusing to eat his vegetables.”

“He is a child,” Bucky said.

Steve flipped them both off. He found the History Channel and decided that was good enough.

“Okay, so, two burgers, fries, what do you want, Bucky?”

Bucky gave a shrug.

“The mushroom one,” Steve said.

“I don’t like mushrooms,” Bucky answered. “I think?”
“The barbecue one,” Steve tried again.

“Fine,” Bucky sighed. “But do they have anything with spinach?”

“They got a spinach artichoke dip?” Sam suggested.

“Will you eat that, Steve?” Bucky asked. “Please?”

Steve groaned. “Fine,” he said.

Sam picked up the room’s phone and started dialing. Steve muted the TV and Bucky walked over to flop onto the bed behind him. Steve lay back and rested his head on Bucky’s stomach, and Bucky began absently petting his hair.

“Yeah, room 1620. Could we get two of the honey barbecue bacon burgers with extra fries, the jalapeño burger, and an order of the spinach artichoke dip?”

“Buck?” Steve murmured.

“Hmm?”

He rolled onto his side and Bucky flicked his gaze down to look at him. Steve reached up and pushed his hair off his forehead.

“I love you,” he said softly.

Bucky smiled and shifted onto his elbow to look at him better. “Love you, too, punk.”

Steve settled onto his side, using Bucky’s chest like a pillow, and reached up to tangle their fingers together. He heard Sam in the background, still ordering dinner, but focused on listening to Bucky’s heartbeat. Bucky’s other hand slipped back into his hair and resumed combing through it.
Steve’s phone started ringing. Steve groaned but sat up and looked at it, finding a number he didn’t recognize calling. He looked at it for a long moment, then sighed and answered, standing up to walk to the other end of the room so Sam’s conversation wouldn’t disrupt his call.

“Rogers,” he said, touching the phone to his ear.

“Hi, it’s Katie from the Maria Stark Clinic. Could we speak about your recent visit?”

“Hi, Katie,” Steve answered, dropping to lean against the wall. Bucky had sat up and Steve waved him over, wanting him to hear. Bucky got up and walked over, leaning against the wall next to him. “Go ahead,” Steve told the nurse.

Alright, well, the tests came back and you don’t have anything to worry about,” Katie began. “Dr. Finch ran a lot of tests to hit all the bases, but they all came back negative, even the pregnancy test. You did have a high white blood cell count, but that’s to be expected from having just finished a luteal period. Have you experienced any unusual symptoms since coming in?”

“Nothing to worry about,” Bucky said. “You’ve been slower lately, though.”

“Nothing to worry about,” Bucky said. “You’ve been slower lately, though.”
“Your reaction time has dropped by 2.3 seconds.”

“Buck,” Steve half-laughed, frowning a little, “how do you know that?”

Bucky just shrugged. Steve shook his head and pushed an arm around his neck to give him a quick kiss. “I’ll take your word for it,” he said, walking back toward the beds and Sam.

“You get tired faster, too,” Bucky remarked. “And you’re craving a lot of chocolate.”

“You know what that means?” Steve sighed, dropping onto the bed. “We’re gonna wake up in a pool of blood in the morning.”

“What?” Bucky said, reaching for a weapon. “Why –”

“Because my period will have started!” Steve said quickly. “That’s all!”

Bucky relaxed. He sighed and dropped onto the bed next to Steve, hugging him and pouting. Sam looked between their faces.

“Would now be a good time to mention I have a blood phobia?” he said.

“Weren’t you search and rescue?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed slowly, “that would be why.”

Steve shrugged. “I’ll tell you to not look if I’m bleeding everywhere.”

“You could ask the staff for pads?” Sam suggested.
Steve considered it. “Hang on,” he said, then stood up. Bucky made to get up, too, and Steve waved a hand, indicating for him to stay there. Steve went into the bathroom, shut the door, and moved to the toilet.

A minute’s investigation resulted in no sign of blood. Steve flushed and washed his hands, then walked back out.

“It always starts really light, I’ll be fine,” Steve insisted. “I hate having to wear pads. It always feels like a diaper.”

“You do realize that pads have changed since the 40s?” Sam said.

“Yes,” Steve answered. “I still hate them.”

Bucky gave a shrug. “I’m not afraid of a little blood,” he said. “C’mere.”

He held out an arm and Steve joined him on the edge of the bed. He pulled his legs up and put his head in Bucky’s lap, shutting his eyes again. Bucky, Steve assumed, unmuted the TV and the other bed squeaked slightly as Sam sat down.

“Food’ll be here in twenty minutes,” he said.


“Why are we watching Ancient Aliens?” Sam asked.

“Because Steve picked it,” Bucky answered.

“That’s a shit excuse.”

“Shush.”
Steve twisted around until he could wrap his arms around Bucky’s torso and bury his face in his stomach. He let his legs dangle off the edge of the bed, hugging Bucky and breathing in his scent. Bucky resumed petting his hair, his fingers gentle.

The TV made for good background noise. Steve fell asleep. The next thing he knew, Bucky was tensing up and there were voices that weren’t coming from the TV.

“Food’s here,” Sam announced, and a door shut. Bucky relaxed. “Plus they brought us pajamas and clothes for tomorrow. They said were out of the spinach artichoke dip, but they gave us a shit ton of fries.”

Steve sat up, rubbing his eyes. “Milkshake?”

“Sorry, buddy,” Sam told him. “They did have root beer floats, so I got that.”

“How could they have root beer floats and no milkshakes?” Steve sighed. “Gimme.”

Sam handed out the food and Steve settled onto the mattress with his burger and fries, the root beer float sitting on the nightstand. Bucky sat next to him, leaning back on the pillows, and Steve waited for him to inspect the food and his drink before starting on any of it.

He had two fries in his mouth when Sam asked: “Do you wanna pray?”

Steve faltered. “Yeah,” he said, though he didn’t want to. He brushed off his hands and picked up Bucky’s metal hand, closing his eyes. “You wanna do it, Sam?”

“Why not,” Sam said.

Steve bowed his head and Sam began.

“Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, let us this day be blessed, amen.”

Steve cracked open one eye. “Was that a prayer or a schoolyard chant?”
“C’mon, man, it’s the only prayer I know,” Sam defended himself. “Jesus don’t judge the quality of your prayer!”

“What about Cain?” Bucky asked.

Sam scowled. “If Steve’s Abel, sure.”

Bucky sat up and glared at him. “You better take that back,” he said.

“It fits the situation!” Sam insisted.

Steve ignored both of them and started eating his burger. He grabbed the TV remote and turned up the volume to drown out their arguing.

“My milkshake’s better than yours,” Sam threw out.

“There’s no milkshakes!” Bucky insisted.

“Fuckwads,” Steve sighed.

“My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard,” Sam called.

“That doesn’t make sense!” Bucky countered.

“There’s probably people sleeping,” Steve said, looking at his watch.

“They like, it’s better than yours!” Sam started singing. “Damn right! It’s better than yours!”

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” Bucky said.
“Can I mute him?” Steve muttered, aiming the remote at Sam and pressing the mute button.

“It’s better than yours!” Sam kept singing, but he was laughing too much to really call it singing.

Bucky covered Steve’s ears with his hands. Steve rolled his eyes, turned up Ancient Aliens just a little bit more, and resumed eating his burger. It was a damn good burger, but it would have been better with a chocolate milkshake.

“You gotta look up, like, the memes of the decade,” Sam laughed. “Damn, I haven’t heard that song in too long, hang on.”

Sam started scrabbling for his phone. Steve stole a couple of Bucky’s fries while he wasn’t looking.

“Hey!” Bucky said. Apparently, he was looking. “You’ve got your own fries, you little punk!”

“Yours taste better,” Steve insisted, stealing another.

“They’re the same damn fries!” Bucky said.

“My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard, and they’re like! It’s better than yours!”

Steve leaned sideways to look at Sam, who had fallen over laughing. “What the fuck, pal? C’mon, what is that?”

“I could teach you,” blared from his phone.

Steve hit mute on the TV and gave Sam his best Captain-America-is-disappointed-in-you face. “We’re watching Ancient Aliens,” he said. “C’mon.”

“This is history, right here,” Sam answered. “All the kids know this song!”
“We’re not kids,” Bucky said. “Let us be old in peace.”

Steve pointed with a fry, not answering because his mouth was full and he’d been taught manners.

“Whatever,” Sam said, popping a fry into his mouth. “We’re gonna have an MTV marathon when we get back to New York.”

“Fine,” Steve sighed, not really caring. He shifted on the bed to lean on Bucky again, wanting contact.

“I can’t eat with one hand, baby,” Bucky said, looking down at him sorrowfully. “But I’ll hold you when I finish my burger.”


“Dis bitch,” Sam said absently through a full mouth.

“Hey, don’t talk ‘bout my fella like that!” Bucky answered. Steve sat up, offended Bucky assumed Sam even meant him. “You kiss your mother with that mouth, Wilson?”

Sam swallowed before replying for once. “I didn’t mean it the way people meant it in the 40s, dude. It’s not as derogatory the way it was back then.”

Bucky deflated. “It isn’t?”

Sam shook his head. “Nah, man, people use it lovingly all the time. My sisters call each other bitch every other sentence, for example.”

“Were you even talking about me?” Steve asked, still offended.

“Yes?” Sam said. “Lovingly?”
Steve looked at him sideways. “Okay,” he said slowly. “If you say so.”

“Anyway,” Sam went on, “my mother’s dead.”


“It’s chill, dude, I ain’t mad,” he answered. “She passed away a long time ago.”

“Still,” Bucky said. “Wait.”

He turned to Steve, looking worried. “Did your ma – Did she ever get, y’know…”

“What?” Steve asked.

Bucky looked uncomfortable. “A proper grave?”

Steve dropped his gaze, but nodded. “I woke up in the future and had a shitload of money. It was the first thing I did.”

“That’s good,” Bucky said, sounding relieved. He threw an arm around Steve’s shoulders and squeezed briefly before pulling back. “We should leave her flowers sometime.”

Steve nodded. “Maybe,” he said, not wanting to really get into it. He didn’t really want Bucky visiting that cemetery.

“Like, how much money do you have?” Sam asked.

Steve broke out of his reverie. “Uh, a lot?”
“How much is a lot?” Sam pressed further.

Steve made a so-so noise. “I had stock in Johnson&Johnson from 1940 that I sold when I woke up, plus my bank account was just gathering interest, and there’s all the back pay the army gave me. I think I have a few million?“

Sam let out a long whistle. “Damn, boy,” he said, “I should’a been cuddling up to you this whole time.”

Bucky let out a quiet growl. Steve smacked him on the arm, because obviously, Sam was joking.

“Haha,” Steve replied then, “very funny. I gave a lot of money away, anyway, the rest is just in the bank.”

“Gathering interest?” Sam laughed. Steve shrugged. “Can you, like, fund my nieces’ college tuition?”

“Probably,” Steve said. “Where are they going?”

“They’re both eight,” Sam kept sniggering, “who knows?”

“Remind me in ten years,” Steve said, returning to his dinner.

“You ought’a be saving up for your own kid’s college fund,” Sam added.

“Can’t have kids,” Steve reminded him, tone a little bitter.

“You could get a surrogate,” Sam said. Steve shrugged. That wasn’t the point. Besides, what good would he be, then? Would it be his child or the child of the woman who bore them? Steve didn’t even want to think about ever getting a surrogate. That wasn’t what upset him.

“We could get a dog,” Bucky suggested.
Steve looked at him. “A dog,” he repeated.

Bucky shrugged. “They’re like furry babies?”

Steve looked away, then pouted. “I want a dog,” he mumbled.

“We’ll get a dog, baby,” Bucky promised, pecking him on the cheek. “Anything you want.”

“Papa’ll buy you a mockingbird,” Sam threw in.

“Shuddup,” Steve answered him.

“He’s got a point,” Bucky laughed.

Steve elbowed him. “You ain’t my daddy and you ain’t getting me a mockingbird.”

Bucky laughed again. Steve rolled his eyes, then grabbed the TV remote and unmuted Ancient Aliens. “Damn fools,” he muttered to himself.

“You ain’t my daddy,” Sam repeated across the room, wheezing. “Things I never thought I’d hear you say, Rogers.”

Steve threw a pillow at him. Sam simply caught it and dropped it behind his head.

“Sheesh,” Steve added for emphasis.

Sam gave a shrug. “I call ‘em likes I see ‘em.” Steve rolled his eyes.

Bucky hugged him from the side abruptly, going so far as to tug him closer. Steve let out an oof and
grabbed Bucky's knee for stability as Bucky nuzzled into the side of his face.

“Fuck off, Barnes,” Steve laughed.

“Hey, I told you I’d hold you when I finished eating,” Bucky said smugly, then kissed his cheek.

“I’m still eating,” Steve complained.

“I ain’t stopping you, punk,” Bucky said. Steve rolled his eyes again.

Bucky still had fries left, but Steve took care of them. Sam took their trash away and claimed first shower, saying that their antics had left him feeling like he need to go look at monster trucks to feel like a man again. Steve called him a wuss and Bucky just nuzzled into his neck. Sam waved them off and disappeared into the bathroom, the tell-tale click of the lock following him.

Steve let his gaze focus back on Ancient Aliens. He was actually enjoying it.

Bucky nuzzled into his neck yet again, and slowly Steve recognized a quiet, rumbly purr coming from him.

“You enjoying yourself?” he asked, a smirk curling his lip.

“Mmm,” Bucky answered. “I got a lapful of a gorgeous, sweet-smellin’ Omega. What’s not to like?”

Steve shook his head. Bucky kissed his neck, then bit gently.

“Hey,” Steve said quietly, “seriously, Buck, we can’t do nothin’ tonight.”

“I know,” Bucky answered. “Just wanna love on you for a bit. That a crime?”

Steve shrugged, sighing. Bucky kissed another spot on his neck and pulled his head up to nuzzle his
“You know how beautiful you are, baby?” Bucky murmured. “You know how gorgeous you are?”

“Fuck off, Bucky,” Steve answered tiredly.

“I’m serious,” Bucky echoed his words. “You know what’s my favorite thing about you?”

“My ass?” Steve said sarcastically.

“That’s a strong contender,” Bucky answered, “but nah. It’s these freckles.”

Steve half glanced at him, then down at his hands. Bucky reached up and slipped his tie loose to release the top button of his shirt and press his fingers against the hollow of his throat.

“You got ‘em everywhere, doll,” Bucky murmured. “I keep wantin’ to play connect the dots and see how many constellations I can find.”

“That’s so cliche,” Steve sighed.

“You got one right here,” Bucky said, tapping a spot on his chest just above his right breast. “That’s my favorite one, ‘cause it makes a straight line right to your tit.”

“I don’t have tits,” Steve told him.


“Fuck off,” Steve mumbled, his face hot.

“I love it when you blush,” Bucky said with a grin. He reached up and cupped Steve’s cheek,
pulling his face in to look at him. “It’s the prettiest shade’a pink I ever seen, sweetheart.”

“What are you tryna get?” Steve asked suspiciously.

“I’m tryna get you to see how damn beautiful you are,” Bucky said with finality. “Because you’re the most gorgeous Omega in the world and I want you to know that.”

Steve tried to look away. Bucky pulled him back in and held him there, touching their foreheads together.

“Baby, I hate that you don’t feel beautiful,” he said in a soft whisper. “I hate that you feel awful and I want you to know I think you’re beautiful whatever you look like. You’ve always been my pretty, Stevie.”

Steve shut his eyes and fisted a hand in Bucky’s shirt. “I – I don’t know what to tell you, Buck.”

“Don’t tell me nothin’,” Bucky answered. “Just keep listening when I tell you you’re beautiful. You’re fucking beautiful, baby, a fuckin’ bombshell and I’m the luckiest guy in the world to have you.”

Steve, his mouth dry, dropped his head onto Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky wrapped his arms around him and held on tightly, his head tipped to rest against Steve’s.

“You got hair like silk,” Bucky said. “And your lips always look pink like you been bitin’ ‘em –”

“I am always bitin’ my lips,” Steve grumbled.

“But they’re pretty, Stevie,” Bucky insisted. “Hey, and you know what you rollin’ up your sleeves does to me? Your fuckin’ arms give me a hard-on, Stevie.”

Steve drew in a sharp breath, squeezing his eyes shut tight and his fists curled tighter in Bucky’s shirt.
“And your eyes?” Bucky murmured. “Baby, I wasn’t kidding about them being like starlight. Purest
blue in the whole damn world. Baby, I gotta draw maps to look you in the eye ‘cause I get lost with
how beautiful you are and forget how to work my own tongue. Doll, I’m not bullshitting you when I
say you’re beautiful.”

“Keep telling me,” Steve whispered thickly. “I’ll believe you one day.”

“I’ll keep tellin’ you ‘til the day they put me in the ground,” Bucky promised. “Everyday ‘til you get
sick of me sweet-talkin’ in your ear. ‘Til the end of the line.”

Steve drew in another hard breath and nodded once. Bucky kissed the crest of his ear and let his
cheek rest against his head. Steve swallowed the knot in his throat, took a slower, deeper breath, and
let Bucky’s scent take him back to a good place.

The summers that were sticky hot but were the best part of the year because they were allowed to
roam free until the sun went down. Their neighborhood would band together for Independence Day
and Old Bobby Green would roast a whole hog, smoke it for days with cedar and applewood, and
the smoke that came from the coals would always have a sweet tang to them. Mrs. Barnes’ kitchen
was always perfumed by the herbs she grew in the windowsill in the summer, tarragon and thyme
and rosemary, bay and fennel and chives. Her heritage as a Jew and Mr. Barnes’ traditions from his
Romani family banding together and making their kitchen smell like an herb garden all the year long.
The bread his ma would make on Sundays that smelled so heavenly as the dough baked and filled
the whole house the week to come. Every year on Steve’s birthday, they’d climb up to the roof of the
general store down the street and watch the fireworks down on the bay. Their bellies would be full of
good food and drink, their clothes would be spiced with the scent of herbs and Old Green’s cedar
and applewood chips, and that was what Steve thought of when he buried his nose in Bucky’s neck.
When they were young and innocent and nothing couldn’t be beaten with a good right hook.

Steve hid his face in Bucky’s neck and breathed deeply, trying to catch the feeling of being carefree
so long ago again. He would have believed Bucky in a heartbeat if he’d said Steve was pretty back
then, and not even because he looked the way he was meant to. Steve would have believed anything
Bucky told him when they were kids, before they started growing up.

Just like he believed it when he was five and Bucky was six and Bucky swore up and down they
were gonna get married one day.

The bathroom door opened and the sound jolted both Steve and Bucky out of the quiet they’d fallen
into. Sam stepped out, scrubbing his hair with a towel and dressed in the hotel’s pajamas. Steve
cleared his throat and resettled himself so he wasn’t sitting in Bucky’s lap, but Bucky just tugged him
back in. Sam glanced between them, eyebrows raised.
“I just interrupted y’all makin’ out,” he said. “My bad, I can go back in there for another five minutes –”

“It’s fine,” Steve said. “I’ll take the next shower.”

He moved to get off the bed and Bucky followed him. Steve glanced at him, then turned his head away from Sam and hissed: “Oh, no, you don’t.”

“You don’t know what I’m doing,” Bucky claimed.

“You’re thinking you’re gonna join me,” Steve countered under his breath.

“Okay, you know what I’m doing,” Bucky said.

“But you’re not!” Steve hissed.

Bucky scowled. “Why not?”

Steve’s ears went very warm. “Because!” he muttered. “Decency!”

Bucky just scowled.

“Man, let the poor dude shower with you,” Sam called, obviously trying not to laugh and Steve wasn’t even looking at him. “He’s givin’ you the kicked puppy look and everything!”

Steve, blushing hard, held out a finger to Bucky. “You’re not allowed to try anything,” he said.

Bucky brightened considerably. Steve furiously avoided Sam’s eye as he made his way to the bathroom, Bucky following him. After they shut the door, Steve heard Sam laughing.
“I don’t get it,” Bucky said.

“No shower sex,” Steve said firmly.

“Yeah, no,” Bucky agreed surprisingly easily, “that shower’s too small, one of us would break something.”

Steve narrowed his eyes at him. “Really? You’d already ruled it out?”

Bucky shrugged. “I mean, I wouldn’t’ve said no to a handjob.”

Steve leveled a finger at him. “No.”

“Yes, sir, whatever you say, sir,” Bucky said, snapping off a salute. Steve rolled his eyes and grabbed complimentary shampoo and body wash from the counter. He paused, then grabbed the conditioner, too. For Bucky.

Steve turned on the shower, then made quick work of undressing. He averted his eyes from Bucky while doing it, and while Bucky changed out of his clothes, knowing that the temptation would be easy.

Steve climbed into the shower and Bucky followed him, promptly plastering himself to Steve’s back and hooking his chin onto his shoulder.

“That’s not helpful,” Steve said over his shoulder.

“Mmm,” Bucky rumbled back in answer. Steve rolled his eyes, ignored where Bucky’s body was pressed to his, and settled on washing his hair.

A minute later, Bucky batted his hands away. Steve sighed, like it was some hardship, and turned around to let Bucky do it for him. His eyes shut and his arms wound their way around Bucky’s waist, loosely holding onto him.
“Y’know what else’s cute about you?” Bucky asked softly, his nails gently massaging Steve’s scalp. “The second I start playin’ with your hair, you go all sleepy.”

“‘S you, Buck,” Steve mumbled.

“I just plain fall asleep,” Bucky argued. “You go all cuddly and affectionate, like a kitten.”

“Sure, Buck,” Steve answered.

“A big blonde kitten,” Bucky said with glee. “Who’s dumb enough to jump out of airplanes without a parachute.”

Steve opened one eye to squint at him crossly.

“Hey, don’t go gettin’ soap in your eyes, punk,” Bucky said. “It ain’t pleasant.”

Steve dutifully shut his eyes. “You’re gonna be hung up on that thing about the parachute for the rest of my life, aren’t you?”

“Yep,” Bucky said, sounding pleased. “Until you start wearing parachutes every time you get on a plane.”

Steve let out a long sigh. Soap got into his mouth and he choked, then spit it out, hacking up a lung or three in the process. Bucky just laughed at him.

“I don’ know what y’all doin’ in there but you better do it quieter!” Sam’s distant voice yelled.

“We’re not doin’ nothing!” Steve yelled back, then turned to get the soap out of his mouth. Bucky leaned on his back and kept laughing.

“Asshole,” Steve rasped.
“I told you!” Bucky wheezed.

“You told me I’d get soap in my eyes, not my mouth,” Steve accused. He turned back around and started rinsing the shampoo from his hair. “Be useful and wash your own damn hair.”

“Aww, you’re not gonna do it for me?” Bucky asked with an exaggerated pout.

“I ain’t a kiss-up,” Steve replied. Bucky snorted and shook his head, but reached for the shampoo and started working it into his own hair.

Steve switched spots with him so Bucky could rinse his hair, then used a cloth to wash his body out from the spray of the water. Out of habit, he scrubbed at his skin roughly, until Bucky caught his wrist and took it away from him.

“What’d that pretty skin do to you, huh?” Bucky asked, pulling on his wrist to bring him closer. “You ain’t gotta be so mean to your own self.”

“’M not bein’ mean,” Steve mumbled. Bucky kissed his cheek and started running the cloth over his skin, considerably gentler. His wrist followed the cloth wherever it went, mixing his scent into the soap. Steve let him.

They switched again and Steve put his back to Bucky to let the water wash away the soap. He shut his eyes and stuck his face under the spray, then pulled back and, eyes still shut, took a deep breath. Bucky’s scent was stronger than his, significantly so, and the way it bound itself to the steam left Steve feeling like Bucky was, in that moment, a little bit omnipresent.

Bucky touched his shoulder and Steve stepped back, opening his eyes again. Bucky pecked his lips as he entered the spray of the water, and Steve let himself lean on Bucky again. The steam made his head and eyes feel heavy. The omnipresence of Bucky’s scent made him feel safe and at home, and he was more than a little bit ready to go to bed, Sam’s presence be damned.

“You done?” Bucky asked him, resting a hand on his hip.

“Y’need the conditioner,” Steve mumbled.
“The what?”

Steve pointed. “Conditioner. Strong and soft.”

“Oh, I see.”

Bucky kissed his cheek again, then pulled away. Steve took the safety handle inside the shower in hand to support himself as well. The steam left him feeling a little dizzy on top of tired.

Bucky didn’t seem to notice, his eyes shut as he worked the conditioner into his hair. The worst of the dizziness passed after a moment and Steve let it slide, chalks it up to stress and fatigue. Or low iron levels. He used to get dizzy looking up when he was a kid. Maybe Bucky had a point about eating spinach.

Steve watched Bucky rinse his hair again, then switch off the water. Bucky got out of the shower first and turned back, holding out a hand to Steve. Steve took it just to humor Bucky, though he was a little dizzy, still. They both dried off and dressed in the plain white pajamas provided by the hotel, and Steve buttoned his up to the throat. He found a couple of disposable toothbrushes on the counter with toothpaste.

“Here, come brush your teeth,” Steve called over his shoulder. Bucky walked over and hugged him from behind, leaning on his back. Steve huffed and turned his head to the side to look at him crossly. “Don’t fall asleep standing up,” he said reprovingly.

“Hmph,” Bucky answered, then took his weight back and dropped a kiss onto Steve’s shoulder. He accepted the toothbrush Steve gave him, but then took the one Steve kept in his hand, too, and squinted suspiciously at both.

Steve held back a sigh and waited. Bucky sniffed them, examined them, then licked each.

“Hey!” Steve protested as Bucky licked his toothbrush again. “That one’s mine!”

“Pssh, my spit ain’t gonna kill ya,” Bucky said, handing it back. “Poison would, though.”
“Well, if it were poisoned, now you’d die, too,” Steve said dryly. Bucky shrugged. Steve scowled and prodded him sharply on the shoulder. “Don’t give me that cavalier act. Ain’t funny.”

“Sorry,” Bucky answered, crowding closer and kissing his cheek. “I don’t mean it.”

Steve huffed, dropping his gaze to put toothpaste on his brush. Bucky leaned his forehead against his temple for a second, then – Steve squeaked and dropped the toothbrush – he licked the side of his face.

“What was that for!” Steve demanded, grabbing a hand towel and scrubbing his face while Bucky laughed. “God, you’re so gross!”

“Your face!” Bucky wheezed between laughs.

“Y’all alright in there?” Sam yelled.

“Fine!” Steve answered. “Fuck you, Barnes, you can sleep on the floor.”

“Sure, doll,” Bucky chuckled, grabbing his waist and planting a fat kiss on Steve’s cheek. Steve wrinkled his nose. “If you really want me to.”

Steve rolled his eyes. Bucky kept chuckling and let go of him to brush his own teeth.

“Gross motherfucker,” Steve grumbled to himself, sticking his toothbrush in his mouth.

“You don’t complain about me stickin’ my tongue other places,” Bucky remarked.

Steve coughed and spat into the sink. Bucky chuckled again and started brushing his teeth. After that, Steve made the choice to hold his tongue so he wouldn’t choke on any more toothpaste.

He splashed his face with water again and dried off with the same towel he’d rubbed Bucky’s spit trail off with. Bucky took the towel after him, then reached past him to unlock the door. Steve yawned as they left the bathroom, heading straight for the far side of his and Bucky’s bed.
Steve got under the blankets and reached for Bucky. Bucky took his hand with his left and kissed the back of it, but stayed on top of the blankets. Steve held Bucky’s hand against his chest and shut his eyes.

“You gonna sleep, Bucky?” Sam asked.

“No,” he heard Bucky answer, then Bucky briefly squeezed his hand. “I’m gonna keep watch.”

“Alright,” Sam answered. “Fair enough.”

He didn’t protest, nor try to explain to Bucky that the hotel was perfectly safe, and Steve wondered if maybe he shouldn’t have protested at first either.

“Tell you what,” Sam added, “I’ll take second watch.”

Steve kept his eyes shut but felt Bucky twisting away from him to face Sam. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Nah, I don’t mind,” Sam insisted. “That way everybody gets some sleep.”

Steve opened his eyes and then his mouth, and Bucky turned to look at him. “You sleep, baby.”

“I can do third watch,” Steve muttered.

“Nah, man, you’ve been exhausted lately,” Sam called. “Listen to your Alpha for once and just sleep.”

“I listen to my Alpha all the damn time,” Steve grumbled, flopping back onto his pillow.

Bucky bent and kissed his temple. “Sure you do, doll.”
Steve grumbled some more under his breath, but it was cut off by a yawn. “Wake me up if you wan’ me to do third watch,” he mumbled, feeling sleep threatening to claim him.

“Just sleep,” Bucky murmured.

“Love you,” Steve said.

“Love you, too,” Bucky answered.

“Yeah, g’night, Steve!” Sam called.

Steve waved a hand in Sam’s direction. He shuffled closer to Bucky, his eyes still shut, then pulled his arm around his head and shoulders and pressed his face into Bucky’s hip. He tucked his arms between Bucky’s legs and his chest, the blanket pulled over his shoulder, and rapidly fell asleep.

[*] [ @bioticpigeon , 10/20/14 11:34AM] 

#BuckyBarnesIsntHydra
Sam was jostled awake by cold, pinching metal on his shoulder. He jerked, disoriented, until he caught sight of Barnes standing in the gap between the two beds.

“Second watch,” Barnes said. “You don’t have to take if you don’t want to, though.”

“Nah, man, it’s fine,” Sam promised. He sat up, yawning, and nodded to Barnes. “You hit the hay, you done good today.”

Barnes gave a sharp nod. He retreated to the other bed, where Steve’s sleeping figure could be seen in the dim light coming from the gap in the curtain. Sam stared blankly in their direction for a moment, while Barnes climbed under the blankets and cozied up to Steve, then flicked his gaze away and opened his eyes wide before blinking several times.

He yawned again and sat up further, reaching for his phone. It was a little after three in the morning, and given they’d be leaving the hotel by six, that meant Barnes had taken more than half the night for first watch.
Sam sighed and let it go. He crept out of bed and went digging for his headphones, then settled back onto the bed with them and hooked one bud into his ear to watch Netflix until it was time to actually get up. He left one ear free, just to keep to the pretense of keeping watch.

Sam spent the next couple of hours staying awake by re-watching Parks and Rec. It was worth being awake at three in the morning.

Their wake-up-call came at five-thirty by way of Steve’s phone ringing. Barnes answered it before Steve could even wake up.

“Yeah,” Barnes said. “He’s asleep. Fine.”

Sam put away his phone as Barnes hung up. “Time to get going?”

“Yep,” Barnes said, rolling over to start whispering to Steve. Sam figured he could hit the john and give them some privacy.

So he rolled out of bed and headed into the bathroom. He took the time to piss, wash his hands, then brush his teeth for good measure and spent a second blinking at his reflection. He leaned in and looked over his jaw. He needed to shave.

Unfortunately, the hotel had not provided razors. Sam sighed and let it go, figuring he could shave in New York. Or maybe his house. He could ask if it was safe enough to move back to DC yet.

Probably not. But at the least, he could get some stuff. He was getting tired of wearing the same pajamas for a month in a row.

Sam glanced at the door, then at his wrist, remembered he wasn’t wearing a watch and wondered how long he ought to give Steve and Bucky before he went back out. It had probably been five minutes, but who was he to know they weren’t having a morning make-out session? Sam pressed his ear to the door and heard absolutely nothing. He would’ve wanted a morning make-out if he were either of them. It was good for your health, fortified your spirits or some shit.

Sam gave them another couple of minutes before opening the door. He found Barnes half-way through getting dressed, wearing slacks and no shirt, and Steve sitting on the bed looking rumpled and unhappy.
“Morning, Steve,” Sam greeted. “Y’all could use the bathroom if you wanted.”

“I’m fine,” Barnes said, pulling on a shirt. Sam shrugged and grabbed his change of clothes.

“You want the bathroom first, Steve?” Sam asked.

“You can use it,” Steve said, his voice sounding rough from sleep. “Just, um, knock before you come back out.”

“No problem,” Sam answered, backing up. “Lemme know when y’all good.”

He ducked back into the bathroom and shut the door. He took a second to stare at nothing, then shook himself and got dressed. After that, Sam took a seat on the toilet lid and waited for somebody to let him out. He should have brought his phone.

After a couple of minutes, a knock came at the door. Sam got up and opened it; Barnes just waved before walking away. Sam walked out and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“So, what’s the plan?” he said.

“We meet Romanoff in the lobby,” Barnes answered. Steve was standing in front of the TV, watching the weather report with a furrowed brow. “Then meet the lawyers for briefing, then go to the Senate.”

“Cool,” Sam replied. “Is it gonna rain today, my man?”

Steve glanced up, then shook his head. “Clear skies. Cold.”

“Good thing we got jackets,” Sam said. Steve shrugged and switched the TV off. “Y’all ready?”

Steve gave a nod and Sam offered them a thumb’s up before turning around.
“Hey, can I ask you something?” Steve said.

“Yep?” Sam said, turning back around.

“That therapist you told me about,” Steve started, still staring at the now-blank TV screen. “Do you think you could… put me in contact with her?”

Sam blinked. “Yeah!” he said, digging out his phone. “Definitely, man, absolutely no problem, I’ll text you her work number, okay?”

Steve nodded, not looking at him, but Sam was cool with that, it was enough that Steve was reaching out for the help he needed. Sam resisted the urge to do his friend is doing something healthy dance and shared Larah’s contact with Steve.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“No,” Steve muttered, tossing the TV remote aside. “Thanks.”

“No problem, dude,” Sam said, offering him another thumb’s up. “I got you, bro.”

Steve laughed softly and Barnes looked confused. “Bro?” he repeated.

“Bro,” Sam said again, a grin spreading slowly across his face. “You’re like my brother, my homie, y’know?”

“People use it like pal these days,” Steve said with his back turned.

“Oh,” Barnes said slowly.

Sam offered Barnes finger guns. “Bro?”
“Bro?” Barnes said, then copied Sam’s finger guns. He still looked a little confused.

Sam laughed and held out his fist to Barnes. “Fist bump, man,” he said. Barnes frowned, but tapped their fists together. Sam made a quiet explosion noise and drew his hand back, then clapped his other palm to Barnes’s unfolding hand and pumped it. “Bro,” he said, delighted.

“If you say so, pal,” Barnes said.

“I say so, man,” Sam answered. “Hey, we gotta, like, catch the game now or something.”

“What game?” Barnes repeated, looking twice as confused.

“I don’t even know,” Sam said, grinning.

“You two are like butch lesbians trying to imitate dudebros,” Steve grumbled. “Can we go?”

“I don’t know what any of those things are,” Barnes said. “Let’s go.”

“Oh, so, a lesbian is a lady who’s gay,” Sam started as they made their way out of the hotel room, their clothes from the day before in a neat bag Steve was carrying. “And remember that gay means homosexual now. And then butch is a term for a lesbian who’s really into masculine traits, like short hair and work boots and shit. Then dudebros are just –”

“Sam,” Steve threw in.

“But dumber,” Sam added, having enough self-esteem to not get offended.

Barnes looked a little lost. He glanced at Steve, an expression of help in his eyes. Steve just shrugged.

“Future’s weird,” he said.
“I’m so confused,” Barnes whispered.

Sam held out a hand to him placatingly, almost touching his shoulder but not quite in case Barnes was touch-shy like most guys. “Try looking up Urban Dictionary, they got all kinds’a slang terms kids these days use.”

“Didn’t Romanoff say she told you to use that thing?” Barnes said to Steve.

Steve shrugged. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

Barnes rolled his eyes. Sam sniggered.

They took the elevator down in companionable silence. Sam checked Facebook and Twitter, blocked a couple of racist randos on Twitter who’d found him since he’d shown up at the inquiry yesterday, and for shits and giggles scrolled down his Twitter feed for a minute.

Twitter threw a couple of trending hashtags in his face. Sam intended to ignore them, except –

“Hey, Steve?” he said as the elevator doors opened and he opened the thread. “Check this out.”

Sam showed Steve his phone. Steve leaned in and his eyebrows shot up. Barnes leaned in, too, then promptly wrapped his arms around Steve’s middle and squeezed.
“There,” Barnes said while Steve let out a startled noise. “Steve Rogers has been given a hug.”

Sam chuckled to himself as he went back to reading the #SteveRogersNeedsAHug thread. So many Kermit the frog sipping tea pictures, some of which were funny enough that he saved them.

“But that’s none of my business,” Sam muttered to himself happily as he followed Barnes and Steve out to the lobby.

“What’s none of your business?” Romanoff demanded.

Sam showed her the tea. Romanoff frowned for a second.

“What is this?”

“This is America’s teens at work,” Sam said. “Spillin’ all the tea, dude.”

“Spilling tea?” Barnes muttered.

“Urban Dictionary,” Sam told him at the same time as Romanoff said it. “Jinx,” Sam added. “You owe me a soda.”
Romanoff shook her head at him. “No,” she said, then turned away. “Let’s go.”

“Oh,” Sam muttered to himself as he followed them out.

In the taxi, Sam continued scrolling through Twitter. He shared a couple with Barnes and Steve, but the memes left them confused and Sam wound up having to explain what the Muppets were just so Barnes would stop asking why there was a frog drinking tea.

Sam sent a couple to his sisters, because he knew they’d enjoy them. The taxi slowed and came to a stop outside a small cafe, a bright red awning standing out against the gray skies. Sam got out first and shoved his phone in a pocket, looking up at the sky and squinting.

A drop of water landed between his eyes. Sam blinked and wiped it away, then turned to face Barnes and Steve as they both got out of the taxi.

“No rain, huh?” Sam remarked. Another drop landed on his head, then one splattered on his nose.

“When are the weather forecasts right?” Steve said dryly and stepped under the awning.

Sam followed, walking to the front door and taking the handle. It was locked. He would have tried to peer inside to see if there was anyone there, but there were blinds drawn over the windows and the glass of the door.

Natasha and Clint approached and Sam pivoted to face them instead of the locked cafe. “It’s closed,” he said.

Natasha pushed past him and knocked twice on the door. There was audible movement inside, the lock turned and the door opened.

“Thanks,” Natasha said to the aproned woman who had let them in. “I owe you, Lyn.”

“No problem,” Lyn answered, walking farther into the store. Sam gave a shrug and held the door for their group to enter. Inside, Sam spotted Murdock and Nelson sitting in a booth, cups of coffee and croissants in front of them.
“Coffee for everybody?” Lyn called as they entered. The rain outside was picking up by then, but inside, the cafe was warm and smelled like fresh baked bread. Sam saw Steve shut his eyes and inhale deeply.

“Yeah, but give the super soldiers just cups of straight espresso,” Natasha said. “Steve, how’d that twelve shot effect you the other day?”

Steve opened his eyes again. “Oh, I don’t remember.”

“I’ll take care of them,” Lyn promised. “You guys want food?”

“Yeah, please,” Clint spoke up. “You got those muffins?”

“The orange ones?” Lyn asked with a smile. “Yeah, I made ‘em special just for you.”

“You’re amazing,” Clint swore.

“Take a seat,” Lyn told the group, “I’ll bring your drinks out and some stuff from the bakery.”


Sam took a chair and rubbed at his face. Clint took the seat next to him, Natasha on his other side. Barnes did his cute shit and pulled out Steve’s chair for him, but didn’t join them.

“You’re just gonna stand there, Barnes?” Natasha remarked, not looking.

Barnes only shrugged. He was looking around suspiciously. Steve reached back and tugged on his hand once, but he stayed standing.
“Leave the man alone,” Sam spoke up. “He ain’t hurting nobody.”

Natasha waved a hand dismissively. Sam shook his head and eyed Murdock’s croissant. He was hungry.

“So, we’re bringing up our witnesses today.” Murdock jumped right into the briefing, despite the fact that Clint was yawning and Steve was visibly bouncing a leg. “We should start with Barnes’s sister and then move on to the nurse.”

“What that order?” Natasha questioned.

“In case they ask how Rogers contracted an STD,” Nelson said in answer. “They may not bring it up –”

“They will,” Natasha said.

Nelson shrugged. “Maybe Wenham will suddenly discover he has a soul. But if we give them the story of why Rogers and Barnes were separated first, then the story of how Rogers had to survive will earn more sympathy.”

Sam let his gaze drift over to Steve and Barnes. Barnes was watching the back of the cafe from the corner of his eye, his hands resting on Steve’s shoulders. Steve was staring at the table’s surface with a sour twist to his face.

“Steve, do you think you can give testimony today?” Murdock asked.

Steve didn’t answer right away. He took in a long breath, crossed his arms over his stomach, and tipped his head to the side as he continued to examine the table’s surface with that sour twist to his expression.

“Don’t have much choice, do I?” he said finally.
“I mean, you could testify later this week,” Nelson said. Steve shook his head. Sam guessed that really hadn’t been what he’d meant.

“I’ll be fine,” Steve told them. Sam flicked his gaze to Barnes, then down and saw that his hands were digging into Steve’s shoulders. Steve didn’t seem to notice.

“Have you thought about what to say?” Murdock asked.

Steve nodded, but didn’t go into detail. Just then, the doors to the back of the cafe swung open and Lyn made her way out, carrying a tray of baked goods.

“You guys can help yourselves,” Lyn announced as she neared. Barnes tensed but Lyn went around him and put the tray down between Natasha and Clint. “I’ll be right back with your coffees.”

“Thanks, Lyn,” Natasha said.

Sam leaned forward on his chair to examine the pastries. There was a selection of croissants, muffins, bagels, and a few slices of toast, with condiments in the center. Sam took a bagel and a pack of cream cheese, then grabbed a knife. They’d been given real cutlery, not plastic, for which he was grateful as he spread cream cheese on his bagel.

“This place has the best pastries,” Clint announced, taking four muffins. Sam figured that explained why there was so much.

“Yo, Steve,” Sam called, his mouth full, “there’s chocolate croissants.”

Steve raised his eyebrows but took one and sniffed it. Barnes took it from him and Steve didn’t even react, just looked up and waited for Barnes to finish checking it for poison. Barnes squinted at it, smelled it, gave it a small lick. Sam wondered if Barnes could really detect poison just by licking things, but evidently, the croissant was safe, because he gave it back to Steve. Steve bit into it happily.

“Anyway, let’s discuss your whistleblowing,” Nelson said. Sam polished off the first half of his bagel and looked around to see if Lyn the Magic Lady had coffee ready for them yet. She was across the cafe by an espresso machine, and Sam gave a wide grin. More espresso, less depresso, let’s go, he thought.
“I’ve violated over fifteen codes, they have every right to jail me.”

“Yes, but!”

Sam tugged out his phone at a vibration and checked it. He snorted; his little sister, Kennedy, had answered Kermit the frog with her own meme. She was in college and as such, knew more about memes than him.

Totally called for, he responded. Then saved it to his phone and switched back to Twitter to resume scrolling. He saved a few of his favorites, sent Steve one or two, and retweeted a couple. After a minute, Lyn approached with another tray laden with coffee cups.

“Here y’all go,” she said, starting to pass out the cups. Sam took his with extreme gratitude, inhaling deeply the steam rising from the black surface.

He exhaled and opened his eyes in time to see Steve take a cup, lift it, go white and promptly put it back down. Barnes bent and started whispering in his ear, but Steve just waved him off and pushed
his chair back from the table.

“You okay there, man?” Sam asked.


“I’d offer you Pamprin but I doubt it would help,” Natasha said.

Steve just shook his head. Lyn hovered nearby.

“I’ve got tea?” she said worriedly.

“Would you mind?” Steve asked, looking back at her.

“Don’t you worry, sweetie,” Lyn answered with a kind smile and a nod, “mint tea’s good for everything that ails ya.”

“Thank you,” Steve told her as she walked away again. He exhaled heavily and leaned back against Barnes standing behind him. Barnes bent and kissed his hair.

“Eat the plain bagels,” Natasha said to Steve, handing him one. “Chocolate won’t help.”

Steve grimaced, probably regretting the two chocolate croissants he’d already eaten, but took the bagel and handed it to Barnes without hesitation. Barnes inspected it much the same he’d done to the chocolate croissants and gave it back. Steve nibbled on it.

“Are you alright?” Murdock asked. “If you’re ill, we can push for a break.”

“No, I’m fine,” Steve insisted. “Just – Stuff, probably nerves.”

Or his upcoming period, Sam guessed. Poor kid, Sam knew his sisters always got theirs at the worst
possible times, he doubted Steve’s would be much different.

Barnes still looked highly concerned and his fingers were still digging into Steve’s shoulder. Sam watched Lyn bring Steve the tea and Barnes inspect it with a touch of pity. At least Steve seemed to feel better for drinking the tea, as he relaxed the more he drank it. Barnes, though, never seemed to release any tension.

“Alright,” Natasha said at 6:45, “it’s time to go.”

Sam watched the anxiety flip back on in Steve’s eyes. Barnes gripped Steve’s shoulders with white knuckles and Steve’s hand shook slightly as he put his empty teacup back on the table. No one else seemed to notice as they got up and the lawyers and Natasha gathered their papers, and Clint snagged a final muffin. Sam pushed to his feet and stretched, then moved around to where Steve was standing up.

“You’re gonna be fine, man,” Sam said, reaching out to clap his shoulder.

Barnes growled at him. Sam jerked his hand back, startled. Steve didn’t even seem to notice.

“Yeah,” he said. “Fine.”

Yeah,” Sam echoed, looking at Barnes. Barnes didn’t return his gaze, too focused on Steve. “You got the most important people on your side, you’ll be fine.”

Steve nodded. Sam took a risk and patted his shoulder again.

Barnes flicked his gaze to him and growled again, low. Sam gave him a placating look and withdrew his hand more slowly. Steve, stepping back to put on his coat, didn’t notice. Sam took a step closer to Barnes.

“Are you alright?” he said quietly.

Barnes frowned. “Yes?”
Sam glanced at Steve and raised his eyebrows. “What’s with the glower?”

Barnes’s frown deepened, then he scowled. “Don’t touch him,” he said quietly, and Sam slowly nodded.

“We can talk about that,” he offered. “You, me, Steve. Another time?”

Barnes shook his head, then met Sam’s gaze and raised his eyebrows with a warning in his eyes. “Don’t touch him,” he said firmly, then stepped away.

Sam was left standing there, confused and worried. That wasn’t a good sign.

“Let’s go, Wilson,” Natasha called. Sam shook himself and gave a nod. Another time, he reminded himself. That was a problem for another time. A serious, major concern for future Sam to lend a hand in solving.

Future Sam was probably hating present Sam’s guts in the future.

Sam sighed and followed the group out of the cafe. Lyn called a goodbye and most of them returned it. Sam watched Barnes walk just behind Steve with a hand on the small of his back. Barnes actively scent-marked Steve all the time. He didn’t want other people touching his Omega. Never stopped touching Steve, to begin with. Not good signs.

Chapter End Notes

*uh-oh. so, yeah, bucky's behavior is suspicious? weird. you'd think steve and bucky were raised with inherently misogynistic social norms that were repurposed and exposed as toxic later in the century. weird.*

*as per usual, the great and wonderful lexi is my queen and in this house, we stan her. i have bloopers for you.*

me: anyway why are you on tumblr go back to reading
lexi: you were writing something down!
me: go back to reading what do i pay you for
lexi: you don’t pay me at all bitch

lexi: “steve froze up” he’s gonna have to talk to sam now
me: no it’s bc steve has issues with humans that are alphas and/or have penises that are not bucky
lexi: like bucky’s not going to immediately put steve on the bed and just drape himself over him like a starfish “this is mine” sam’ll be like “cool i’ll be on the other bed you have fun with that”

lexi: “avocado? bucky repeated” WAIT HE DOESN’T KNOW WHAT AVOCADO IS SOMEONE NEEDS TO FIX THIS THIS POOR MAN. “peace, steve complained” okay. okay. let’s sit down and unpack that. “that’s not on this menu” clap BACK this commentary is a mood. “they don’t have milkshakes. why bother.” OKAY LET’S SIT THIS BRIEFCASE DOWN AND UNPACK IT.
lexi: can i use my terrible photoshop skills for something?
me: yes
lexi: i have to photoshop eeyore onto steve’s body
me: i thoroughly encourage this behavior
*psst, it here*

lexi: “Hi, it’s Katie from the Maria Stark Clinic. Could we speak about your recent visit?”
me: *is shook bc she’s doing a customer service voice she sounds souless like barbie*
lexi: god i just slipped into white girl voice
me: um idk whether to be offended or not you’re right but still

lexi: “I’m not afraid of a little blood,” bucky said. you know i wouldn’t be surprised if bucky found a way to be into steve’s blood
me: um what
lexi: not like in a kinky way but you know
me: no i don’t know

lexi: “Dis bitch,” Sam said absently –” it’s me.
lexi: Bucky kissed his neck –” bucky, you little slut
lexi: “That’s so cliche,” Steve sighed.” no one asked you rogers

lexi: “I don’t have tits,” Steve told him.” uh you do. looks like a duck, sounds like a duck, quacks like a duck, a duck it is
me: i literally went to google and looked up “captain america running scene” and i found a compilation of every marvel scene wherein cap runs I COMPARED THE AMOUNT OF BOUNCE IN THE SUIT VS NOT IN THE SUIT CONCLUSION THE SUIT HAS A SPORTS BRA

lexi: “You’ve always been my pretty, Stevie.” i’m gonna read the rest of this in babytalk
me: oh god pls don’t
lexi: *in adorable baby voice* “Steve shut his eyes and fisted a hand in Bucky’s shirt. “I – I don’t know what to tell you, Buck.”
me: *dying*
lexi: *babyvoice* “Steve, his mouth dry, dropped his head onto Bucky’s shoulder.”
me: you’re gonna send me into littlespace if you don’t stop
lexi: lmao okay

lexi: ugh bucky talking about steve’s eyes ugh
me: he’s being dumb and gay okay

lexi: “When they were young and innocent and nothing couldn’t be beat with a good right hook.” aw that’s actually really sweet
me: see i can do more than just sad
lexi: like i believe you

lexi: “Steve… looking rumpled an unhappy”
me: like a majestic bald eagle

lexi: “Fist bump, man,” he said. Barnes frowned, but tapped their fists together. Sam made a quiet explosion noise and drew his hand back” ba-da-la-da-dah
me: ba-da-la-da-dah

lexi: “Sam wondered if Barnes could really detect poison just by licking things”
me: he’s just like standing there glaring at it and then he sticks his tongue out and pokes it with his tongue
lexi: a gentle lick
me: a gentle lick

lexi: “mint tea’s good for everything that ails ya.” omg she’s like every grandma, like you’re sad? mint. you’re sick? mint. your life’s a mess? mint.
me: that’s – that’s it, that’s the mood

lexi: “Barnes growled at him.” MAN GET YOUR DOG he don’t bite YES THE FUCK HE DO “Sam took a risk and patted his shoulder again.” i’m imagining him like reaching out from very far away and just patting him with the tips of his fingers like pat pat!
me: omg yes
lexi: pat pat!

yes, mint tea is good for all that ails ya. leave a comment if you love me or if you hate me or if you have absolutely no opinion whatsoever i just like the attention that’s why i’m here instead of writing my actual original novel (yea it exists wdym). send me your twitter handle on tumblr in order to be featured in upcoming chapters as a poster of dank memes. love y’all!
i pledge no allegiance

Chapter Summary

i pledge no allegiance to an immoral and corrupt nation. i pledge no allegiance to a thoughtless and bigoted country. i pledge no allegiance to a flag that asks me to let privileged man stand on my back so that his shoes don't have to be dirtied by the men and women lying under me. i pledge no allegiance.

Chapter Notes

alright i'm a little late BUT i have good reason! i'm this close to finishing my capbigbang fic (that kinky fic i keep telling lexi edges blurred is Not™). i've got four chapters to write and i'm trying to get it done this week. anyway, your update is here, it's bold, it's unapologetic, and i've got a fuckton of bloopers from it bc lexi decided to read congressman wenham's voice in a deep south accent. think the lawyer from the bee movie. literally. thank you, lexi, for that gem and for being the best beta in the history fo betas, and thanks to the reader of the week for making the tweet in this chapter possible. the reader of the week is @kjane0699/thelittlestcaptainamerica and not only did they offer their twitter handle, but they had the idea for the meme in this chapter. it's top quality memery.

you can find this chapter's cover on my tumblr here and the playlist is here, those of you who enjoy the playlists i make for every chapter, i've switched intertwined's playlists to youtube and i'll be moving edges blurred's playlist to youtube eventually as well. thank you.

psst, i said i've got a fuckton of bloopers. so here's a bunch.

me, making the playlist cover: okay i'm editing this photo of steve just after the serum and just he keeps l o o k i n g at me and i'm just just stop i didn't do this to you stop looking at me like that
lexi: um you did this to him
me: but he doesn't have to keep looking at me like that!

he's looking at me. i'm uncomfortable.
lexi: hey what’s the lawyer guy from the bee movie sound like?
me: uh we’re gonna ask google
lexi: ‘cause i gotta sound just like
me: okay so we’re gonna go to youtube
lexi: oh god
me: so we can prove you know what he sounds like
*we watch the sting scene*
the lawyer from the bee movie: “are you her little… bed bug?”
me: omfg i forgot how disgusting this movie was
lexi: uh yeah that movie was for adults. anyway. *in the lawyer’s voice* We resume with Agent Romanoff’s release
me: omfg stopstopstop i have write this down
*her voice is a combination of blanche from the golden girls and a terrible southern accent. lexi’s bf is cringing. i’m cringing. i’m judging her, i fucking live in the deep south.*
every time she speaks in wenham’s voice, i snort, her bf, and i quote lexi, “squeezes his eyes… like he doesn’t know what to do with me. don’t you love me?”
me: i have to brace myself for congressman wenham’s voice
lexi: I pose a vote to the Senate
me: *chokes on the bite of yogurt i just took* 
lexi: stop laughing at me!
lexi’s bf: i’m sorry but the way romanoff rolls off your tongue is really funny!
lexi: oh shit i’ve fallen into the space between my bed and the wall
me: i need to stop eating my yogurt i sorta sprayed my screen
*we spend the next hour laughing over wenham’s stupid voice*
lexi: shit i lost it
me: hang on *in an exaggerated accent* “This blood sample that Agent Romanoff submitted”
lexi: omg
me: the worst thing is i can actually had a southern accent until i moved to baltimore and i can still do it

*pls remember, lexi’s bf is still there and still laughing at her*
lexi: “This blood sample that Agent Romanoff submitted” STAAAAAHHHP LAUGHING AT MEEEEE
lexi’s bf: i’m sorry! i can’t help it that you spit out blood like a southern vampire!
me: *mournfully and still kinda laughing* i wish we’d recorded this

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The man is literally the definition of Protective Mom™ how did anyone believe he was an alpha  
#SteveRogersNeedsAHug
Steve still felt the nerves from the cafe churning his stomach as the call for the all rise came.

He didn’t move from his seat, Natasha didn’t move from hers, and a glance around the room showed maybe another 20 women remaining in their seats. Their solidarity with him was encouraging, but his stomach still churned.

“We resume with Agent Romanoff’s release of classified information to the general public,” Congressman Wenham announced, and even he sounded tired on this gloomy, October Tuesday. He let his gavel fall, Steve flinched, and nobody noticed. “Agent Romanoff, do you have any opening remarks?”

“Not today, Congressman,” Natasha answered.
Wenham nodded. “Then we’ll get right into it.”

On Steve’s left, Bucky’s knee was bouncing. Steve felt fatigue catching up on him as he got the urge to lay his head on Bucky’s shoulder and shut his eyes. He didn’t do that, though, because despite what Nelson and Murdock had told him, Steve wasn’t sure PDA was a wise idea.

Wenham and Natasha argued for a long time. Steve wished he’d been able to stomach the coffee this morning. Wenham and Natasha argued for a very long time, but as his watch showed 11:30, Wenham sighed heavily.

“I pose a vote to the Senate,” he declared. “Based on the testimony and evidence given by Agent Romanoff, should she be brought before a grand jury to be indicted for releasing this information?”

Steve sat up straighter, suddenly awake. Wenham twisted to look around at the Senate members this time, and when he turned back to face Steve and his half of the inquiry, the votes for yes were the minority.

Wenham let his gavel fall. Steve still flinched.

“Agent Romanoff will not be brought before an indictment trial and this subject is settled. This leaves Captain Rogers’ campaign of deceit.”

Steve dropped his gaze, swallowed and clenched his jaw. Bucky’s hand came to rest on his leg and squeezed.

“We’d like to ask one Mrs. Rebecca Proctor and one Mrs. Susan Hayle to speak,” Murdock told the panel.

“Let’s talk with Mrs. Hayle,” Wenham said. Steve stiffened and glanced down the table; Nelson and Murdock had said Rebecca would speak first. “This blood sample that Agent Romanoff submitted, our people tested it and it appears to be Captain Rogers’ blood, but we have questions relating to the fact that this blood sample also tested positive for AIDs.”

Steve jerked his gaze to Wenham. The congressman was looking back at him without an ounce of pity in his eyes.
“Given that HIV wasn’t discovered until the 80s,” Wenham continued, “we question the validity of the sample.”

“You acknowledge that it was his blood,” Nelson argued. “Do you or do you not accept it as Captain Rogers’ blood before the serum?”

“We have questions,” Wenham insisted.

Bucky was leaning into Steve.

“What’s AIDs?” he whispered.

Steve tipped his head to the side. “I’ll tell you after,” he murmured.

Bucky caught his gaze, frowning, but eventually nodded. He lifted his hand and curled a finger towards Steve; Steve turned his face back out and leaned in so Bucky could whisper in his ear.

Instead, Bucky kissed his cheek. “I love you,” he said quietly.

Steve leaned away and smiled down at his lap. He reached over and took Bucky’s hand, glancing at him with that small smile for a second, then away as the smile faded. Bucky squeezed his hand.

“Mrs. Hayle, if you could come forward?” Wenham called.

Steve looked behind him and saw an elderly woman being pushed in a wheelchair towards the center of the room. The granddaughter, Alexa Hayle, was behind the chair. She met Steve’s gaze and nodded once, smiling tightly.

Alexa steered her grandmother’s wheelchair towards the pulpit between the two crescent tables. She engaged the brakes, then walked away. Susan Hayle folded her hands in her lap and looked up at the inquiry panel.
“Please state your full name and date of birth for the record,” Wenham said.

“Susan Jackson Hayle, May the fifth, 1920.”

Wenham waved forward an attendant, who held out a heavy Bible to Mrs. Hayle. “And do you solemnly affirm that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you, God?”

“I do,” Mrs. Hayle answered.

The attendant scurried away with their Bible. Steve let his gaze drop once more.

“Mrs. Hayle, how old were you when you joined Project Rebirth?”

“I was twenty-two, sir.”

“It was your first assignment, was it not?”

“It was, yes.”

“And you had never met Steven Rogers before you took his blood on June the twenty-second, 1943?”

“I had not.”

Steve still didn’t remember her. A thousand people had taken his blood for Project Rebirth, it seemed.

“What was your impression of Rogers when you met?”

“That he was deathly pale.”

Steve let out a short laugh under his breath. He’d been deathly everything before Rebirth.
“Mrs. Hayle, this blood sample that you claim to have saved, were you aware that it is contaminated with AIDs?”

“I knew that Captain Rogers suffered numerous ailments when he was brought to Rebirth, but that one illness, in particular, had not yet been identified.”

“So you claim that Captain Rogers was the first victim of HIV/AIDs in the United States, then?”

“I assume that whoever transferred HIV to him was infected first.”

Light laughter rippled through the media bullpens. Bucky was gripping Steve’s knee tightly.

“Mrs. Hayle, do you swear that this blood sample was the sample you took from Steven Rogers on June 22nd, 1943?”

“I swear it.”

“And how do you explain the presence of the AIDs virus in his blood?”

“I cannot explain that, sir, I am not Captain Rogers.”

“If I may, Congressman,” Murdock interrupted. Steve looked up, seeing Murdock leaning forward. “Perhaps his illness requires the story to be told from the beginning.”

“Captain Rogers,” Wenham asked. Steve looked to him, but not directly at him, somewhere just below him. “How do you explain the presence of the AIDs virus in your blood?”

Steve took a steadying breath, then grabbed Bucky’s hand and held on tightly. Bucky did not hate him for it, and if Bucky did not hate him for it, no one else mattered.

“The same way most men get it,” he said finally.
Wenham raised his eyebrows. “Should we ask Sergeant Barnes if he suffered AIDs, too, then?”

“I didn’t get it from him,” Steve answered.

Wenham narrowed his eyes then. “Where did you get it from?”

Steve clenched his jaw and swallowed. He cast a glance down the table. Nelson gave him a nod.

“I couldn’t point out the person,” Steve announced. He looked straight ahead, not focusing on any one individual. Bucky’s fingernails were digging into his hand. The words were at the back of his throat, rising in him like bile; bitter and acidic, nauseating, painful. They were at the back of his mouth and they burned to get out.

“Is that so?” Wenham asked coldly. “Yet you expect us to believe that Sergeant Barnes has been your Alpha since 1933.”

“He has been,” Steve insisted. “I already told you we were separated after – Because of it.”

“If you’ll recall, Mrs. Proctor will give testimony on the nature of Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers’ relationship prior to joining the army,” Nelson threw in.

“And we are asking Mrs. Hayle to give her testimony on Senator Brandt arranging the erasure of Captain Rogers’ life before the serum,” Murdock added.

“I cannot accept that this is a genuine sample of Captain Rogers’ pre-serum blood, gentleman,” Wenham answered. “What this looks like is a sample of Captain Rogers’ blood with several viruses and bacteria added to make it look like his pre-serum blood.”

“How would I have gotten a vial of Captain Rogers’ blood after the serum?” Mrs. Hayle spoke up. “There were very clear records on who entered and exited Project Rebirth, after my team examined him prior to the experiment, then we were escorted off of the premises and returned to our lab. A week later, men from the FBI arrived and told my team to destroy all samples taken from Captain Rogers. At risk of my life, I kept three because I knew Rogers suffered an unknown virus and I hoped to see it documented and a vaccine created!”
“But how could Rogers have contracted AIDs?” Wenham demanded. “AIDs! HIV was not discovered until the 1980s –”

“That does not mean it did not exist before then!” Mrs. Hayle argued.

“So the one unlucky sufferer was Captain America?” Wenham retorted. “I find it highly doubtful that Captain Rogers of all people was exposed to –”

“I was a prostitute,” Steve said.

Wenham fell back in his chair. Mrs. Hayle turned around in her wheelchair, her mouth hanging open. Bucky’s nails dug into Steve’s hand.

“Would you repeat that, please?” Wenham asked hoarsely.

“I was a prostitute,” Steve said once again. He heard the cameras clicking, the pens scratching, the pure shock emanating from nearly every individual in the whole Senate as his words echoed with as much finality as the falling gavel. “After my mother died, I was left unemployed. I wasn’t married, I didn’t have a support network – It was the only profession that I could depend on.”

“Wh–Where was Sergeant Barnes?” Wenham demanded.

“I thought he was better off without me,” Bucky spoke. The first time he had spoken the entire time. “See, after Stevie had his heat, my folks were worried we’d get ourselves in trouble so they moved us out to Queens. They told me that I’d been with Steve and nearly killed him so I wouldn’t go back.”

“Which wasn’t how it really happened,” Steve said, looking at the table.

“But I thought I’d taken advantage of him,” Bucky kept going. “And going back home would only hurt him worse than I’d already done.”

“So he became a prostitute?” Wenham asked skeptically.
“It’s not like I had a lot of options,” Steve said, looking up at last. “Omegas didn’t work back then, they stayed home to keep house and raise their kids. I was an unwed, sickly Omega, there were only a handful of female Alphas in Brooklyn and not one of them wanted to take a chance on a fella that would die sooner than carry to term, not to mention that they could tell I was only looking for an Alpha out of convenience. I owed money from my ma getting sick and the rent kept getting raised, my options were starve to death or turn tricks.”

Steve paused, then gave a slight shrug. “I wasn’t ready to die.”

Wenham looked at a loss for words. Mrs. Hayle slowly turned back around in her wheelchair.

“I did it for nearly two years,” Steve said. “I started getting sick in 1941, a doctor gave me a year to live, then the Army announced they were taking Omegas and I enlisted.”

Steve gave a shrug, drawing back on himself. “I still wasn’t ready to die.”

“We will take recess,” Wenham said. “We will meet back at one o’clock.”

The gavel fell. Steve flinched. Bucky turned in his chair and pulled him into a hug, pressing a hand over his left ear and tucking his right into his neck even before the media bullpens exploded into sound. Steve squeezed his eyes shut and balled his fists up in the front of Bucky’s jacket. Bucky was murmuring softly, but his words were drowned out by the distant roar of chatter. The world becoming experts on his life. His sins were told. He’d confessed, and they would now bring him forward for judgment.

“Come on, let’s go,” Natasha’s voice came.

Bucky pulled Steve to his feet, releasing his hands over Steve’s ears and the barrier keeping out the worst of the sound. Steve flinched as the shouting reached him, but he was being ushered out.

“We arranged for a conference room to be reserved for us,” Nelson said somewhere behind Steve. “And we’re getting food.”

“Smart plan,” Natasha answered. “Lead the way.”
“Stevie, can you look at me?” Bucky asked quietly.

Steve put his head on Bucky’s shoulders. He didn’t want to look.

“Here we are.”

“We’ll catch up,” Bucky announced.

“Fine, but my wife’s bringing lunch for us, so don’t take too long.”

Bucky didn’t answer them. He pushed Steve into a single bathroom and flipped the lock behind him. Steve dropped his weight against the wall and hid his face in his hands. Bucky pushed into his space and pulled his body into him.

“You’re alright,” Bucky murmured in his ear. “You’re alright, sweetheart. I’ve got you.”

Steve pushed his arms around Bucky’s neck and hid his face in the crook of his shoulder. Bucky cooed gently in his ear, trying to reassure him, and Steve hardly heard him.

“C’mon, baby,” Bucky said, then a finger knocked against his chin and Steve inhaled sharply. “Look at me?”

Steve lifted his head and Bucky cupped his cheek.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he promised. “I won’t let anybody hurt you.”

“I know,” Steve exhaled.

“You’re gonna be just fine,” Bucky kept going. “This’ll all blow over soon enough.”
Steve nodded. Bucky kissed him gently and Steve let his head fall back into Bucky’s neck. He sniffed, then rubbed his nose against the gland buried deeper in Bucky’s skin than Steve’s. Bucky tipped his head up easily and Steve let his forehead rest against his scent gland.


“I know,” Steve mumbled.

“Nobody can take you away from me, remember. What God put together, nobody can rip apart.”

Steve nodded into his neck. If God was real. If God was real, none of this would have happened in the first place. And God wasn’t real, so there was no telling what this godforsaken nation could tear up in its betrayed fury.

“You ready to go eat?” Bucky asked him gently. “You still feelin’ sick?”

Steve shook his head. “I’m fine.”

“C’mon,” Bucky said. “We’re gonna be okay, baby. It’s all gonna work out for the better.”

Steve nodded again. He lifted his weight from the wall and let Bucky tuck him against his side. Bucky unlocked the door and they stepped out; across the hall, Steve saw their friends sitting at a table. A tall blonde woman had joined them, unpacking a large takeout bag. Steve straightened his spine – like he used to do in dark alleys, straightened the crook in his spine so he could stand tall and smile for the men he never wanted to touch him – and took a deep breath. Then Bucky pulled him back in and kissed his cheek.

“C’mon,” he said. “We got this.”

Bucky pushed open the door, holding it for Steve. Steve slipped inside, and thankfully the chatter that had taken root in their absence didn’t falter. Natasha was the only one looking at them and as Steve took a seat at the table, she narrowed her eyes at him.

Steve shook his head. Natasha raised an eyebrow and Steve shrugged. Bucky stood just behind him,
hands at his shoulders. Steve leaned back in his chair to let Bucky take some of his weight.

“We got burritos,” Sam called to their end of the table. “And soda, you want Coke or Sprite?”

“Sprite,” Steve muttered. Sam took a takeout cup and passed it down his way; Steve took it from Clint and handed it to Bucky immediately.

“Here, have another,” the tall blonde woman Steve didn’t know said, trying to pass a second cup.

“Barnes is checking it for poison,” Sam told her. The woman faltered.

“Chipotle did have that E-coli scare,” she said, looking with a frown at the food.

“No, it’s just Barnes,” Sam said.

“Rogers, Barnes, this is Karen, by the way,” Nelson called down the table. “We told you about her, she’s our secretary.”

“And his wife,” Murdock added.

Karen waved to them. “I’ve got steak and chicken?”

“Steak,” Steve said, then Bucky gave him back his cup. “Thanks. Bucky, what do you want?”

“I’m fine,” Bucky said.

“He’ll have steak,” Steve decided. “Buck, sit down.”

“I’m fine here,” Bucky repeated.
“Well, I don’t want you dripping burrito in my hair,” Steve said. “C’mon, sit.”

Bucky pulled out the chair next to him and dropped into it, but kept himself angled to keep an eye on the door. Clint passed Steve a couple of foil-wrapped burritos and Steve put one in front of Bucky.

“Eat,” he said simply.

Bucky took Steve’s burrito too and unwrapped it, then went so far as to unwrap the tortilla and examine the insides. Steve just waited.

“Y’all want chips and guac?” Sam asked.

“No, thanks,” Steve said. Bucky seemed satisfied with the burrito because he gave it back. Steve wrapped it up again and bit into it.

“We’re gonna put your sister on the stand as soon as we can, Barnes,” Murdock was saying. “Captain, you did great with how you explained the AIDs, keep reminding them that it was literally take up sex work or become homeless.”

Steve gave a vague nod.

“Barnes, feel free to keep your arm around Rogers, we don’t want anyone to think there’s upset between the two of you over this topic.”

“There’s none,” Bucky said.

“That’s great,” Murdock answered. “Let him talk, but if you have something to say, don’t ever interrupt him.”

“Yeah, interrupting is a no,” Nelson added. “Rogers, if anybody interrupts you, here’s what you do; look at them like they’ve disappointed their mothers, when they’ve finished, tell them you hadn’t finished what you were saying, and start over at the beginning.”

“Don’t address anything they’ve said,” Murdock added.
“Okay?” Steve said, frowning.

“Miss Romanoff, I assume –”

“I know that tactic, yes,” Natasha answered. “It’s a good one, Rogers, use it.”

Steve looked down; interrupting was rude, but responding like that had to be rude, too?

“It says that you’re not going to stand for being disrespected,” Murdock announced and Steve looked up. “Wenham will interrupt you to attempt to remind you of your place.”

“Right,” Steve said slowly.

“It is disrespectful,” Murdock insisted.

“He’s not arguing with you,” Natasha said.

Murdock’s face turned towards her, then back to him. “I understand you may have been raised to think differently,” he said quietly.

“A little,” Steve muttered. He’d been raised to not open his mouth in the first place.

“Interruption is a tactic Alphas use almost universally to assert that they are the dominant designation in the conversation,” Nelson spoke up. “But Omegas and Betas are equal to Alphas and deserve to be treated with that sort of respect.”

“By interrupting you, Wenham is saying that you do not deserve his respect,” Murdock added.

“I get it,” Steve answered.
“I just wanted to make sure you felt comfortable with this,” Murdock said, holding up a placating hand.

Steve covered his face with a hand, sighing. Then he shrugged and dropped his hand with a nod, saying, “Yeah, that’s a little hard for me to swallow, but I know my ma would rather I forget my manners and get the respect I deserve rather than be polite and take disrespect.”

“And that’s fine,” Murdock said, startling him. “You don’t have to think it’s impolite to respond to interruption this way, as long as you see that it’s on the person interrupting you for being rude, to begin with.”

Steve gave a slow nod. Nobody had ever told him it was fine he was having trouble agreeing with modern feminism.

“Once upon a time, you would’a just socked ‘em,” Bucky remarked.

“Once upon a time I could fall back on the fact that I was wearing a skirt,” Steve countered. “Then they couldn’t hit back.”

“Whoa, you wore skirts?” Clint called down the table.

“Deathtraps,” Steve answered. “My school made me wear one every day, then so did half my jobs. It was awful.”

“I wanna see photos of you in a skirt,” Clint said. Steve scowled at him.

“Good luck finding one,” he said coldly.

“I wanna see photos of you in a skirt,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve felt his ears getting hot and he ignored Bucky entirely. Clint meant it in a much different way than Bucky did, after all.
“I can’t sock ‘em now,” Steve said firmly. “Not if I want them to quit treating me like a traitor.”

“A good attitude,” Murdock agreed.

Bucky reached over and grasped his shoulder, shaking it gently. He didn’t say anything, but it wasn’t like he needed to. Bucky hadn’t really ever needed to use his voice to tell Steve what he needed to hear… Ever. Ever since they were kids and Steve could only half hear anyway, Bucky could put enough encouragement into a gesture that words weren’t necessary. He became an expert at it during the war, back when their huddled heads would have been suspicious.

“I’ll find photos,” Natasha said abruptly. Steve looked up at her. “Any photo, anything that’s real. I’ll find some.”

Steve just looked at her for a second. “You really don’t have to do that,” he said quietly.

“You spent enough time playing pretend,” Natasha said sharply. “You deserve to be able to have proof you existed.”

Bucky’s hand tightened on his shoulder. Slowly, Steve nodded.

“Thank you,” he said. He didn’t know what else to say.

Natasha nodded once. Again, Steve couldn’t help thinking that her kindness was more just that. That she was giving him what she had already proven she couldn’t have. Steve remembered her telling him once that she didn’t like owing debts, but this didn’t feel like paying back a debt.

“Time to go,” Nelson said at quarter to one. “Everyone ready?”

There was a vague assent. Steve kept his mouth shut. He was good at that.

They filed back into the Senate hall. The seats were full, the bullpens spilling over. The opposite circular table was empty.
At two, the inquiry panel filed in. Steve and Natasha stayed in their seats. Half the media bullpens stayed in their seats. More Senators stayed sitting. Steve could swear he even saw a few Alphas staying in their seats.

“This session is resumed,” Wenham announced, picking up his gavel and letting it fall. Steve blinked. “We resume with – with Mrs. Susan Hayle’s testimony on the supposed cover-up of Captain Rogers’ designation by the late Senator Brandt.”

Mrs. Hayle’s wheelchair was brought forward again. Steve ended up glancing over his shoulder towards the only seats that weren’t for Congress members or media and spotted Rebecca sitting with William and Bianca on either side of her. Rebecca caught his eye and gave him a thumbs-up and Steve tipped his head toward her before turning back around.

“Mrs. Hayle, please describe what happened when Senator Brandt allegedly ordered the destruction of Captain Rogers’ blood samples.”

“Men from the Secret Service came, with papers detailing their orders. They told us to get rid of all our samples, stayed until we did. The only reason I could save those three was no they hadn’t been labeled yet.”

“Who authorized these papers?”

“Senator Brandt.”

“And these men, did they have identification?”

“They did.”

“And you are sure they were Secret Service?”

“I am sure. Just as sure as I am that Senator Brandt arranged it.”

“What happened to the papers?”
“The men took them with them when they left.”

“Did they take any samples?”

“No, they did not.”

Steve stared down at his hands clasped in his lap. Bucky reached over and slipped his fingers between Steve’s two palms pressed together.

“When they came to you, did you ask to see their identification immediately?”

“They offered it before we could ask.”

“And what were their names?”

“Agent Thomas Yachinsky and Agent James Towdy.”

“Too many fuckin’ James’s,” Bucky said very quietly.

Steve cracked a smile for a second. Only a second.

“Do you remember their badge numbers?”

“I wrote them down, actually.”

Steve had to admire Mrs. Hayle’s memory of the event, considering how long ago it had been. She rattled off her answers without ever missing a beat, to the point that Steve could see Wenham losing his patience with her calmness.
“That will be enough,” he said finally. “Thank you, Mrs. Hayle, if we should need to speak with you further, we will call you.”

Steve glanced down the table toward Nelson and Murdock, wondering if they’d want to cross-examine her or something, but neither of them moved or said anything. Mrs. Hayle’s granddaughter returned and wheeled her away, her wheels squeaking slightly in the otherwise hushed room.

“Let’s talk before we bring forward your sister-in-law, Captain Rogers,” Wenham said. “What happened when you enlisted?”

“I spoke with Dr. Erskine,” Steve said. “He offered me a place in Project Rebirth but wouldn’t say what it was for.”

“So Project Rebirth didn’t pick arbitrarily from Camp Lehigh?” Wenham asked. “You were chosen ahead of time?”

“Project Rebirth recruited male Omegas from across the country,” Steve answered. “There were fifteen of us in total. We had a bunkhouse to ourselves and a stricter curfew, but we went through basic training with everybody else. Everybody else got sent home and when I was the last one left, Dr. Erskine came to talk with me about Project Rebirth.”

“And what did he tell you about the changes you’d go through?” Wenham asked.

“Told me everything he could guess,” Steve said with a shrug. “He said he’d wanted to try the serum on a woman first, since an Omega woman would be easier to find and less of a risk, but the army wouldn’t let him. So he picked male Omegas. He refused to test it on an Alpha until he’d seen it work successfully after what happened to the Red Skull.”

“Why did Erskine want Omegas?” Wenham demanded. “What was he so worried about, that he couldn’t take Alphas?”

“The Red Skull lost all his human empathy,” Steve answered. “The serum took his selfishness and ambition and made that take over everything else. I guess the doc was just afraid that if somebody like that took it again, he’d just end up another monster.”

“And male Omegas were the answer?” Wenham asked dryly.
Steve took a second to look at him with hardness in his eyes. Wenham stared back, undaunted.

“Doc told me that he’d accidentally made the serum to amplify what was good in a person,” Steve said eventually. “After what happened with the Red Skull, he thought that if he gave it to an Omega, it would amplify their natural instinct to protect and grow those around them. Making them good people over good soldiers. That was what mattered to him.”

“The record says Dr. Erskine picked you because you were weak,” Wenham broke in, sounding just as inhumanly dispassionate as the Red Skull just then. “That as the underdog, you would know what the true value of strength was.”

“That was why he picked me,” Steve answered. “I tried to enlist five times. I used false names nearly every time because they kept rejecting me. Dr. Erskine noticed it, knew I was dying, and I guess he figured that I was a good enough man to make a super soldier.”

“And you were dying of AIDs, to be specific,” Wenham added flatly.

“Among other things,” Steve replied flatly.

“Did you inform anyone in the Army of your profession?” Wenham asked. He said profession snidely, like he was mocking Steve.

“No,” Steve answered, putting disappointment into his voice for the way Wenham was speaking to him. It was immature of him. “Being a professional cocksucker and a fairy would have disqualified me.”

There were several sharp intakes of breath. Steve thought that fairy was probably an insult now, but that was what he’d been and the only way he could put it bluntly. He’d worn lipstick just to get two bits for sucking down cock after cock until he couldn’t afford it any longer, and so by all definitions of the word, he’d been a fairy.

Bucky squeezed Steve’s hand. Steve hoped he hadn’t fucked up by speaking so explicitly.

“They didn’t ask how you had an STD?” Wenham demanded.
“They didn’t know what it was,” Steve said. “Nobody knew. Perks of no one putting any effort into sexual health back then.”

The pens were scratching wildly. The camera shutters were whirring. Bucky’s hand was tight on Steve’s.

“Why was Dr. Erskine willing to take an Omega who was unlikely to survive the procedure?” Wenham asked.

Steve shrugged. “I said that if I died in the process, then they’d know where they’d messed up. There were still fourteen other male Omegas.”

“And that recklessness didn’t put Dr. Erskine off of you?” Wenham asked coldly.

“It seems like it didn’t,” Steve answered, “considering that I was chosen.”

Wenham glared. Steve glared back. He’d been encouraged to let out all the anger he’d had to hold in over how he’d been treated his whole life; he was doing it. He was angry that his school hadn’t thought it was worth the time to teach Omegas how to multiply and had forced him to wear a dress every day. He was angry that his mother hadn’t ever been trusted because she didn’t have a husband and was the first to be let go because she was Irish. He was angry that nobody ever gave a damn about him unless he’d been on his knees, on the streets or at a church pew. He was angry that so many people had passed over him because he was a girl-boy.

Steve stared Wenham down with all that anger. He’d held it in so long, it was fermented and spoiled and tasted foul in the back of his mouth, but it burned in his chest and filled his blood with adrenaline to finally be able to say how hurtful it had been just to have been born in this world.

“Why did you never say anything?” Wenham asked.

“Why did I never say anything during the war?” Steve countered. “Or why didn’t I say anything after I woke up in the future? Why didn’t I turn on everything Erskine worked for or why didn’t I say something in a future that didn’t seem to give a damn one way or another? Because I’ll be honest, both answers are fairly simple: Do you see what’s happening now?”
Steve heard the hissing of shock and offense and then, abruptly, someone clapped. Steve startled, looking off to the side, and saw a woman standing in the media bullpen. Her face was hard and her hands rang out sharply as she clapped.

Another woman joined in. Then another. Wenham picked up his gavel, but just as suddenly as it had begun, the clapping became a cacophony as more than just women began clapping; not just the media, the Senators, the spectators, Sam and Clint and Bucky started to clap, even.

“Order!” Wenham yelled, hitting his gavel and it didn’t even come close to the echoing of the applause. Someone whistled and another voice cheered. “Order!” Wenham screamed into his mic and nobody listened.

Bucky grabbed Steve’s shoulder. “Say something!” he called.

“What?” Steve answered, panicked.

“Anything!” Bucky said, shaking him and grinning. “Expose the sons’a bitches that did this to you, Steve! You got the floor!”

With a jolt, Steve realized that Bucky was right. For once in his miserable life, Steve had the microphone. He had the spotlight. He abruptly had a voice. The people had to listen now.

Steve stood up. He picked up the mic on his table and the applause slowed. Wenham looked stunned.

“The fact that Captain America is an Alpha wasn’t the problem,” Steve started speaking. He didn’t think, he just spoke. “’Cause that’s the truth of it: Captain America’s an Alpha and I’m not; that’s how it’s always been. That was never the problem. Captain America’s not a real person, Captain America is a comic book character that was dreamed up by Senator Brandt and his war bond salesmen. Captain America was a role, I was just the actor. You ask why I never spoke up? There’s a saying that I see all over the world now, a direct quote from Captain America – America is a place for all peoples to be who they truly are. You wanna know the first reason I never said anything?”

Wenham looked too stunned to cut Steve off, but even if he’d tried, Steve had a voice now. He wasn’t about to be silenced.
“That quote was from a script,” Steve spat. “People accredit it to me; here’s the truth, a fella called Henry Wright wrote that. Him and Thomas London, they wrote every one of my scripts. That’s what every word that ever came out of my mouth was, part of a script. If ever I tried to even change a word, I’d get my ears boxed and told to remember my place. Anything that you grew up thinking I said and thought *gee, that’s a grand thought*, I wasn’t the one saying it. Brandt and his writers and his marketing team put a key in my back and wound me up until I just recited all their lines and they kept turning that key even after I died. I never spoke up because I never even had my own soapbox to stand on to begin with.”

Steve paused for breath, Wenham opened his mouth and Steve just plowed on. He wasn’t getting silenced now, not now, not when he finally had the room to speak. He had a voice now. He’d waited his whole damn life for his turn to talk and he wasn’t fucking finished.

“The problem wasn’t that Captain America was an Alpha, the problem was that Captain America was a role and nobody ever bothered to think twice about the actor playing him. The problem was that they couldn’t just leave Captain America on the bonds circuit when I went to war and let somebody else pick up that role. The problem was that Brandt didn’t just erase my life, he fabricated a brand new one and did it so well, not even Director Fury knew that it was a lie. The problem was that I never even mattered.”

Steve stopped yet again. He nodded slowly, looking at Wenham’s wide eyes.

“And after I woke up?” he said carefully. “Did no one ever think it odd that even after Captain America died, he was telling people how they should live their lives, reinforcing what the men in charge wanted? Did nobody think it was weird when they started up the comics again during the Civil Rights movement and after Stonewall and all Captain America had to say was how great it was to live in America, in the land of the free, and the people who were standing up against injustice were just being ungrateful and ought to sit down? Unless they were on the bus, of course,” Steve added with a wry laugh.

“When I woke up in this future, I mattered even less. Nobody gave a damn that the war had been only a week ago for me, they dropped me back in a new one. Nobody gave a damn that I’d just lost my Alpha – Didn’t even matter that no one knew that, they all knew Bucky was my best friend; nobody cared and nobody thought twice that maybe I was still mourning. This future claims it’s progressive but never once did anyone stop and ask if maybe I needed help. ‘Cause, you see, the problem isn’t Captain America. The problem is that we’re still treating combat vets like they got something to be ashamed of. The problem is that the second the truth of my designation came out, people started asking if I was really part of HYDRA all along. The problem is you –” Steve pointed at Wenham “– asking if I deserve my rank after everything I’ve done just because I’m not a real man according to your standards. The problem is just plain America.”

Steve put down the mic. He let his hands rest on the table and sat down, his breathing sharp.
Wenham opened his mouth. And the applause began thundering once again. Bucky flung an arm over his shoulders as cheering began and pressed his forehead into Steve’s temple, hugging him hard. Steve left his hands on the flat surface of the desk; they were shaking.

“You did it,” Bucky said in his ear. “You did it, Stevie!”

“This session is concluded,” Wenham yelled over the sound of the cheering and applause. “We will meet again – At a time to be later determined! Dismissed!”

Bucky planted a loud kiss on Steve’s cheek. Sam leaned down the table and whooped. Natasha caught his gaze and offered him a rare smile.

“That’s my fella,” Bucky said with a proud grin.

Chapter End Notes

if you would recall from intertwined-- > “Kinda feels personal,” [Steve] exhaled. He stepped on the edge of his shield, flipping it up and catching it, then hit the magnetized cuff and broke it off of his wrist easily. “That’s my fella,” Bucky would have said with a proud grin.< -- so steve went AWF i am much too proud of myself for this chapter. i’ve had that speech ready since i fucking had the idea for this story. thank you for reading this chapter, please please pretty please leave a comment i love comments they always make my day better. okay, now, i have more bloopers.

lexi: *says anything in wenham’s voice*
me and her bf: *fucking laugh*
lexi: I o o k

lexi: “He’d been deathly everything before Rebirth.”
me: his first words upon exiting the vita-ray machine were “i’m not dying”
lexi: oh, that’s a mood. “i’m alive. what the fuck”
me: erskine’s response was “yes, you have stopped your current state of dying”
lexi: OH! that’s a mood!
me: that’s actually what he said to sell it to steve steve asks what the serum’s gonna do and erskine says “one, you will cease your current state of dying”
lexi: a mood

lexi: *wenham’s voice* “Mrs. Hayle”
me and her bf: *burst out laughing*
lexi: staaaaahp! two words!

lexi: *clears her throat* *laughs at herself*
lexi: “ailments” ailments? ailments? ailments?
me: ALIENS! HE WAS INFECTED WITH ALIENS!

lexi: wait can i give mrs. hayle a sassy southern accent now?
me: YES

lexi: “I was a prostitute” wait that is not the right voice for that how does one say that me: how does one say that indeed
lexi: is it like “move i’m gay” does he just like lean forward and say it in a southern accent like everyone else apparently?
me: *clears my throat* *exaggerates my actual southern accent* I was a prrrrostitute
lexi: THAT IS EXACTLY IT
me: *dying* this is making my great-grandparents roll in their graves. I! WAS! A! PRRRRROST-TI-TUTE!
lexi: YES that is EXACTLY HOW he says it he like snaps his fingers after each syllable.

me: waitwaitwait wait
lexi: oh okay
me: *adds the monologue about steve straightening his spine*
lexi: oh. okay. rub it in.

lexi: “Chipotle did have that e-coli scare”
me: ARE YOU GIVING KAREN A SOUTHERN ACCENT TOOOOOO
lexi: i didn’t mean to!

me: *interrupting* WAIT
lexi: what?
me: WAKANDA WOULD BE NOTHING BUT BETAS BC THEY NEVER GOT COLONIZED. BUT! BUT! KILLMONGER’S MOTHER! WOULD BE AN OMEGA! SHE WAS AMERICAN! HIS FATHER WOULD BE A BETA! SO KILLMONGER! WOULD HAVE BEEN EITHER AN ALPHA OR AN OMEGA.
lexi: ooh but a male omega? and black? that’s double the anger. which might make him even more bitter towards white people – like steve coming out would have done something, but it’s one thing to be a white male omega, but it’s another to be a black male omega
me: i have to write this now
lexi: ya welcome honey

lexi: if you’re a ho and you know it clap your hands
me: *claps*
lexi: i had to clap my knees but y’know

lexi: “Steve kept his mouth shut. He was good at that.” you were also good at keeping your mouth open but y’know
me: OH MY GOD
lexi: *continues without missing a beat*
me: OHMYGOD
lexi: i’m gonna pretend i didn’t hear that

lexi: oh god wenham’s voice
me: HA! SUFFER!
lexi: “wondering if they’d want to crass-examine” crass? cross?
me: *southern accent* crass examine
lexi: lmao
me: *southern accent* i don’t know ‘bout you, but corn bread don’t flow backwards in the summertime
lexi: i don’t know what you just said
me: me neither I WAS QUOTING A VINE

me: *writing something*
lexi: *randomly mutters in wenham’s voice* agent romanoff

lexi: “The problem is just plain America”
me: go. off. why am i saying that, i wrote it. i’m proud of myself, obviously
lexi: lmao mic drop

me: any closing thoughts?
lexi: wenham’s voice was really funny and i actually enjoyed doing it.
me: very true.
lexi: i’m gonna send you a tumblr post. ‘cause this is a look
me: i guess that’s all
lexi: ‘cause this is screaming slutty!steve to me, this is a look
me: alright. that’s all, folks!

me: *wenham’s voice* agent romanoff
lexi: omg pls don’t make that the new meat palm!

what does slutty!steve mean? uh that's the version of steve from the kept boy, i keep track of all the steves with tags like that. now, i dare all of you to go leave meat palm or agent romanoff in lexi’s inbox, or! leave your twitter handle and a meme request in my inbox and you could be the reader of the week soon. thank you for reading and don’t forget to comment!
and it was mine

Chapter Notes

what, late, wdym, i'm not late, what are you talking about?

anyway, things were hectic in the realms of real life lately, so we didn't read this chapter aloud, just read through it several times. lexi still had some smart-ass comments for me, which i shall share bc we enjoy laughing at her. up next! why am i telling you, just go read it.

the cover for this chapter is not on my tumblr rn bc tumblr is being a SHIT and not uploading things, i'll link it later. the playlist for this chapter is here, pls enjoy

edit 9/16/18: the cover is on my tumblr here

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
OUR BOY JUST DID THAT! MY SON! JUST DID THAT! MIC FUCKING DROPPED BITCHESSSSSSSSSSSSS!! #SteveRogersNeedsAHug
In the taxi back to the military base where their chopper was waiting, Steve felt a little numb. Bucky
looked pleased as Punch, continually glancing his way and lifting his hand to kiss the back of it.
They were fortunately quiet, the taxi driver a hard-faced Russian man who spoke very little English.
Steve was sure in a short while, the translation would get to him. In the meantime –

“Fucking hero,” Sam hissed, awed, in his direction. “You fuckin’ told them!”

Steve nodded absently. “I did,” he mumbled.

“How long you been sitting on that speech?” Bucky asked him happily. “Only, what, six years or
so?”

“About,” Steve answered vaguely.

“*The problem’s America!*” Sam quoted him with glee. “Shoots fired! If that don’t get their attention,
I don’t know what will!”

In the chopper, there was too much wind interference to have a proper conversation. Steve was just
moving in a fog, wondering if the past day had even been real. Had he just done that? Had he just
stood up before the Senate and accused a Congressman of being the problem with America? Had he
just done that on *national TV*?

They touched down in New York sooner than Steve had expected. The ride had slipped by in a blur.
Natasha powered down the chopper and Bucky hopped out before he did to turn back and hold out a
hand to him. Steve took it, letting Bucky help him down from the helicopter even though he was
perfectly capable of doing it on his own. Sam ran around behind them, slapping Steve on the
shoulder with a cry of delight before slowing to a jog and making his way inside. It was barely a
second of contact, but Bucky growled at his back anyway. Steve hardly heard it. Natasha and Clint
were more subdued, following Steve and Bucky following Sam.

Steve was still in a bit of a fog. His hands were still shaking. He needed to lie down.

Sam held the door for them to enter the Tower common room. Steve ducked inside, Bucky falling in
behind him with a hand on the small of his back, and as they entered, Stark popped up from a couch
and cheered loudly.

“My man!” he yelled. “I’m gonna get that whole damn speech on a T-shirt!”

“Okay,” Steve said numbly.

“That was really impressive,” Bruce spoke up; he was sprawled on a different couch. “Props to you, Steve.”

“Did you see Wenham’s face!” Sam cried, then punched the air. “He looked like he was about to wet himself!”

“They’re gonna think twice about asking you about your designation!” Stark called, running over and grabbing Steve by the shoulder.

“Hey!” Bucky snarled even as Steve jolted. “Don’t touch him!”

Stark jerked backwards. The air in the room was abruptly very, very different. Steve was frozen in place, stiff and shaking. He reached out, just lifted a hand, and Bucky immediately pulled him in by the waist, wrapping him up in both arms, glaring at everyone around them all the while.

Sam moved into Steve’s view. “Let’s take a step back,” he said calmly.

“When are you people gonna recognize that he fucking hates being touched?” Bucky snapped at them. Sam blinked. “Stop touching him!”

Steve cleared his throat, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

“I didn’t know that,” Stark said.

“I didn’t know that,” Natasha spoke up. She sounded very startled. She shifted to stand by Steve’s side, looking at him with surprise in her eyes. “How didn’t I know that?”
“Practice,” Steve mumbled. He turned away, swallowing the lump in his throat, and looked for the elevators. “Um –”

“He hates it when men touch him,” Bucky said sharply. “Or – Or just Alphas –”

Steve pushed at his shoulder. “Let’s just go,” he mumbled.

“How come you never said anything? We would have taken steps to make sure you felt comfortable.”

Bucky was standing firmly and Steve wasn’t prepared to have to drag him out. “I would’ve had to explain the time I spent whoring,” he mumbled and Bucky caught his wrist. “Turning tricks, whatever,” Steve snapped. “Can we – I’m tired.”

Bucky started to pull him away.

“You don’t mind Barnes,” Stark spoke up.

“Well, he’s different,” Steve said hastily, turning back. “He wasn’t – I knew him, we grew up together –”

“You know we don’t touch you with even remotely the sort of thoughts men had while you were working,” Bruce said. Steve looked away, clenching his jaw. “Like Tony said, we’re family.”

“Hey,” Sam cut in, but gently, “just go ahead and go.”

Steve hesitated.

“Come back when you’re not so jumpy, alright?” Sam told him. “We’ll get some food, sit down and have some family time. Sound good?”
“I can call Thor and everything,” Stark added.

“Whatever,” Steve muttered, turning and pushing at Bucky’s shoulder. “Come on.”

Bucky took him by the waist as they walked back to the elevator. It began to rise without them even needing to say a word. Bucky hugged him from the side like he typically did in that elevator and Steve stared with a hard expression at the floor.

The doors parted and Steve pulled away from Bucky to enter their apartment. Bucky followed behind him, and the second Steve stopped in the kitchen, Bucky immediately pressed to his back.

“Will you cut that out?” Steve snapped impulsively.

Bucky pulled away sharply. Steve felt a pang and turned around quickly, snatching his wrist before he could move too far away. “No – I didn’t mean that –”

“I’m sorry –” Bucky said.

“Just – You’re smothering me,” Steve said. “Don’t go?”

Bucky stepped back in and nuzzled his cheek. Steve sighed and let his shoulders drop.

“Why’d you do that?” Steve asked quietly.

“What?” Bucky mumbled.

“Snap at Stark like that,” Steve said. “Why’re you growling at everybody who touches me – Why’re you growling at people who look –”

“You hate it,” Bucky said.
“But I can’t avoid it entirely,” Steve sighed. “And there’s no need to get angry with Stark, or with Sam – And don’t ever do it to Natasha again, she’s already terrified of you –”


“Yes,” Steve said frustratedly. “She doesn’t even bother me, she’s a woman, another Omega –”

“The Widow isn’t terrified of me,” Bucky argued.

Steve gave him a flat look. “I’m pretty sure the only thing she’s afraid of is the Winter Soldier,” he said carefully. Bucky dropped his gaze. “You growling at her all the time doesn’t help,” Steve added quickly. “Just – Cut it out?”

“You hate it when they touch you,” Bucky mumbled.

“I don’t hate it,” Steve said reluctantly. “Hate is a strong word.”

Bucky gave him a look that said he didn’t believe him for a second. Steve sighed again.

“You can growl at strangers,” Steve said. “And people I don’t like. But not my team.”

“You don’t like Stark,” Bucky argued.

“It varies,” Steve sighed. “He’s not really that bad. Especially – My mother’s kettle, remember?”

Bucky’s gaze slipped over Steve’s shoulder. Steve nodded to him, then pressed in to hug him before pulling back.

“Stop growling at people,” he said. “I’ll deal with touching.”

“But you don’t like it,” Bucky tried to insist. “What good am I if I let everyone make you
“Cancel it out,” Steve said calmly. “But don’t scare them off – My team really is my family.”

“But you never told them that you disliked touch,” Bucky pointed out.

Steve sighed again. “I didn’t tell a lot of people a lot of things,” he said. “That’s not even the worst of it, okay?”

Bucky scowled. Then he pressed in and kissed Steve’s cheek. “You’re gonna call that therapist, right?”

Steve drew in a heavy breath, then gave a nod. “Tomorrow,” he said. Or the day after. He wasn’t sure. “Not tonight.”

Bucky nodded, too, then nosed at his jaw. “Fair,” he agreed. “We done enough tonight.”

Steve glanced back toward their bedroom, wondering if they could just skip out on time spent with his team, but then his stomach grumbled and he figured takeout sounded better than anything in their fridge. He wasn’t that tired.

“I really told a Congressman that he was what was wrong with America,” Steve said quietly.

Bucky grinned into his neck. “That you did, pretty,” he said, kissing his neck quickly. “You did amazing.”

“Did I renounce Cap?” Steve muttered. “Did I just say…I’m not him?”

“You’re not,” Bucky said, taking his face in his hands and making Steve look him in the eye. “You’re Steven Grant Rogers. You’re a hero in your own right. You’re an amazing artist and a sarcastic but wonderfully kind man and the most beautiful Omega I’ve ever seen. You’re you.”

Steve flushed. “But – I still do good as Captain America?”
“But do you do more good with Cap than others do harm with him?” Bucky asked. Then he kissed Steve on the nose and tipped their foreheads together. “I’d rather you just be you, doll.”

Steve let out a long exhale. “I’d rather just be me, too,” he mumbled. He’d rather just be him… five foot one and thin and delicate –

“Look at me,” Bucky said. “Look me in the eye, gorgeous.”

Steve scoffed. “You’re really laying it on thick, Buck –”

“Look at me,” Bucky insisted. Steve opened his eyes and looked at him. “I am not lying. I think you’re beautiful like this, just as much as you were before.”

Steve sighed, dropping his face and his gaze. Bucky caught his cheek and pulled him back in.

“C’mon, I ain’t kidding,” he said.

“I’m your Omega, you’re obligated to think I’m attractive,” Steve muttered.

“That ain’t how that works!” Bucky said firmly. “I thought you were a damn sight to see while I still thought you hated my guts – Baby, I got chills ‘cause I thought you was gorgeous and it made me feel guilty.”

Steve looked away. Bucky caught his cheek.

“Hey,” he said quietly. “Can I tell you something?”

Steve nodded, expecting another canned confession of how his tree-trunk thighs were easy on the eyes and his chiseled torso was sexy.

“I think I might’ve liked Alphas, too.”
Steve jerked his gaze back up, his eyes wide. “What?”

Bucky shrugged. “I might’ve liked Alphas, too, not just Omegas. But you? You’re the kinda Omega that could rival an Alpha, the kinda guy who could go toe-to-toe with a heavyweight and not break a sweat. So what if you don’t look like you did before? I liked you like that and I like you like this.”

Steve took a long second to process that. “You liked Alphas?” he said.


“So, you like me because I look like an Alpha?” Steve asked, his voice starting to crack.

“No, no,” Bucky said hastily, “no, that’s not what I meant, baby –”

“You like the way I look because I don’t look like an Omega,” Steve accused.

“No, I like the way you look because you’re not a delicate thing that’ll break if I look at you!” Bucky insisted. Steve tried to pull away and Bucky grabbed his waist, pulling him in. “Baby, I like that you’ve got power in you, you’re strong and you can take care of yourself but you let me do it even though you don’t need me.”

“I need you,” Steve insisted.

“You don’t need an Alpha to take care of you,” Bucky corrected. “You’re smart and ballsy and you don’t take shit, but you let me take care of you anyway.”

“I’m not…” Steve mumbled.

“Ballsy?” Bucky asked, reaching up to cup his cheek. “Powerful? A damn fine Omega who can go toe-to-toe with a heavyweight and wipe the floor with him?”
“You want me to wipe the floor with you?” Steve muttered.

Bucky faltered. “Not – I don’t know, that’s a metaphor.”

“Did you like me before?” Steve demanded. “Or is it just the science experiment?”

“I liked you then, too!” Bucky insisted. “Look, Steve –”

“So what do you like?” Steve cut him off sharply. “You want an Omega who’s light and sweet or an Omega who’s powerful and aggressive? What do you want?”

“I want you!” Bucky said. He caught Steve by the lips and kissed him firmly, then pulled back and touched their foreheads together. “You could go toe-to-toe with me before the serum, baby. You could take me down and make me do what you wanted with no problem no different than you can now. You can be light and powerful and aggressive and sweet no matter what your body looks like. You can be all of those things, Steve!” Bucky insisted gently, shaking him lightly. “I love you because you’re you.”

“I couldn’t fight you before the serum,” Steve snapped.

“I don’t mean a fight,” Bucky sighed. He reached up and swept a hand through Steve’s hair, then cupped the back of his neck. “I mean – You could be in charge. You don’t take no shit and you meant business. You mean it now, you’ve got the same, stubborn, fighting spirit as before.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Steve said thickly. “You – You want me to boss you around? You want me to give you orders like – like they did –?”

“No, that’s not – No!” Bucky cut himself off to groan. He pulled Steve flat against his chest and brushed at his hair. “I’d wanna worship you.”

Steve blinked at him, confused and upset. “You what?”

“Worship you,” Bucky said. “I’ve always wanted to worship you, serum or no serum. I wanna dress you up in silks and diamonds and see you well fed and happy and I’d wanna be right there by your
“I’d look no good in silks,” Steve said stubbornly.

“You’d look beautiful!” Bucky insisted. “Forget lingerie, sex; you’d look beautiful surrounded by luxury and comfort because it’s what you deserve. I’d buy you pearls because that’s what you give an Omega for their wedding, not because I’d wanna fuck you wearin’ ‘em – It’d be a bonus but not the point –”

“I’m not a woman,” Steve said quietly.

“That’s not what I want from you,” Bucky said. “I never wanted you to be a woman, or to make you act like one or to look like one – I only ever wanted you.”

“You’re queer,” Steve said. “Like – Honest to God queer.”

Bucky shrugged. “I guess. Ain’t you?”

Steve took a long time to answer. “I never was attracted to… to other Omegas,” he admitted slowly. He’d never really been that into Omega women and he’d never really known any Beta women, but Alpha women had seemed alright, if it hadn’t been for the fact that he loved someone already. But Bucky? If he’d been attracted to Alpha men and Omegas that weren’t delicate?

“Is that bad?” Bucky asked quietly.

He sounded a hell of a lot more queer than Steve.

“No,” Steve said hastily. He touched Bucky’s face, then his hair, and then kissed him. “No, it’s not bad.”

“I love you,” Bucky said against his lips. “That’s really all I know.”

Steve kissed him again, harder. Bucky’s hands tightened at his waist, his weight pushing Steve back.
against the counter, and Steve made an abrupt decision.

He pushed back. He shoved Bucky against the other counter and took control of the kiss and Bucky let him do it. His Alpha’s stance dropped and widened and Steve pressed into the space opened up. He curled a fist in Bucky’s hair and pulled, forcing Bucky’s head back so he was at Steve’s mercy. And Bucky let him. His hands gripped Steve’s hips tight enough to bruise, but he let Steve control him.

Steve jerked back, falling away. Bucky caught his waist before he could stumble and he straightened, taking Steve’s weight.

“You okay, baby?”

Steve nodded, breath heaving. “Fuck,” he mumbled.

Bucky ducked his head and rubbed his nose into Steve’s neck. “Mhmm,” he rumbled.

“That’s what you want?” Steve asked. “You want –”

“I want you to stand your ground,” Bucky mumbled. “I want my stubborn little shit.”

“And you wanna worship that stubborn shit?” Steve asked disbelievingly.

Bucky kissed his neck, then abruptly dropped to one knee and took Steve’s hands. “I wanna worship you,” he said, looking up at him with such honesty it left Steve even more breathless. “Every part of you.”

“I don’t know,” Steve said quietly. “I’m not –”

“If you try to say you’re not worthy of worship,” Bucky growled, “I’m gonna fight you.”

“You’re gonna fight me?” Steve said, then laughed. “Isn’t that my line?”
“You only fight for others,” Bucky answered. “You hardly ever fight for yourself.”

Steve licked his lips. Bucky was right.

“Okay,” he said softly.

Bucky squeezed his hands. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, trying for a smile. “You can – You can worship me, I guess?”

He laughed nervously and Bucky kissed both of his hands.

“I been worshipping you this whole time,” he said. “But I’ll turn up the devotion a notch.”

Steve laughed again and pulled Bucky to his feet, wrapping his arms around his neck and hugging him. Bucky started combing through his hair with his flesh hand.

“Can I buy you pearls?” Bucky murmured.

“Sure,” Steve said quietly.

“And silks?”

“I don’t know about lingerie,” Steve sighed. “I – I hated being forced to wear dresses all the time when I was a kid –”

“I don’t want you to have to wear dresses,” Bucky said quickly. “I want you to have comfortable clothes that you feel good in, that you feel beautiful in. Don’t have to be dresses.”
Steve bit his lip. “I’ll think about those,” he said. “But you can buy me pearls.”

Bucky kissed his neck. “I owe you some anyway,” he said. “Should’a gotten ‘em for you when we said our vows.”

Steve shrugged. “They just would’a gotten messed up, we were in a war zone, Buck.”

“Still,” Bucky said. “Can – can I call you Mrs. Barnes? You don’t gotta let me –”

“You can call me that,” Steve laughed softly. He nuzzled Bucky’s neck, drinking in his scent. “I liked that.”

“And you’re still my pretty,” Bucky swore. “You’ve always been my pretty.”

Steve nodded. Bucky rubbed his cheek over Steve’s hair and ear gently, his flesh wrist pushing down over the back of his clothes.

“I’ll keep telling you you’re pretty,” Bucky murmured. “I promise.”

“I know,” Steve said under his breath.

“But you gotta get that therapy,” Bucky told him. Steve just nodded. “I hate that you don’t feel comfortable in your skin, baby.”

“Ain’t never felt comfortable in my skin,” Steve grumbled.

“I know,” Bucky answered. He kissed Steve’s shoulder. “It’ll be alright. I love you.”

“I know,” Steve echoed softly.

Bucky just held him for a while longer and Steve just let him. Maybe that was what Bucky had been
talking about. Steve didn’t need help getting out from the helicopter and he didn’t need someone to
guard his side in the elevator and he didn’t need to be held like a child, but Bucky wanted to and
Steve wanted to let him. Steve just wished he could see what Bucky meant about the power his body
held being beautiful.

His phone vibrated. Bucky checked it for him and Steve left his forehead resting on Bucky’s
shoulder.

“They’ve got food,” Bucky said. “Indian.”

“I like Indian,” Steve mumbled.

“And they’re watching a movie,” Bucky added. “I don’t know what it is.”

Steve lifted his head. “Let’s change before we go?”

“Yeah, a’course.”

In their bedroom, Steve shucked his form-fitting suit for loose sweats and a hoodie. Bucky stayed in
his jeans, but changed his dress shirt for a T-shirt. Steve shoved his feet into shoes and Bucky
checked the knives stashed in his boots before they headed back for the elevator.

“You gotta apologize for snapping at Stark,” Steve said as the elevator reversed down the Tower.

“Alright,” Bucky grumbled. “But only if he apologizes for making you uncomfortable.”

“He already did,” Steve reminded him.

Bucky scowled a little more. He looked like he was pouting. Steve abruptly laughed and grabbed the
front of his shirt, yanking him in for a kiss. Bucky, making a sound like a purr deep in his throat,
cought him by the waist and pushed into his space. And Steve? Instead of just letting him, instead of
submitting and letting Bucky’s stature bend back his spine like Omegas always do in the movies,
Steve pushed back.
Steve pushed back, shoving a knee between Bucky’s legs and pulling hard on the front of his shirt. Bucky growled softly into his mouth and grabbed handfuls of his ass, and Steve figured he was doing alright because Bucky started kneading his ass with his fingers and he usually didn’t do that until he was getting tempted to eat him out.

“The elevator has reached the common floor,” JARVIS announced.

Steve jerked back from kissing Bucky, but Bucky just started kissing down his neck. The elevator was still, but the doors were shut and Steve felt a sudden wave of appreciation for the AI that ran the Tower for that.

“Hey, get off, jerk,” Steve said, pushing at Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky growled and bit at a spot on his neck. “C’mon, we’re there.”

Bucky made a displeased rumble, but pulled off his neck and pecked his cheek. “We could go back upstairs and carry on,” he suggested quietly.

A flash of arousal stirred in his stomach, but Steve shook his head.

“I’m hungry,” he admitted. “And if they got Indian from the place Stark always gets Indian, then they got mango lassi and that shit’s good.”

“Better than sex?” Bucky said disbelievingly.

Steve thought about it. “We can have sex later,” he said.

Bucky pouted again. “I’m gonna remind you of this,” he answered, “the time you turned down sex for Indian food.”

“Bite me,” Steve said, then turned away. “We’re good, JARVIS.”

Bucky caught his waist and bit his ear one last time just as the elevator doors opened.
“Rogers!” Stark yelled even before the doors had shut behind them. “Mango lassi!”

Steve gave a soft sigh and smiled. Stark waved a clear, plastic to-go cup full of bright yellow liquid at him and Steve snatched it and a straw before heading for the food. Bucky stuck behind him and took the cup from him while Steve reached for plates.

“Hey, Steve, we got paneer saag,” Sam told him.

“I don’t like spinach!” Steve insisted. Bucky pressed the to-go cup back into his hand. “Thanks,” he added, then said firmly, "Stop trying to make me eat spinach!”

“Why are we making Steve eat spinach?” Clint asked. “Is he becoming Popeye?”

“Because his period’s coming up and Barnes is going off about how he needs foods high in iron,” Sam explained.

“He needs foods high in protein,” Natasha threw in. Steve rolled his eyes. “Pass the naan, will you?”

Steve loaded up plates for him and Bucky while Bucky inspected the spread of food. Bruce and Stark – Steve really ought to start calling him Tony, since he’d gotten his mother’s kettle from the Smithsonian – were standing over by the TV area with plates in hand and arguing about what to watch. Steve spotted Pepper on one of the couches, her shoes on the floor next to her and her legs tucked underneath her; she was asleep, leaning on her hand. Everyone else had filled their plates mostly by the time Steve and Bucky arrived, so Clint and Sam left the kitchen after a minute and Steve was left with Bucky hovering behind him and Natasha carefully arranging her portions to keep each food from touching.

“Are you afraid of me?” Bucky said suddenly.

Natasha jerked her head up. Steve winced.

“Of course not,” Natasha answered sharply.
“Steve said you were,” Bucky argued. “Why?”

Natasha shot him a glare. Steve answered it with a grimace.

“I was yelling at him for growling at people for touching me,” he explained, “and told him to at least quit being rude to you because…”

Natasha straightened up. Then she looked Bucky in the eye with determination and her jaw set.

“You don’t remember anything from the 90s, do you?” she asked.

Bucky shook his head.

“In 1995,” she said in a flat tone, “the Winter Soldier was lent to the Red Room as part of the Widow training. The Winter Soldier commanded me and my fellow Widows to cut open our wrists. With an Alpha tone. I resisted and you –The Winter Soldier –” she said, as though wanting to make the distinction very clear, “– threw me across the room by my hair.”

Bucky shrunk. He grabbed Steve’s arm and squeezed tightly, looking like Natasha had just slapped him.

“I –” he said.

“It was not you,” Natasha said firmly.

“It was me,” Bucky insisted. “I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t you,” Natasha repeated. “It was the people who were controlling you. You had no will or thought, so it was not you.”

“I don’t even know how to use an Alpha tone,” Bucky said hastily. “I did it once to Steve on accident –”
“Twice, actually,” Steve interrupted.

Bucky looked at him, then, his eyes wider.

“When we were escaping the HYDRA factory in Austria,” Steve told him, taking his hand and squeezing it. “I told you to go on without me and you commanded me to follow you; said you wouldn’t go without me.”

Bucky swallowed, blinking. Steve shook his hand a little. “Obviously, I obeyed.”

“What was the second time?” Natasha asked.

“A few weeks ago, actually,” Steve answered. “I was in a bad place and trying to get him to let me stay there, he commanded me to stop lying about how I was feeling.”

“So you’re using your powers for good,” Natasha replied flippantly. “Steve needs all the ass-kicking he can get to take care of himself.”

“Yeah,” Bucky muttered. Then shook himself. “Yeah, he does.”

Bucky turned to face Natasha. “I’m sorry about – About everything that happened to you,” he said. “Even if it wasn’t really me doing it, I’m sorry my hands hurt you. I’ll do my best to show you that you don’t need to be afraid of me anymore.”

Natasha nodded slowly. “I appreciate that,” she said gently, then left.

Steve reached up and touched Bucky’s cheek with a knuckle; Bucky turned back to him and grabbed his wrist, holding his hand in place.

“Do you know that it was you commanding me not to stay behind and die that made me see why Alpha voices existed at all?” Steve blurted.
Bucky shook his head.

“Every time I’d seen them before, Alphas used them to get Omegas to do something they didn’t want to,” Steve told him. “I saw a girl consent to rape because an Alpha commanded her to do it.”

“Bet you beat ‘em up,” Bucky mumbled.

“I did,” Steve said with a smile. “Or I tried. I jumped on the guy’s back and bit his ear off. That startled the girl enough that she ran off.”

Bucky laughed shortly. “You bit a guy’s ear off!” he hissed in an echo, then pulled Steve into a hug and squeezed him. “That’s my fella,” he said quietly.

Steve squeezed him back and remembered, abruptly, standing in an elevator filled with unconscious HYDRA agents and imagining that Bucky would have said those very words with pride. Bucky had said those very words after he’d told off Congress. Steve hugged him tighter.

“I didn’t bite his whole ear off,” he mumbled.

“That’d be gross,” Bucky said.

“It was gross,” Steve agreed. “Ears taste awful.”

“What’s this about ears?” Stark asked, breezing past them.

“Steve bit off somebody’s ear once,” Bucky said proudly.

“What?” Sam yelled from the couches.

“That’s disgusting,” Stark stated.
“The guy was assaulting some poor girl!” Steve defended himself. “What else was I s’posed to bite?”

“Maybe not bite the creep at all?” Stark suggested. He was piling a plate with naan bread. “Just a thought.”

“I was five foot nothing and he was at least six four,” Steve said. “I jumped on his back and the first thing I could think to do was bite him. What else was I supposed to bite than his ear?”

“Fair,” Stark agreed.

“Don’t bite my ear off,” Bucky murmured in Steve’s own ear. Steve rolled his eyes.

“To what extent did you bite this man’s ear off?” Natasha asked.

“What?” Pepper said abruptly.

“Steve bit off someone’s ear once,” Stark answered, zipping away again with his plate of naan bread in hand.

“Ew,” Pepper said.

Steve shook his head and picked up his and Bucky’s plate before following Stark – Tony, really – over to the couches. Bucky trailed along behind him, like he always did.

“The man was assaulting a girl,” Steve told them. “I did the first thing I could think of, jumped his back and bit his ear.”

“Bit his ear off!” Stark insisted.

“Okay, I didn’t bite it off, ” Steve said, sitting down. “I bit through the cartilage.”
“You bit his ear off,” Sam insisted as well.

“Only the cartilage!” Steve argued. Bucky dropped onto the couch next to him and pulled Steve’s legs into his lap; Steve didn’t bother resisting. “The rest of his ear was fully intact.”

“He deserved it,” Natasha threw in.

“Oh, no doubt about that,” Stark said, “but the point is Cap bit a guy’s ear off once.”

“Then you’d love to hear about the time I bit a John’s dick off,” Steve snarked.

Bucky snapped his hands to cover his crotch. “What?”

Stark burst into laughter and Clint fell off the arm of the sofa he was perched on. Sam flopped over sideways, his head touching Natasha’s thigh, wheezing faintly, and Natasha smiled proudly.

“Well, not completely off,” Steve started to say. “More like just the foreskin –”

“You gotta stop biting people!” Stark laughed.

“Please,” Bucky said faintly. Steve just laughed.

“He deserved it, too,” Steve said.

“It tastes awful, doesn’t it?” Natasha said calmly.

“What?” Clint squeaked, scrambling up from the floor.

“It’s disgusting!” Steve agreed. “God, I was washing my mouth out with soap for a week!”
“What even happened?” Pepper demanded.

“He was calling me rude names,” Steve said. “Then he started going off about how I looked pure and shit and I realized he was a Nazi sympathizer, so I bit him.”

“Imagine being circumcised during fellatio!” Stark laughed.

“How much force does it take to bite off someone’s foreskin?” Bruce said absently.

“I don’t know,” Steve said, “I was pretty pissed off.”

Bucky was still shielding himself with his hands. Steve saw him and laughed, putting down their plates and leaning over to peck his cheek.

“You could never piss me off that much,” he said softly.

Bucky cleared his throat. “Let’s change the subject,” he said for the rest of the room to hear.

“Cap, have you seen Mean Girls?” Stark demanded.

“No?” Steve said hesitantly.

“See!” Stark exclaimed to Bruce. “We’re watching Mean Girls.”

Bruce sighed heavily but shrugged. “Boo, you whore,” he said flatly.

“You can’t say you don’t want to watch it and then quote it!” Stark said while Steve frowned heavily.

“Raise your hand if you ever felt personally victimized by Tony Stark,” Bruce announced, then shoved his hand in the air.
Clint, Sam, Natasha, and Pepper shot their hands up. Steve, feeling that this was a joke he wasn’t getting but wanting to participate, stuck his hand up. He kicked Bucky and his Alpha threw his hand up, too.

Stark looked around the room and squawked. “I am not the Regina George of our group!”

“I wish I could make a cake out of rainbows and everyone could eat it and we’d all be happy,” Pepper sighed.

“I don’t understand,” Bucky hissed to Steve.

“Me neither,” Steve hissed back. “Just roll with it.”

“She doesn’t even go here!” Natasha called from cupped hands.

“Fuck all of you,” Stark declared.

“No, thanks,” Bucky answered.

Steve grinned while Stark spluttered incoherently and Clint fell back off the arm of the sofa as he clutched his stomach, laughing.

“JARVIS!” Stark yelled. “Play the damn movie!”

The lights dimmed and Stark collapsed onto Pepper’s sofa. Steve, chuckling still, picked up his and Bucky’s plates before settling in to eat and watch the TV. He took a sip of his mango lassi, then put his head on Bucky’s shoulder and squirmed until Bucky pushed an arm around him and he sighed happily. This was nice. This was worth all the sweat and tears it had taken to get there.

“I like this movie,” Steve said as the end credits started.
“This movie was my childhood,” Sam said.

“How old are you?” Stark demanded.

“Okay, this movie was my teenage years,” Sam corrected. “Sisters watched it, like, four times a week.”

“He’s 35,” Natasha said.

Sam spluttered. “What!”

“Spy Queen,” Stark told him.

“When’s my birthday?” Sam demanded.

“November 24th,” Natasha answered without a beat.

“Well, damn,” Sam muttered.

“When’s mine?” Bucky asked. Sounding confused.

“March 10th,” Natasha said. Steve was frowning.

“Is she right?” Bucky asked him.

Steve nodded slowly.

“When’s his?” Bucky asked.
“July 4th,” Natasha said; she sounded a little confused, too, perhaps concerned. “You were born in 1917 and he was born in 1918.”

“You didn’t remember that?” Stark asked.

Pepper hit him. He yelped.

“No,” Bucky said simply. “Is November 24th Thanksgiving?”

“Depends on if it’s a Thursday,” Steve said quietly.

“Gotta be annoying,” Bucky remarked.

“Eh,” Sam said, waving a hand. “Means family has no excuse but to show up with gifts.”

“I got you a toy race car for your seventh birthday,” Bucky said abruptly, looking at Steve. “I stole it.”

Steve blinked. “You stole it?”

“I did,” Bucky confessed. “But you loved it, so I ain’t sorry I did it.”

Steve looked at him for a minute, then sighed and shrugged. “Sister Thomas always said that Barnes boy had sticky fingers.”

Bucky grabbed him by the waist and manhandled him into his lap. “Sticky fingers picked up you,” he said, kissing his cheek.

“I like sweets,” Steve remarked calmly.

“I’m gagging over here!” Stark called.
“Stick a cork in it,” Sam answered. “They’re cute!”

“That’s why I’m gagging!”

“I got you colored pencils for your eighth birthday,” Bucky said quietly. “And you couldn’t see the red ones.”

Steve shook his head. “I could see ’em now,” he said.

“And I got you a doll for your sixth,” Bucky went on. “’Cause you kept taking Rebecca’s.”

“I loved that doll,” Steve whispered. He’d loved the doll, the racecar, the colored pencils. Anything Bucky gave him, he loved.

“Where is it now?” Bucky asked, frowning. “Where’s – Where’s all your stuff? How come you only got your ma’s kettle?”

“The Smithsonian has it all,” Steve said.

The doll was part of the collection of his mother’s things. Along with the ancient paper dolls that had lead to his first word, the dresses and penny loafers Steve wore to school, the love letters Steve wrote for Bucky that never got sent; they had dates but no names, so history assumed that, as they were written for an Alpha from an Omega, they had been his mother’s. Like all of the things that didn’t fit the masculine image of the Alpha Captain America, that doll that Steve had loved so much was labeled as someone else’s.

“I never asked for any of it back,” he said quietly.

He took the chair. Bucky’s chair, but nothing else. It had been the most insignificant part of the exhibit, just an armchair, and as such, was all he could take without drawing suspicion.

“They never offered,” Steve concluded.
“Oh, no, they don’t have all your stuff,” Stark spoke up.

Steve looked over his shoulder. “What?”

“I called them and told them to give it all back,” Stark said. “The kettle just got here first. That and some other stuff, it’s in a box up there.”

Steve blinked. “All of our stuff?”

“Most of it,” Stark said. “All your mother’s stuff, at least, a few things that belonged to your father. Some pictures, a jacket of his.”

Steve grabbed Bucky’s arm, digging his nails into his skin. “What jacket?” he demanded.

“The –” Stark waved a hand, frowning as he thought. “Light winter jacket? A really ugly gray color, kinda small? Come to think of it, was your dad your size before the serum?”

“That wasn’t my dad’s,” Steve said numbly.

Stark sat up straighter, his frown changing. “It wasn’t? Museum said it was.”

“It wasn’t,” Steve muttered. “I told – I said it was, ‘cause it was the first thing I could think of that didn’t sound weird, but it was Bucky’s.”

Stark glanced to Steve’s right, then looked at him.

“Bucky left it at my house,” Steve muttered, then looked behind him. “When – In ‘33, when you moved to Queens, you forgot it.”

“You kept it?” Bucky asked.
Steve nodded. “It was the last thing I had of you. I – I really only wore it whenever I was nesting, then I took it with me to basic and overseas…”

He stopped, pausing to bite his lip. Bucky reached up and trailed a finger over his cheek, his brow furrowed in concern. Steve had kept it, had taken it with him everywhere, since it was inconspicuous. He’d loved that doll most of all, since it was the first gift that Bucky had given him, but he couldn’t have taken a doll with him when he joined the Army. He took the jacket, told anybody that had asked that it had been his father’s, and when he’d found Bucky again, he’d still kept it. Bucky had made a habit of scent-marking it and Steve had used it as a pillow. Peggy had once known the truth, but like much else, Peggy couldn’t say the truth about anything anymore. Steve had let history say what it wanted, thinking that he was just waiting for his body to give out so he could join his family after death.

“How much else in the exhibit is labeled wrong?” Stark asked.

“Most of it,” Steve answered, not looking away from Bucky. “Considering the first thing they say is a lie.”

Really, he’d been waiting to join Bucky. And now Bucky had joined him.

“They’re correcting the false information as best they can,” Natasha spoke up. “You could give an interview.”

“And say what?” Steve asked. Where could he start? He’d let history say what it had wanted for so long, he wasn’t sure he could let go of the secrets he’d guarded so jealously.

Bucky pulled his head down and tucked it into his neck. Steve let him.

“What you really dealt with growing up,” Natasha said. “You mentioned your school forced you to wear dresses. That’s something that somebody somewhere would benefit from hearing.”

Steve shrugged. “Maybe.”

He could point to the doll labeled his mother’s and say: “That was mine. It was the thing I loved the
most, because Bucky gave it to me. And it was mine.”

But… To open up…

“What school did you go to?” Sam asked him.

“St. Maria’s,” Steve mumbled. “St. Maria’s Finishing School for Underprivileged Girls.”

The room was quiet. Opening up did nothing but hurt.

“They changed it to Underprivileged Omegas after I started there,” Steve said. “But nobody called it that, they always said Underprivileged Girls.”

“That sucks,” Sam remarked.

“It did,” Steve said, sitting up straighter. “The teachers always said young ladies and half the time they called me a girl to my face, just ‘cause I was wearin’ a dress like the rest of them and they hardly never apologized for it after they remembered I was a boy.”

“That’s shitty,” Sam declared.

“It was!” Steve agreed. He leaned back on Bucky. “I got called girl-boy at least three times a day.”

Bucky’s hands tightened on him and he growled quietly. Pepper tutted, shaking her head, and Clint grimaced while Stark covered his face and Natasha glowered.

“That’s just wrong,” Sam said.

“It was,” Steve muttered.

“I really hate that word,” Stark spoke up. “Like, the worst thing a man could be is a woman? It’s
disgusting. I presented really late and people used to call me that, even though it was obvious I wasn’t an Omega.”

“People called me that before I presented, too,” Steve said. “Guys called other guys girl-boys over everything and anything. It was the go-to insult.”

“It’s disgusting,” Stark repeated.

“You could talk about that,” Natasha spoke up. “Use your voice to call everyone out.”

“It’s still a go-to insult,” Stark muttered.

Steve, his brow tight, nodded slowly. They were right. He had a voice now. And he’d been hurting so much for so long, what was a little more?

“I’ll tell people,” he said quietly. “If it’ll help someone else out there.”

Bucky kissed his temple. “You know we’ve got your back,” he reminded him gently.

“I know,” Steve said. He turned back in and gave Bucky a quick kiss, before tucking his face into his neck and nudging his nose against the scent gland buried in his skin.

Someone cleared their throat. Steve sucked in a breath, pulling back and resting his head on Bucky’s shoulder. He kept forgetting people didn’t like scent-marking anymore. He still was unclear as to why.

“I’m beat,” Sam announced then. “Nobody wake me up until, like, noon tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Clint agreed.

“Ditto,” Bucky said, then stood up.
Steve yelped and scrambled to grab his neck, because Bucky stood up with him still in his lap, but Bucky just held him bridal style and started for the elevator.

“Get it, Rogers!” Clint called after them.

“I’m swooning!” Sam added.

Steve waved his middle finger at them, his ears burning. Bucky was smirking, the great jerk.

“You’re a jerk,” Steve muttered as the elevator doors shut behind them.

“And you’re a punk,” Bucky answered, grinning at him. “What else am I gonna use this super strength for? Opening jars?”

Steve rolled his eyes. Bucky bumped their foreheads together.

“I’m your jerk,” he said fondly.

“Damn right, you are,” Steve agreed. Bucky grinned wider, then dropped him to let him stand on his own two feet and cupped his face in his hands. Steve shut his eyes and Bucky kissed him.

“And you’re my punk,” Bucky murmured against his lips.

“Damn right, I am,” Steve answered.

Chapter End Notes

whoo, boy, was that a doozy. who's here for pan!bucky? lexi is here for the switch representation, which, tbh, i didn't realize i was writing until she pointed it out? but? she right? you realize what this means? we're gonna see some fucking power-bottom up in this bitch soon. i'll see you all next week with something i hope you don't hate me for bc i enjoyed writing it. is that ominous? it should be, it's the month of pre-halloween. pls comment and ily duckling
and here are lexi's smart-ass comments.

Steve flushed. “But – I still do good as Captain America?”
lexi: baby you're the BESTEST Captain America!
me: the bestest

[Bucky] kissed Steve on the nose and tipped their foreheads together.
lexi: *whispers* and they were gay
me: ohmygod they were gay

[Steve would] rather just be him... five foot one and thin and delicate –
lexi: this is the time where I hit him with a Nerf dart in therapy. "Steven Grant Rogers are you starting that mess up again?" *pewpew*

“I am not lying,” [Bucky said]
lexi: You know when they say I Am it's getting SERIOUS ™
lexi: That EMPHASIS IT SEXY

Steve sighed...
lexi: Full offense does Steve ever stop sighing depressedly?????
me: no?

“I think I might've liked Alphas, too," [Bucky said.]
lexi: WE STAN A BODY POSITIVE DISABLED PANSEXUAL VETERAN. A KING.

“So, you like me because I look like an Alpha?” Steve asked
lexi: steve n o

“No, no,” Bucky said hastily, “no, that’s not what I meant, baby –”
lexi: Bucky: pansexual panic no no no nonono I fucked UP
me: that is exactly what's happening there

“So what do you like?” Steve cut him off sharply. “You want an Omega who’s light and sweet or an Omega who’s powerful and aggressive? What do you want?”
lexi: WE DON’T SUPPORT BI/PAN ERASURE IN THIS HOME STEVEN. STOP SELF SABOTAGING YOU DILLWEED
me: dillweed

"...I’d buy you pearls because that’s what you give an Omega for their wedding, not because I’d wanna fuck you wearin’ ‘em – It’d be a bonus but not the point –” [Bucky said]
lexi: What's the line, force his penis to cease it's reactions?
me: it's a request, there's paperwork involved. it has to be in triplicate.

“You’re queer,” Steve said. “Like – Honest to God queer.”
lexi: ......honey I don't know how to break this to you..... Sweetie.... You're gay...
me: yes but he thinks he's not as gay as bucky
me: we're gonna bring up gatekeeping in therapy boy's got issues

Steve nodded, breath heaving. “Fuck,” he mumbled.
lexi: When you realize that being a switch exists lmao, the gay panic is back

“And you wanna worship that stubborn shit?” Steve asked
lexi: Steve: wdym people are attracted to me like this? everyone: bitch what do you mean???????

“You only fight for others,” Bucky answered. “You hardly ever fight for yourself.” Steve licked his lips. Bucky was right.
lexi: *clap emoji* *clap emoji* *clap emoji* *clap emoji* *clap emoji*

“Ew,” Pepper said.
lexi: this is truly how group chats work
me: a mood

“I'm gagging over here!” Stark called.
lexi: me the fuck too

“I'm swooning!” Sam added.
lexi: it's ME
me: you are sam

“Damn right, I am,” Steve answered.
lexi: Gay.

fun fact, steve's circumcising a john during felatio was inspired by a d&d character i'm playing for a campaign run by my friend beth (my future-sister-in-law), his name is kae and he's half human, half siren, so he has pointy teeth and is REALLY good at flirting his way out of any situation. he's a powerbottom and a thot, but! bc he's half siren! he's fine consuming human flesh. so the second i realized that, i just shouted into the group chat “KAЕ COULD BITE SOMEBODY'S DICK OFF! WE COULD INTERROGATE SOMEBODY BY HAVING KAE START TO GO DOWN ON THEIR DICK AND THEN POOF HE GOT TEETH.”
thank you for coming to my ted talk, i can't wait until i get to bite somebody's dick off in d&d, i'll see y'all next week. go drink some water, have some protein, duckling, get some sunshine.
hello, there's a hurricane outside my house, and my block is somehow the only one with power still. i'm blessed, i hope you're blessed, if any of you are affected by the hurricane i'm so sorry and i hope you get the situation resolved, soon. to cheer you up, have some fluff! it's like tooth rotting fluff and if y'all thought bucky's horny vibes from last chapter would carry over to this one you right have some smut, too oh, i was really ominous in my notes last chapter? wdym? thanks to the ever amazing lexi, i don't know what i'd do without you making me uncomfortable by moaning unnecessarily. the reader of the week this week is ipushedher! this chapter's cover can be found on my tumblr here and the playlist can be found here, enjoy!

psst, here's a couple of bloopers.

me: okay my dad's watching black panther and he's gonna call me when the white wolf scene comes on
lexi: okay
*i join voice chat*
lexi: – Buckaroo, my son, Buckaroo –

my dad: hey it's the end credit scene
me: *splits*
*the glorious og thot and confused grandpa bucky barnes comes on screen*
my dad: who's that?
me: it's bucky!
my dad: who's bucky?
me: he's the winter soldier?
my dad: who?
me: captain america’s best friend???
my dad: oh, okay
my dad: where's his arm?
me: ...
me: somewhere in the alps
lexi, when i tell her later: WHERE’S HIS ARM

lexi: my bf is taking a shower rn but he’ll be here in a minute
me: oh wonderful then he can judge you
lexi: ye– hey!

*enter lexi’s bf, stage left*
lexi: moony, boyfriend, boyfriend, moony
me: hi, boyfriend
lexi’s bf: hi, moony

lexi: *to her bf* i’m gonna warn you this is gonna get smutty
lexi’s bf: you could read it in the corner?
lexi: no, i’m gonna do it facing you imma make eye contact
lexi’s bf: but…?
lexi: you love me
lexi’s bf: *tired sigh*
lexi: i’m gonna make direct eye contact

lexi: “Bucky,” [Steve] moaned”
me: i wrote this and i was like ehhhhhh! lexi’s gonna read this aloud! i shouldn’t italicize so many things! but then the aesthetic! but then i have to listen to it! but i still did it!
lexi: i’m gonna moan this whole damn thing
me: i’m gonna moan this whole damn thing
me: i’m gonna moan this whole damn thing
for the art™

me, interrupting: i find it just really funny that you’re reading bucky’s lines in this really flat tone! and then steve! steve!
lexi: steve!
me: you’re full on moaning steve’s lines!
lexi: i’m laughing so hard!
me: *wheezing* i’m dying…

lexi: … i gotta change, i gotta free the titties hang on
me: *is inspired, hastens to photoshop*
me: *interrupts lexi* hey hey i gotchu somethin
lexi: what?
me:
*lexi and me dissolve into wheezing for five minutes*

Steve: *still moaning* "Mine!"
lexi: Honestly it is nice tho to see Steve take some ownership like he isn't just Bucky's, Bucky is his and it's just nice to see Steve owning that they're a bonded pair and that at least this one person belongs to Steve Rogers and not Cap

lexi, to her bf: you’re not even responding to me anymore, you’re so tired of my shit, i love it
*the romance of the ages, everyone*

me: what do you think of the title?
lexi: hmm i think i like it it’s from the end right?
me: yeah but also bucky is the something stupid
lexi: oh yeah lmao true he does lapse into caveman knotead alpha mode

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Guys... Don’t be Dark Kermit... #SteveRogersNeedsAHug
Steve woke slowly, his senses returning to him in stages. First, touch. He was lying nearly on his stomach, with a leg thrown behind him and a leg thrown out, and Bucky was nearly lying on his back. His hips were flush with Steve’s ass still, and somehow throughout the night, Bucky’s softened cock hadn’t slipped from him. They’d fallen asleep after sex, Bucky’s knot keeping them locked together – or, to be more accurate, Steve had fallen asleep, and Bucky had made sure they were comfortable.

So the first thing his conscious mind recognized was that Bucky was blanketeting him, and that meant he was warm and secure. There was something in him that was proud that their connection hadn’t been severed during the night and it was the same something that said Alpha equaled safe. So, touch came to him first, but it still meant his mind was distant and fuzzy, and knowing that he was protected and loved only reassured the part of his mind that wanted to remain asleep.

But the second thing his mind registered was that his mouth was dry. He was very, very thirsty, and the glass of water on his nightstand was just barely out of reach. The fact that he was thirsty meant he couldn’t just go back to sleep, it was what had woken him in the first place, and reaching for his water meant he had to wake up.

Steve lifted onto an elbow. Bucky immediately groaned and circled his arms tighter around Steve’s middle, but Steve ignored him in favor of reaching for his water. Taking a large gulp, he sighed and put it back down. Then dropped back onto the mattress and squirmed until he was more secure in Bucky’s arms. His thirst satisfied, his mind returned to the primitive line of thinking; Alpha, safe, sleep.

Then his stomach grumbled.
“Fuck,” Steve exhaled.

Bucky lazily mouthed at his shoulder. “Lemme wake up first.”

“I’m hungry,” Steve countered but didn’t move.

“‘Kay,” Bucky answered, grumbling much like Steve’s stomach. “You want food or dick first?”

Steve scowled, not yet awake enough to actually make that decision. Bucky sighed.

“Food,” he said and lifted his weight off of Steve’s back. Steve winced as his soft member slipped from him, but Bucky dropped a kiss onto the back of his neck in a placating way before he slipped from the bed. “What do you want to eat?”


“Coming right up,” Bucky said, yawning halfway through. “God, we gotta stop falling asleep like that, I’m all nasty.”

Steve wriggled his hips until he was lying more on his side and huffed. “You’re nasty,” he grumbled, then pushed himself up, clenching, and started hobbling to the bathroom. “I’m leaking.”

“Gross,” Bucky agreed.

“Liar,” Steve accused. “Means I got your Alphaness all over me.”

“You got me there,” Bucky laughed.

Steve rolled his eyes, shutting the bathroom door on Bucky’s dark eyes. He dropped onto the toilet and scrubbed at his face. He needed to shave.
“I’ll be in the kitchen!” Bucky called.

Steve waved a hand even though Bucky couldn’t see him.

He sat for a minute, then took advantage of the great supply of baby wipes and cleaned himself up. He grimaced down his body, disliking the dried feel of Bucky’s cum and his own slick. Most of his cum had gotten on the sheets on the other side of the bed from where they’d slept, but regardless, as an Omega, his cum was hardly water, almost entirely slick. The baby wipes took care of the mess, anyway, and Steve washed his hands before returning to the bedroom in search of clothes.

He found a T-shirt laid out on the bed, one of his, and upon picking it up, Steve caught Bucky’s scent. He smiled to himself as he pulled it on. He ought to make Bucky scent his clothes more often.

Underwear and sweats acquired, Steve wandered out of the bedroom. Bucky was standing in the kitchen, looking at the cupboards with a lost expression on his face.

“I don’t remember how to make pancakes,” he said as Steve walked up. He sounds like a sad puppy.

Steve wants to cuddle him like a sad puppy. So he gives Bucky a hug and kisses his cheek. “I’ll make them,” he told him kindly.

Bucky glanced at him, then caught him by the waist and kissed his cheek in return. Steve hugged him for a second, taking the time to rub his nose against Bucky’s cervical scent gland, then pulled away and started digging around in the cupboard for pancake mix. He stood up on his toes to reach the top shelf and Bucky whistled abruptly.

Steve glanced over his shoulder and flushed. “Stop looking at my ass,” he said.

“But it’s such a nice ass,” Bucky sighed, walking over and grabbing it. Steve blushed again as Bucky squeezed his ass. “It’s so round and perfect, Stevie,” Bucky said.

“I want food before you fuck me,” Steve declared.
Bucky grinned and nuzzled his neck, but Steve was determined not to give in so quickly.

“I want pancakes,” he said firmly.

“I can still love on ya while you make them,” Bucky suggested.

“Keep your hands where I can see ‘em and maybe,” Steve told him firmly.

Bucky chuckled and bit his neck. “Feisty this morning, huh, sugar?” he purred. Steve’s ears began burning in earnest. “Keep it up,” Bucky continued, “I like it.”

“‘M always feisty,” Steve grumbled.

“No, you’re a stubborn asshole,” Bucky insisted, squeezing his ass again. “This is feisty.”

Steve elected to ignore him. He found pancake mix and chocolate chips, then pushed Bucky aside to put them on the counter.

“Get eggs and milk from the fridge,” Steve told him, then took a bold step. “You better be helpful if you plan on actually being allowed to fuck me later.”

“Gonna make me work for it?” Bucky murmured, taking his waist and ducking close to his ear. “Sounds like a plan to me, dollface.”

Steve swatted his hands away, fighting a smile. “Make yourself useful, Barnes.”

“As you wish, Mrs. Barnes,” Bucky purred.

Steve’s ears flashed hot and Bucky bit lovingly at one of them before pulling away. Steve took a fortifying breath, then went looking for something to mix the batter in.
Bucky dropped a gallon of milk onto the counter, then set down a carton of eggs more gently. He dropped onto an elbow and smiled at Steve, then wiggled his eyebrows up and down. Steve resolutely ignored him and dug a large bowl and a spatula out of their cabinets.

“You come here of’en, doll?” Bucky asked.

Steve set down the bowl and spatula to look at him judgmentally. “That was so bad, it doesn’t even deserve an answer.”

“Why would I use up all my good lines when you’ve already guaranteed I get to stick it in you later?” Bucky asked, flicking his eyebrows up.

“Maybe because I haven’t guaranteed anything other than pancakes,” Steve said firmly, waving the spatula at him. “Put your back into it, jerk.”

“I can put my back into it,” Bucky purred.

Steve hit him with the spatula and Bucky had the nerve to simply laugh.

“Be useful,” Steve instructed, measuring the powder mix into the bowl. “Find the vegetable oil.”

“As you wish, Mrs. Barnes,” Bucky said, catching his hips and pressing a kiss to his neck.

Steve wondered if all his blushing was bad for his ears. “Damn flirt,” he complained under his breath.

“But you love me,” Bucky answered, then dropped a bottle of canola oil onto the counter next to him. “Enough that you’ll let me fuck you?”

Steve looked at him out of the corner of his eye. Bucky gave him a hopeful grin and kissed his cheek. Steve rolled his eyes and carried on mixing up the pancake batter.

Bucky kept using shitty lines on him, Steve would tell him they were shitty and to try harder and
Bucky would just give him a shittier line. Steve was rolling his eyes every few seconds, and Bucky, the little shit, kept using his shitty lines like he knew Steve was a sure thing anyway.

Of course, he was, but Bucky had enough of an ego, to begin with.

“Find me the maple syrup,” Steve told him, flipping the last of the pancakes on the stovetop griddle.

“Whatever you say, Mrs. Barnes,” Bucky answered.

Steve rolled his eyes yet another time. He pulled plates from the cupboard, scooped the finished pancakes off the griddle, then waited for the last one to cook through before dropping it onto Bucky’s plate. He switched off the griddle, dropped the spatula into the sink with the rest of the dishes, and transferred the plates to the breakfast bar. He took a seat on a stool and Bucky sidled up behind him, sliding an arm around his waist and putting the maple syrup on the counter next to him.

“So, do you come here often, dollface?” Bucky purred into his ear.

Steve sighed. Then he leaned his head back onto Bucky’s shoulder to bare his throat and said: “Depends on what you define as often.”

“Playin’ nice now, are ya?” Bucky chuckled. He kissed Steve’s throat, then nuzzled at his neck. “I’d say… Often would be dependent on your opinion.”

“Then, sure,” Steve said. Bucky started sucking a mark into his neck as Steve continued. “I try to pick up this guy as much as I can.”

“Oh?” Bucky said, starting to tease. “What’s this guy look like, babydoll? I bet I’m better than ‘im.”

“Dunno,” Steve answered. “Maybe. My guy’s tall, handsome, needs to shave.”

“Gimme five minutes and I can do that,” Bucky offered.

“Mmm, no,” Steve decided.
“Oh, I see,” Bucky laughed softly. He rubbed his scratchy jaw against the sensitive skin of Steve’s neck. “You like beard burn, baby?”

“Mhmm,” Steve answered. “Means I still feel it later.”

“I see,” Bucky purred in his ear. “You want beard burn in your ass, sugar?”

“Nah,” Steve said, “rather you just fuck me.”

Bucky nuzzled his neck. “That I can do,” he said. “That, I’m rather good at, at least according to the sounds my fella makes when I’m pounding int’a him.”

“Your fella loud in bed?” Steve asked, chuckling.

“Not as much as I’d like him to be,” Bucky murmured. “He’s got this thing where he’s worried we’ll get caught so he feels like he gotta be quiet,” Bucky said and Steve lowered his gaze, his smile softening a little, “only,” Bucky continued, rubbing his jaw and his grin against Steve’s cheek now, “we got this whole apartment to ourselves and not even neighbors underneath us.”

“Is that what you think?” Steve asked.

“That’s what I think,” Bucky answered, nuzzling his neck still. “You should scream my name louder, sweetheart.”

“If you’re good enough,” Steve replied simply.

Bucky made an offended noise and bit his ear. “I thought I was the best dick you ever got in your life, babydoll.”

“Course you are,” Steve said dismissively, “it’s you. Don’t mean there ain’t room for improvement.”
Bucky growled and bit his ear again. “I’ll show you improvement.”

“After,” Steve said firmly, “we eat.”

Bucky huffed and separated them. He dropped onto the stool next to him, adjusted the front of his sweats, and picked up his fork.

“Don’t eat so fast you choke,” Steve reminded him as Bucky started shoveling food into his mouth.

Bucky stuck out his tongue and Steve rolled his eyes. He poured syrup onto his plate and took more careful, measured bites than his Alpha, who finished before Steve even got halfway through.

Steve gave him a look from the corner of his eye. Bucky propped his chin up on a fist and wiggled his eyebrows.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Steve said.

“Like what?” Bucky asked, a slow grin splitting his face.

“Like you’re about to eat me,” Steve told him, waving his fork at him.

“Baby,” Bucky purred, slipping off his stool and hugging him from the side, “I am about to eat you.”

Steve eyed him sideways. Bucky simply grinned and nuzzled his cheek.

“I’m not done eating,” Steve declared, then set about ignoring him.

Bucky slipped behind him and started kissing his neck. Steve ignored him. Bucky’s hands swept around the front of his body, drifting up to cup his chest, and Steve ignored him. He continued to eat, taking reasonable bites, and Bucky began purring softly behind him. Steve ignored him.
“You just about done, sweet thing?” Bucky murmured in his ear. “I gotcha somethin’.”

“Do you?” Steve asked, cutting another bite of pancake.

“Mhmm,” Bucky answered. He pressed his hips into the small of Steve’s back. “It’s my dick.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Steve said flatly.

Bucky only purred more and rolled his hips into Steve’s ass.

“Gimme a second –” Steve added, then shifted on his stool to stick his ass out and press back into Bucky. “Try again?”

Bucky chuckled and started slowly grinding into his ass. Steve cut the last square of his pancake in half, pushing his fork into his mouth calmly.

“Any better, sugar?” Bucky murmured.

“Hmm,” Steve said, leaning back against him as he chewed and swallowed. “No.”

Bucky dropped a hand from his chest to between Steve’s legs. Steve sat upright, Bucky pulled him almost off the stool to rub against him, and Steve couldn’t fake it anymore.

“Gotta feel it now,” Bucky said in his ear. “Got a big thing for you, babydoll.”

“I think I can feel it now,” Steve said anyway. “Keep that up and maybe I’ll get interested.”

Bucky squeezed his groin and kissed the base of his neck. Steve scooped up the last of his pancake and pushed it into his mouth. The second he swallowed, Bucky crowded closer and bit at his scent gland.
“You into this, sugar?” Bucky purred in his ear. “Or you gonna leave me hanging?”

Steve let his head fall back and Bucky bit his neck further up. Steve let out a sound like he was thinking, then pulled Bucky’s hands off of him and got up from the stool.

“Put the dishes in the sink,” Steve told him. He caught Bucky’s waist and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Don’t want the syrup to dry.”

“I got some syrup for you,” Bucky promised lewdly.

Steve pecked his lips again and pulled back. “We’ll see,” he said.

Bucky growled at him, but Steve pulled away before Bucky could duck into his neck and bite his scent gland. He escaped into their bedroom, then dropped onto the bed and grabbed his hair with both hands. He blew out his breath, hard, and tried to settle the nerves in his stomach.

What the hell was he doing? What the hell did Bucky want from him? Were they doing this? What even was this?

Bucky knocked on the open doorway. Steve dropped his hands and shifted onto the bed to face him, forcing a smile. Bucky didn’t look like he believed it, dropped onto the bed in front of him and grabbed the back of his neck, pulling him into a kiss.

“You’re thinking too hard,” Bucky said against his lips.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Steve admitted.

“You’re not doing anything,” Bucky told him. “You’re just being you. Feisty.”

“Did you like me acting like that?” Steve asked in a hushed whisper, feeling embarrassed; he had enjoyed it, certainly. The way it made Bucky growl and bite his neck had him shivering. “Playing hard to get?”
“Hell yeah,” Bucky answered.

Steve let out a relieved breath.

“But –” Bucky added and Steve sat up again. “You know you don’t gotta do this,” Bucky told him, a nervous grimace forming on his face, “just ’cause I’m weird –”

“You’re not weird,” Steve said simply. “Kiss me.”

Bucky gripped the back of his neck and kissed him, hard. Steve grabbed the front of his shirt and dug his fingers in, then pulled Bucky into him and lay back on the bed. Bucky followed without question, swinging his weight around to cover Steve’s body fully and force Steve’s lips open with his tongue. Steve lifted a knee, then threw it over Bucky’s back and arched into him, grabbing his hair with one hand and holding on tightly to the front of his shirt with the other. Bucky growled into his mouth, pressed down with his body and ground their hips together in a lazy circle. Steve broke the kiss and pulled his head back. Bucky immediately attacked his neck, biting and sucking, and Steve let his arms fall above his head as he went limp under Bucky.

“Fuck me,” Steve mumbled. “You can do all the work.”

Bucky growled again and bit his ear, almost too hard but just light enough to send a shiver down Steve’s spine.

“You wet already, sugar?” Bucky murmured in his ear.

He wormed a hand down the back of Steve’s sweats, pushing it under his boxers and searching. Steve hummed and lifted his hips up and Bucky started tugging his clothes off.

“Bet you are,” Bucky added, kissing down his neck. “You get wet when I look at’cha.”

“’Cause you look at me with them bedroom eyes,” Steve answered vaguely.

“’Cause you look like a wet dream,” Bucky promised him. “Walkin’ piece’a heaven, babydoll.”
“Hurry up and fuck me,” Steve demanded, kicking his boxers and sweats off the bed. “None of this takin’ time business.”

“Whatever you say, Mrs. Barnes,” Bucky whispered in his ear and Steve gave a full-bodied shiver.

Bucky pulled his shirt up and Steve lifted his shoulders off the bed so he could get it off, then Bucky sat up to yank his T-shirt off and shrug off his pants. Bucky dropped back against the bed, his elbows framing Steve’s face, and ducked his head into Steve’s neck to lick over his scent gland. Steve lifted his knees past Bucky’s hips, then pulled back his heels and curved his spine up.

“C’mon,” Steve challenged, “thought you had something for me?”

Bucky growled into his neck. Steve figured he was doing alright, since Bucky usually didn’t get stuck with just growls until after he was balls-deep. Bucky dropped all his weight onto his left arm and grabbed the back of Steve’s right thigh with his free hand, then pushed his leg back and reached between his thighs. Steve lifted his chin and Bucky bit lightly a trail up his neck.

“Fingers ain’t your dick,” Steve complained. “I’m loose enough, Buck –”

“If you say so, Mrs. Barnes,” Bucky rasped out.

Steve jerked as Bucky crooked his fingers one last time, then did his best to stay relaxed as Bucky’s fingers slid free and Bucky grabbed his hip instead.

“Fuck, if you ain’t the prettiest thing I ever laid my eyes on, Stevie, God –”

Steve wrapped his legs around Bucky’s back, pressed his head into the mattress and bit his lip hard, then remembered that no one could hear them. He dug his fingers into the pillow he’d shoved up the bed, then unclenched his jaw and let out a panting breath, drawing in one more, and:

“Bucky,” he moaned.
Bucky growled as his name slipped from Steve’s lips. He grabbed Steve’s legs and threw them over his shoulders instead of his waist, then braced his arms on either side of Steve’s chest and licked a stripe up his neck. Steve gasped at his rough tongue over his scent gland, then jerked and arched up into his body as Bucky started a brutal pace; curving Steve’s body in half, Bucky really put his back into it.

“Oh, God,” Steve exhaled, feeling like his Alpha was pounding fucking stars into his ass; there were lights flashing under his eyelids and heat was starting a steady pulse over his body with his every stuttering heartbeat. “Bucky!” he cried, louder still as Bucky growled into his neck and sent shivers soaring through him.

“That’s it,” Bucky encouraged him in a dark voice. Bucky was breathing hard and hot on his neck, stimulating his scent gland with his tongue and his teeth and the cadence of his voice; Steve was trembling already. “C’mon, sugar,” Bucky breathed, “scream my name.”

“Buck!” Steve gasped. “Oh!”

“Scream, babydoll,” Bucky growled, licking at his scent gland. “C’mon, c’mon –”

“Bucky!” Steve cried out. “Buck, yes, fuck me like that – Bucky, yes – oh, yes!”

Bucky growled into his neck and Steve let go of the pillow, his legs slipped down Bucky’s back and Steve flung his arms over Bucky’s shoulders instead to curve up into him. He dug his nails into Bucky’s back, Bucky bit his scent gland harder, almost breaking the skin that time, and Steve dug his nails in more.

“Gonna give me stripes?” Bucky dared him.

Steve moaned like a cheap whore and simply jerked his nails in a short line down Bucky’s back.

“You gonna mark me, baby?” Bucky asked darkly. “Make everybody know I’m yours?”

“Fuck,” Steve gasped out; he let his nails scratch into Bucky’s back, leaving marks, red lines of proof that Steve had been there, that he’d been under Bucky and had had Bucky’s devotion. “Yeah, yeah,” Steve whimpered, “you’re mine, Buck, only mine –”
“Let the world know I’m a taken man,” Bucky said lowly in his ear, his voice a deep gravelly tone. “I’m Steve Rogers’ man, his alone.”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, his voice dropping into a whine and he dug his blunt nails into Bucky’s back as hard as he could. “Mine,” he gasped. “Yours.”

Bucky bit just below his ear, hard enough that it hurt but it still felt good. “I’m gonna leave your pretty neck a tortoiseshell, sugar,” he growled and Steve nodded, wanting it so much. “You give me stripes, I’ll give you spots,” Bucky said.

Steve laughed and Bucky lapped his tongue over his scent gland reprovingly; Steve only giggled more, until Bucky bit him and he forgot what he’d been laughing at with a moan.

“You’re my Omega,” Bucky growled, “I’m your Alpha. Mine, yours.”

“Yes,” Steve gasped. “Oh, yeah, Buck – Buck! Bucky!”

“Scream, sugar,” Bucky growled. “Maybe somebody’ll hear you, and they’ll know what’s happening. They’ll think, oh, Barnes is fucking him,” Bucky said in a mocking tone.

Steve’s toes were curling rhythmically in the sheets as Bucky laughed shortly, breathily.

“He sure sounds like he’s doing a good job of it,” Bucky continued, like he was challenging Steve. “Scream louder, Stevie,” he said, and he was definitely issuing a challenge. “Let ‘em all hear you.”

Steve dragged his nails down Bucky’s back, lifting his hips off the bed. He let his breath come out hard, loud, letting it be obvious exactly what they were doing. Hell, the bed frame was slamming against the wall and the mattress, new as it was, was groaning as Bucky pounded into Steve, so Steve moaning and gasping for breath wasn’t all there was to make it clear what they were doing. There was the sound of Bucky moving in and against him, the squelch of fluids and slapping of skin on skin, the sharp smell of Bucky’s growing knot and Steve’s pungent slick; the room would smell of their combined bodies for days, and the thought only excited Steve further.

“Scream your pretty little heart out,” Bucky dared him. “Make your voice raw like I fucked your
throat. Scream my name, Stevie, c’mon.”

“Oh, God,” Steve whimpered, “Buck, Bucky, I’m so close, I’m close, Buck –”

“Good.” Bucky growled. His lips dragged down Steve’s neck, parting over his scent gland and his teeth scraping the skin. Steve jolted and gasped, moaning loudly. “Scream, Stevie.”

“Buck!” Steve screamed as he came.

His eyes rolled back into his head and every muscle in his body tensed. Bucky grunted, his hips snapping a few more times, then his jaw clamped down on Steve’s neck and his teeth sunk into his scent gland. Steve jolted again with the pressure as Bucky came and his knot popped, nearly overstimulating him.

He fucking loved it.

Bucky gave a long, low hum, his teeth still locked in Steve’s scent gland. Steve let his legs slip to the bed and his arms fell over his head again. After a minute, Bucky relaxed his jaw and started licking over the mark he’d left. Steve exhaled slowly, a soft smile curling his lip.

“That was great,” he mumbled faintly.

Bucky gave another long hum. He sucked lightly on Steve’s scent gland, which was nicely numb from being bitten, then rubbed his nose up Steve’s neck and kissed along his jaw to his mouth. Steve parted his lips and Bucky kissed him, lazily and lewdly. Steve hummed into his mouth and Bucky lifted off of him, just going to the other side of his neck and trailing hickeys down it.

“You’re the best,” Steve mumbled then.

“Mhmm,” Bucky answered. “Best dick in your life.”

“Yep,” Steve sighed. “C’mere.”
Bucky kissed his lips again, then nuzzled the side of his face and curled his arms under his neck. Steve shut his eyes and let his head rest on the mattress while Bucky lay his head down next to his and absently nosed at his ear.

They fell into an easy quiet, soaking up dopamine as Bucky’s knot slowly deflated. Steve floated in the blissful post-orgasm feeling, surrounded by Bucky and breathing in nothing but his scent. None of the hurt or anger or grief he’d suffered in the past could touch him just then, not while Bucky was covering him.

His Alpha felt just a little bit omnipotent then.

“ALERT!” JARVIS’s voice blared from somewhere in the bedroom.

Bucky ripped his knot free as he scrambled to find a gun and Steve gasped in pain as he felt something start bleeding.

“YOUR PRESENCE IS REQUIRED, CAPTAIN.”

“It’s my phone!” Steve snapped at Bucky, who was pointing a pistol he’d drawn from nowhere at the corners of the room. “It’s my phone – Jesus fucking Christ, that hurts!”

“What?” Bucky said, falling back onto the bed and grabbing Steve’s hip; Steve let out another hiss, curling onto his side. “I’m sorry, I panicked –”

“You gotta be hurting more than me!” Steve said, but grabbed Bucky’s hand and pulled himself up. He grabbed his phone off the nightstand and flicked it a couple of times, trying to make the alert screen go away. “What do you want, JARVIS?” he yelled at the phone.

“Your presence is required in Sir’s lab,” JARVIS answered, in a much more level tone than the alarm that had startled Bucky into ripping out his knot way too fucking early. “There is a disturbance outside New York City Marble Cemetery.”

Steve exhaled and swept a hand over his face. “What kind of disturbance?” he asked tiredly.
“The residents seem to be assembling a mob,” JARVIS said.

Steve dropped his hand. Bucky lowered his gun.


“Yes,” JARVIS answered.

Steve looked at Bucky. Bucky looked back at him, blinking slowly. Steve looked at his phone, opened his mouth and shut it a few times.

“Zombies?” Steve said incredulously.

“It appears so,” JARVIS said pleasantly.

Steve threw his phone onto his bed. He ran for his dresser, walked into boxers and socks, then dug his suit from the wardrobe.

“Zombies?” Bucky shouted.

“I don’t know!” Steve answered, yanking on the spandex inner layer. “You should stay here —”

“Oh, I’m going,” Bucky said, spinning off the bed and starting to get dressed himself. “Who’s gonna watch your ass?”

“Clint’s our sniper,” Steve said, dropping onto the bed to pull on his suit.

“I meant that literally,” Bucky snapped. “Clint is not guarding your ass as closely as it needs.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “We’ll report to Starks’ lab,” he said, then started buckling up the bodice. “I don’t want you going out there if you can’t get armor of some kind.”
“Too bad,” Bucky answered, pulling on jeans. “I’m going whether you want me to or not.”

Steve shook his head. He fastened his gloves, then grabbed his helmet and picked up his shield on his way out of the bedroom. “Can we argue about this on the go?” he asked.

Bucky waved his middle finger toward him. “Not all of us can get dressed in five seconds,” he said.

Steve exhaled. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in his ass. “Look, Buck,” he said, “the Avengers aren’t a bunch of fools thrown together, hitting things into submission. It’s my team, and I’m not having one of my players on the field with insufficient protection.”

Bucky yanked the laces tight on his boot. “Lemme phrase it this way,” he answered. “I can’t sit on my ass while you’re out there getting beat up. I’m not doing that.”

“If we can’t outfit you –” Steve started and Bucky jumped to his feet and stormed up to him.

“I’m not joining your team,” he snapped. “I’m following you.”

Steve grabbed the front of Bucky’s shirt. “You listen to me, James Buchanan Barnes,” he hissed, “whether you wanna be on the team or not, if you’re out there, you’re on my team, and when we’re on the field, I’m not your little wife!” he yelled. “I’m your Captain and you will not disregard safety protocols because your head is too far up my ass!”

“I have to protect you!” Bucky answered in a snarl. Steve jerked back and Bucky grabbed his hand, shaking it. “I can’t let you go and not follow, Steve. Don’t make me stay behind.”

“Your presence is being demanded,” JARVIS’s voice came from Steve’s pocket.

“We’ll argue on the move,” Steve said, reversing Bucky’s hold on his hand and tugging him into step. “Let’s go.”
Steve clipped his helmet to his belt and holstered his shield as they boarded the elevator. It didn’t stop as it descended to Stark’s lab, which made Steve guess everyone else was there. Bucky held firmly to his hand, his jaw tense as he stood beside Steve. Steve shot him a glance, then turned and grabbed him by the face, pulling him in for a short kiss. Bucky grabbed his wrists and kissed back hard, angry, and Steve let him.

The elevator doors parted and Steve released Bucky. He headed for the group huddled around Stark’s main computer setup, finding Natasha and Clint already suited up and even Colonel Rhodes standing by Stark’s left.

“Great, you made it.” Stark called out to them. “Barnes, your gear’s on the back wall, locker with your name on it. Sam’s suiting up ATM, he’ll point you to it. JARVIS can brief us on the go.”

Bucky caught Steve’s eye and raised his eyebrows. Steve gave him a dark look and strode over to the rest of his team.

“Are you limping?” Stark asked. “Natalie, look, is he limping?”

Natasha turned around and narrowed her eyes at him. Steve avoided looking at both of them and hoped he wasn’t blushing.

“It’s no concern,” he said. “What are we looking at?”

“Uh,” Stark said, then grabbed a hologram and threw it into the center of the room. It expanded, showing a video feed of the gates to Marble Cemetery. “Zombies.”

Steve grimaced at the video feed. The footage was grainy, probably a security camera from the angle, but there were definitely corpse-people forcing their way out of the gated cemetery. “First responders?”

“Po-po and the FDNY are already on scene,” Stark said. “I figured we ought to step in and help since, y’know, it’s zombies.”

“A lot of these are skeletons,” Natasha remarked.
“They’re undead,” Stark insisted.

“Why do you sound happy?” Steve sighed.

“It’s zombies!” Stark exclaimed.

Colonel Rhodes slowly covered his face. “He’s always wanted to fight in the zombie apocalypse,” he muttered.

“Do we need the big guy?” Bruce asked, hovering near Stark’s shoulder.

“No,” Steve said. “Rhodey, you joining us?”

“Yep,” Colonel Rhodes said, dropping his hand and squaring his stance.

“Then you’re on search and rescue,” Steve told him. “You, Stark, and Sam. Fly in and carry out any civilians you find. Clint, Nat, you and me will coordinate with first responders to see what their plan is. I’d like to drive the hoard back into the cemetery and lock them in, then go from there.”

“Where do you want me?” Bucky asked.

“With me,” Steve answered. He’d actually forgotten Bucky would be with them, that quickly.

“Jealously guarding his ass,” Stark threw in.

Bucky lifted his rifle and raised his eyebrows at Stark. “Don’t even look at him,” he said flatly.

“Is he joking?” Stark hissed in Steve’s direction.

“Yeah,” Steve said, “you can tell by the fact that he’s pulling the left corner of his lip down to keep himself from smiling.”
Bucky looked at him with betrayal in his eyes. “Steve,” he said, “you just gave away my tell. What kinda guy does that to his fella?”

“Is that the same get-up HYDRA had him in?” Steve demanded abruptly, looking Bucky up and down before turning to Stark.

“It’s better,” Stark said. “My version comes with a cup.”

Steve looked back at Bucky, glancing briefly downward and thinking that a cup would help with his probably still painful knot. “It looks like the same damn uniform.”

“I know how to work with this,” Bucky said defensively.

“What if you blank out?” Steve thought aloud. “Shit, what do we do if you slip into the Soldier on the field? Maybe you shouldn’t –”

“What’d I just tell you five minutes ago?” Bucky interrupted. “I’m not staying behind.”

“Okay, Mom, Dad, you got five seconds to work that out,” Stark cut in. “We gotta get on scene.”

Bucky stared Steve down. “I’m not staying behind.”

“You don’t know what triggers it,” Steve countered. “You could –”

“If something random triggers him, it’ll send him into the old Winter Soldier,” Natasha said, stepping in. “The one the Red Room trained. The American Winter Soldier had specific command phrases only, the Red Room’s Winter Soldier was broken down into base instincts. That means he’ll respond to his Omega only.”

Steve glanced at her, then at Bucky.
“If he slips into the Winter Soldier, all he’ll do is continue protecting you,” Natasha insisted. “He’ll just briefly turn into a caveman.”


Steve glared at him. “If you turn into the Winter Soldier, I’m benching the both of us.”

“He’d be fine!” Stark said. “What’s a little animal brutality when dealing with zombies?”

“This isn’t a discussion,” Steve said firmly. “Stark, Rhodes, suit up.”

Tony clapped his hands. There was a distant whine, then the Iron Man and War Machine suits maneuvered into the room and flew for Stark and Colonel Rhodes. Bucky jerked at the sound, but simply stepped back and stood between Steve and the approaching suits. Steve let out a short breath and let it go. Sam stepped up as Rhodes and Stark got into their suits, looking bulky with his wings strapped to his back and outfitted in body armor.

“You’re on search and rescue with the other flyers,” Steve said before he could say anything. “Let’s get moving.”

“Chopper’s ready to go,” Natasha said as Steve headed for the helipad. “I’ve notified first responders that we’re on our way.”

“S and R, you fly ahead,” Steve called over his shoulder as the group fell in behind him; Bucky came to match his stride, walking at his side like they’d done so many times before during the war. “Remember, our first priority is to lend backup to first responders and prevent loss of civilian life.”

“Bring back samples!” Bruce called after them.

“I’ll bring back a zombie!” Stark yelled.

“You may not bring back an entire zombie,” Steve snapped.
“Aw, but Mom,” Stark whined.

“Get your ass off the ground,” Steve told him. “And don’t call me mom.”

Stark showed him his middle finger, then took off. Sam just ran for the roof’s edge and took off, and Rhodes shot him a salute before following. Steve let Natasha move ahead of him to get to the helicopter.

“Can we call you Dad?” Clint asked.

“No,” Steve said.

“That would make Barnes mom,” Clint mused.

“Hell no,” Bucky answered.

“Get in the chopper,” Steve said, jerking a hand to point.

“See, that’s a mom attitude,” Clint said, jumping into the helicopter.

Steve waved his middle finger at him, then turned to Bucky.

Bucky offered him a hand up. Steve hesitated for a split second, then took it and let Bucky help him up. He turned back and pulled Bucky in as Natasha got the rotors spinning. Steve pulled his helmet on and buckled it, then flicked his right wrist and held it up to his mouth.

“How’s it looking, boys?” he called over the comms.

“Blockades down Bowery, 1st Ave and East Houston,” Stark answered. “Cops are working south down 2nd Avenue and north up Crystal Street.”
“Do a flyover of the scene and report back,” Steve ordered. “Rhodey, find the guy in charge, tell them we’re en route, ETA –?” he broke off, looking up at Natasha.

“Ten,” Natasha called back.

“Ten minutes,” Steve repeated.

“On it,” Rhodes answered.

Steve dropped his wrist, flicking it again to shut off his mic, and grabbed Bucky’s knee, squeezing it.

“You prioritize me over any other team member,” he said quietly, “I’ll personally lock you in the apartment next time we get deployed. Understood?”

Bucky looked at him out of the corner of his eye. Steve stared back, refusing to give ground.

“Understood?” he repeated gruffly.

“Understood,” Bucky answered softly.

Steve gripped his knee again. Bucky grabbed his hand and squeezed it sharply.

“You do somethin’ jumping-out-of-a-plane-with-no-parachute level of stupid,” he said, “I’ll personally lock you in the apartment the next time they try to call you out.”

“Fine,” Steve said.

Bucky shook his hand, then pulled it up and kissed the back of it. Steve shifted his gaze ahead, watching smoke rise in the distance over Marble Cemetery. If he still believed in God, he’d be praying right then. But he’d lost his faith. So he didn’t bother. God never listened to him, anyway.
ha, i bet y’all were worried it’d be something bad! it’s just surprise zombies! i hope there’s no hurricane outside your door and you have power and water and food and internet and no leaky roof, i’ll see you next week!

le gag reel
lexi: “Steve had fallen asleep...”
me: one and done
lexi *snorts*
me: steve just rolls over

Steve: “Fuck”
Bucky: “Lemme wake up first”
lexi: BUCKY YOU HORNY LITTLE SHIT YOU’RE ALREADY IN HIS ASS

lexi: “You want food or dick first?” we’re asking the hard questions this morning. hard questions. get it?
me: OMG YOU AWFUL PERSON
lexi’s bf: *vague comment, but i’m sure it was judging*

lexi: “No, you’re a stubborn asshole,” wow. that’s what happens when you get married. old couple syndrome.

lexi: “...if you plan on actually being allowed to fuck me later.” WOW. WHATTA MOOD.

lexi: “Why would I use up all my good lines when you’ve already guaranteed I get to stick it in you later?” wow i didn’t know bucky was a fuckboy
lexi’s bf: *quietly wheezing*

lexi: “If you’re good enough, Steve replied” WOW fuckin savage i like this steve can this steve can come more often

lexi: “Bucky adjusted the front of his sweats” WOW
me: he’s pouting
lexi: he is! he’s pouting, he’s like a child, he’s like i thought i was gonna get my dick wet and now i’m not i gotta eat grumble grumble grumble

*it’s ma dick exchange*
me: this is my favorite thing i’ve ever written

Steve: “I hadn’t noticed”
lexi: super hot fire plays in the background OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH

“Any better?” Bucky asked. “Hmm,” Steve said... “No.”
lexi: FUCKING REKTTTTTTTTTTTT

Steve: “Keep that up and maybe I’ll get interested”
lexi: #SAVAGE

“Put the dishes in the sink,” Steve told him.
lexi: Bucky: okay you'll be my Mrs. Barnes Steve: okay well get me some milk and don't you dare drop those eggs you better put those damn dishes in the sink James Buchanan Barnes! Bucky: wait no Steve: you said you wanted me to be your Mrs. Barnes me: Bucky: not like this!

Steve: “Did you like me acting like that?” Bucky: “Hell yeah” lexii: Wow what gave that away, him grinding against your ass????

lexi: i don’t understand what you’re so worried about steve it’s the same formula wdym what are you doing me: i mean it’s changed a little bit lexii: no steve all you gotta do is lie down and take bucky’s dick, that’s all this is, it's still bucky's dick going into you, sure the emotions are a different but it's the same end result, bucky's gonna knot you what are you doing steve you’re thinking too hard you could be wearing a potato sack and bucky would still be hard for you the truth is out there

Bucky: “You know you don’t gotta do this, just ‘cause I’m weird –” lexii: We don't kinkshame ourselves in this home Buck

Steve: “Fuck me. You can do all the work.” lexii: Steve Rogers is a pillow princess pass it on

lexii: oh wait more moaning! wait i gotta make eye contact! make eye contact with me! why do you never look at me during! lexii’s bf: why are you like this lexii: i was like this before you started dating me, i was arguably more annoying before that lexii’s bf: i’m not making eye contact with you lexii: why do you never look at me during!

lexii: “oh, bucky, yes!” me: *quietly* why did i write this lexii: at least my bf is sitting behind me sighing

"Steve moaned like a cheap whore"
lexii: i mean he's got the experience me: !!!! rude!!! lexii: am i wrong look at me and tell me i’m wrong me: still! rude! he wasn't cheap he was the only male omega ass for sale that shit's expensive!

lexii: “Buck!” Steve screamed as he came.” me: oh thank god it’s over

lexii: “That was great, [Steve] mumbled.” me: like a happy valley girl

lexii: “-Bucky, who was pointing a pistol he’d drawn from nowhere-” me: he pulled it from his ass lexii: he pulled it from his ass! lexii’s bf: from his prison-wallet
lexi: “do we need the big guy? bruce asked” i love bruce he’s like “do we need the other guy?” and steve’s like “aw no buddy you can stay home” bruce’s like “aw thank i’m gonna stay home and take a nap”

Bucky: "Steve!"
lexi: Adam!

lexi: “God never listened to him, anyway.” oh, steve. it’s just moony being a bitch.
me: i wonder if i should be hurt but then…
lexi: you know i’m right
me: yeah

*yes, lexi moaned all of steve’s lines during that scene and none of bucky’s it was fucking funny. go annoy her on tumble to be the reader of the week next! or me whichever suits you. stay safe everybody!*
red, white, blue and distracting

Chapter Summary

“Lemme get a distraction,” Sam called.

“What’s red, white, blue and distracting?” Steve countered.

“You better fuckin’ not –” Bucky started to say.

Chapter Notes

y’all looking forward to surprise zombies? i hope you are, zombies are always fun. wdym they’re not always fun? i mean, sure, if you're actively being chased by zombies, it's not fun, but any other situation they are! as the usual, thanks to lexi for being my queen and going above and beyond to help me perfect my content, ily. this week's tweet is sponsored by incorrect avengers on twitter bc there isn't a reader of the week this week. leave a message in my inbox or lexi's to be featured as the poster of some dank memes in the future. or! if you want to support me on ko-fi, you can buy me a coffee here! don't feel like you have to but know that if you do, you will have my undying loyalty. this week's chapter cover is on my tumblr here, the playlist is here, and the meme of the week can be found here.

psst, here’s some bloopers to start your week off right.

me, having just joined voice chat: you are an anonymous sheep lexi: OH SHIT HI me: hi? lexi: you scared me

lexi: my boyfriend’s here me: hello boyfriend how are you lexi, to her bf: pay attention to me! lexi’s bf: *answers but too far away to hear* lexi: I DEMAND CONSTANT ATTENTION

*we are discussing pads being procured by entities without uteruses*
lexi: like he asked “what size is your pussy”
me: lmao what size is your pussy
lexi: what size pad do you need what size is your pussy
me: mine is a small
lexi: mine is lorge
me: *snorting* lorge
lexi: like not large, lorge
me: can i include this in bloopers?
lexi: please

lexi: y’know i’ve never seen zombies in new york
me: huh
lexi: like rural towns? sure. california? okay. even the white house, but never new york.
maybe new york just has this “fuck off zombie” vibe
me: it’s bc new york has all the aliens
lexi: and a super soldier
me: lmao true
lexi: a super soldier and his super boyfriend. fuck off zombies!

Lexi: baby we can't drink arizona tea anymore! Its anti-ox! Its against oxen!– WAIT
NO DON’T LEAVE ME! STOP SIGHING ANGRILY AT ME! i love you,
remember that
Boyf: i thought it was something serious and i was like why are you drinking it!

me, watching lexi trying to edit the bloopers: what are you – are you trying to make a
new line – it’s shift enter, shift enter
lexi: i don’t have shift enter on my tablet!
me: oh okay hang on i got you
*adds a new line to the bullet points for lexi*
lexi: thanks bro
me: you’re welcome bro
lexi: pls record that in the bloopers
me: i’m doing it right now

lexi, reading ahead in edges blurred: we love dumb gays

See the end of the chapter for more notes
red, white, blue and distracting

[incorrect avengers (@canonavengers), 10/22/2014, 9:43AM]

#BuckyBarnesIsntHydra
“We were called in at 11:14,” Captain Mikhailov reported. “The groundskeeper reported a prowler late last night, but uniforms who showed up said they couldn’t find anything.”

“When did the first one of these things pop up?” Steve asked.

“Sometime around 10:30,” Mikhailov answered.

The two of them stood over a map of the city, dry-erase ink indicating blockades and squad movements. Steve had his flyers doing a grid search, looking for civilians, but the rest of his team were waiting at the temporary base the police had set up on Bowery and East Houston.

“If we can drive them back into the cemetery, we can identify what caused them to come to life,” Steve said for perhaps the tenth time.

“I’m not interested in what caused it right now,” Mikhailov said, again, for perhaps the tenth time. “I want them off the streets.”

“They’re not that dangerous,” Steve insisted, “what’s dangerous is whoever can reanimate corpses by the dozen!”
“Listen, son,” Mikhailov sighed, “I dunno what you’re thinking, but as far as I’m concerned, zombies are just plain zombies. Which means they’re infectious.”

“Then what infected them?” Steve demanded.

Mikhailov, an Alpha well into his fifties, stared Steve down without shame. Steve gritted his teeth and held back some choice swear words. The police captain had been plenty respectful to him a month ago.

“You’re here to help me,” Mikhailov said. “So you can join the squads clearing the area or you can go back to your fancy tower.”

Steve caught Natasha’s eye. She nodded once, then slipped out of sight.

“Fine,” Steve told Mikhailov. “My team and I will take East 2nd.”

“Have at it,” Mikhailov answered with a wave of his hand. “Report to Lieutenant Cleary.”

Steve turned on his heel and waved to Bucky and Clint. Clint swung his bow off his back as he fell into step and Bucky habitually checked the magazine in his rifle.

Steve lead them away from the temporary HQ, heading north up Bowery toward East 2nd. He flicked his right wrist and held it up to his mouth.

“Stark, how’s that stealth tech in your suit coming?” he asked quietly.

“Uh, pretty shit.”

“How shit?” Steve answered, sidestepping to avoid a group of firefighters.

“Cloaking tech isn’t working fully yet, and it’s still pretty noisy, but I can work around that.”
“I want you to meet Natasha at Bowery and East 4th,” Steve told him. “The two of you are going to work your way into the cemetery itself and scout around. We’re looking for whoever organized this.”

“On it,” Stark answered.

Steve flicked his wrist and dropped it back to his side.

“Where are we heading?” Clint asked.

“Down East 2nd,” Steve answered. “To the center of the hoard.”

“Sounds like fun,” Clint said.

“Sounds like stupid,” Bucky muttered.

“We’re distracting whoever started this from Natasha and Stark,” Steve said over his shoulder.

“So, we’re being intentionally stupid,” Bucky remarked.

Steve reached back and caught him by the ear, dragging him forward despite Bucky bursting into a chorus of: “Ow, ow, ow, ow!”

“We’re being selectively stupid,” Steve said, then gave him a toss and Bucky stumbled once or twice before righting himself and clapping a hand over his ear. “Quit questioning your CO.”

“Looks like somebody’s on the couch,” Clint sniggered.

Bucky flipped him the bird, then rubbed his ear a few more times before snatching Steve’s elbow.
“Still a lil’ feisty, huh?” he murmured.

Steve went red and gave Bucky a shove. Bucky laughed at him and threw an arm around his shoulders, planting a kiss on his cheek. Clint guffawed and Steve caught sight of a rookie cop dropping his phone with guilt on his face.

“Watch yourself, kid,” Steve told him.

“Sorry, sir,” the rookie muttered. “Um –”

“Delete the picture,” Clint advised.

Bucky quit grinning and withdrew his arm, taking the stock of his rifle.

“Sorry,” the cop said hastily, “I didn’t – I’ll delete it –”

Steve took the phone from him, opened the camera, and swiped through the recent pictures. He deleted three of him and his team, then handed it back.

“You get off with a warning this time,” he said. “Next time, I’ll see you reprimanded.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” the rookie replied, snapped a salute, and scurried off. Steve shook his head and waved Clint and Bucky on.

“Next time, I’m gonna beat his face in,” Bucky growled under his breath. Steve gave Bucky’s shoulder a push.

“Move on,” he said. “Focus.”

They neared East 2nd and Steve had Clint distract the uniform cops guarding the blockade long enough for him and Bucky to slip past. Clint would follow a minute later via parkour, scaling the nearby nightclub. The street was eerily quiet, devoid of human life and movement. Steve signaled Bucky to go right, then swept to the left to clear the side streets and alleys.
Across the street, Bucky signaled an all-clear. Steve waved him on, then drew the pistol from his hip and held it and his shield on guard.

His comm unit clicked in his ear and Steve tipped his head to the left to open the channel.

“En route,” Clint reported. “Where are you?”

Steve lifted his wrist, flicking it. “Heading towards Albert’s Garden. Do me a favor and check the second cemetery. Any activity there?”

A second passed. Steve cleared the next alley and waved Bucky on.

“Nada,” Clint checked in. “Just the main cemetery.”

“Great,” Steve muttered.

His comm clicked again.

“Something tells me this is a trap,” Stark’s voice threw in.

“No kidding,” Steve grumbled.

“The main graveyard is deserted,” Stark said. “But there’s a ring of zombies just standing outside of it.”

“Great,” Steve sighed. He passed the park and signaled Bucky to cross the street and regroup. “Clint, get off the roof.”

“Roger,” Clint said.
Steve rolled his eyes. Bucky looked confused.

“What’d he say?” he muttered.

“Roger,” Steve said. “It’s the same as copy, he understood me.”

Bucky frowned for another second, then he seemed to remember the second meaning of Steve’s surname and he let out a slow *ah* before nodding.

Clint dropped down from an awning ahead of them. Steve flicked his wrist to close the comm channel and waved his team on.

They reached 2nd Avenue and Steve called for a hold. He looked up and down the street, then motioned for Clint to cross. He did, running over and climbing a garbage bin to jump onto a fire escape. Steve rolled his eyes but waved Bucky across. Bucky slipped out of sight behind the garbage bin, rather than follow Clint, and Steve waited for the squad down the road to turn a corner before following.

He waved Clint down and headed on, nearing the cemetery. He lifted his wrist, opening the comm channel, and called: “Nat, what do you see?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“And that means?” Steve asked.

“My guess is they’ve got cloaking tech that works.”

“See if you can get inside,” Steve told her. “Don’t engage. Stark, circle back and meet up with Rhodes. Sam, stay on S and R.”

“Grid’s near finished,” Sam reported.

“Then finish it and join the other flyers,” Steve ordered. “Rhodes, Stark, I want you two to start
pushing the hoard back into the cemetery.”

“Copy,” Rhodes answered.

“Roger,” Stark said.

Steve rolled his eyes again. Bucky did, too.

“It’s funny!” Clint hissed towards them.

“Laugh it up, birdbrain,” Steve muttered.

Bucky whistled abruptly. Steve threw out a hand, stopping Clint and looking at Bucky expectantly. Bucky pressed a finger to his lips, then started creeping forward. Clint caught Steve’s eye and lifted his hands, then slowly signed: What’s he doing?

Steve wasn’t as good with sign language as Natasha or Clint, but had enough that he could give basic answers to most questions. And swear. Most of what he knew were obscenities.

He answered with Heard something. Clint frowned, then signed What?

Steve shrugged. He turned back, watching Bucky taking cautious steps down the street. It was silent.

Bucky turned abruptly and let off one shot, silenced by the muffler on his rifle. Steve waved to Clint and ran forward, catching up with Bucky to find a desiccated corpse staggering backwards in the center of an alley. Bucky fired again, catching it in the skull, and the corpse fell over before rolling to its hands and knees.

“Stay down!” Bucky snapped, shooting it again. The corpse got back up. “Okay, it’s not dying.”

“Clint –” Steve started.
“On it,” Clint cut him off, drew an arrow and let it off.

The arrow struck the corpse’s center mass, then it burst into flames and the corpse fell to the ground. Steve wrinkled his nose, then covered his face with a hand as the corpse burned up and Bucky lowered the point of his rifle.

“Fire,” he muttered. “Of course.”

Steve gave his wrist a flick. “If you engage any zombies, you gotta burn ‘em.”


“Well, I didn’t grow up killing them by the hoard in video games,” Steve answered, turning away. He walked up to the burning corpse and kicked away anything flammable from nearby, then kicked the corpse itself into a neater pile. “Don’t start any wildfires in the process.”

“Copy,” five voices answered. Steve waved to Bucky and Clint.

They cleared a corner and the gates of Marble Cemetery came into view. Steve grimaced.

“This is gonna be gross,” he sighed.

“This is gonna be awesome,” Clint insisted.

“How were there even that many people in the graveyard?” Bucky spluttered.

“I count three hundred,” Rhodes said over the comms. “At least.”

Steve holstered his gun. It wouldn’t be of much use. “Alright. Barton, get someone else sniper-ish and pick off the edges. Rhodes, Stark, herd them back into the gates with fire. Me and Bucky will pick off stragglers as best we can.”
“Hey, so, Barnes?” Stark called.

Bucky looked at Steve. Steve pointed to his wrist and Bucky hesitantly raised it to his mouth. “What?”

“Do me a favor, make a peace sign with your left hand.”

“What?” Bucky repeated flatly.

“Just do it,” Stark said.

Bucky exchanged glances with Steve. Steve shrugged. Clint hovered near them until Steve waved him off. Bucky reluctantly made a peace sign with his left hand.

“Now do a rock on sign; fold your index, middle, and ring fingers, extend your pinky and thumb, then wave it side to side five times.”

“What the fuck am I doing?” Bucky said, even as he did it.

“Stick up your index, sign language for I love you.”

“Why?” Bucky demanded, lifting his index.

“Now say Flameo, Hotman and do finger guns.”

“What?” Bucky demanded.

“Just do it!”

Bucky looked at Steve. Steve shrugged.
“Flameo, Hotman,” Bucky muttered, making finger guns.

A panel in his forearm popped open and a what looked like a small mounted gun popped out. Bucky started, jerking his arm around to point it at the hoard.

“Make a fist,” Stark ordered. “Don’t point it at anybody.”

Bucky made a fist. The gun started spewing fire.

“Holy shit!” Bucky laughed. “You fucking gave me a flamethrower!”

“You’re welcome,” Stark said smugly.

“What did we say about giving the recovering brainwashed super soldier a flamethrower?” Sam demanded over the comms.

“What do you think all the complicated hand gestures were for?” Stark countered.

“Fuck yeah!” Bucky shouted, tensed as if to run off, then relaxed his fist – ending the spray of fire – and looked back at Steve as though looking for permission.

“Go,” Steve sighed. “I’ll be right behind you.”

“Fuck yeah!” Bucky yelled, then jumped into the fray with his flamethrower.

Steve lifted his wrist. “Stark, you and I are having words later.”

“Okay, but you gotta admit, it’s useful.”
“Later,” Steve insisted.

“Woo-hoo!” Bucky screamed from the center of the hoard.

“I’ll just stand here, then,” Steve sighed while Clint started to fire flaming arrows from a nearby building roof. “With no fire,” he muttered, dropping onto an outdoor chair outside a cafe and watching Rhodey and Stark swooping in to fire their lasers to corral the zombie hoard. “Being useless.”

“You could join me in the cemetery,” Natasha suggested.

Steve made a face at Bucky, mowing down zombies with his flamethrower. “Why not,” he grumbled, getting up. “If the cops ask, you and me are heading back to the tower to get our own flamethrowers.”

“I already have one,” Natasha said.

“Am I the only one without literal firepower?” Steve demanded, running at an unguarded part of the cemetery fence to scale it.

“Uh, I’m still working on yours,” Stark replied. “I was trying to make it do three streams of colored fire; red, white, and blue, ’cause you’re Captain America and all.”

“Great,” Steve said, landing on the other side of the fence. “Where are you, Nat?”

“Follow the fence around to the far side,” Natasha answered. “By the way, I think I found our zombie whisperer.”

Steve slipped farther into the cemetery, crossed what initially appeared to be a heat haze and suddenly stopped to blink hard. In the center of the cemetery, a massive beam of red light was projecting into a dome that extended across the grounds.

“Yeah, I see it,” he said. “Hold your position.”
Steve used the trees and massive headstones to sneak around the edges of the cemetery, which wasn’t very large to begin with. He found Natasha on the rear side, lying in the grass behind a mausoleum.

“Look like a mad scientist to you?” she whispered.

Steve peered around the edge of the mausoleum. There were two people in the center by the red beam, a boy in a silver catsuit and a girl in a long, leather jacket.

“Where’s their gear?” Steve muttered.

“That’s what I want to know,” Natasha answered darkly.

Steve lifted his wrist. “Sam, head to the cemetery. Join us on the far side.”

“On it.”

Steve signaled to Natasha, then dove off to the side and rolled behind a second mausoleum. Natasha slipped around the edge of hers, creeping closer to the two people in the center of the graveyard. Steve pulled a tiny silver ball from his belt, clicked it, and tossed it towards the two people. It rolled through the grass, coming to a stop maybe fifteen feet from them, and audio crackled in his comm unit.

“... no sign of him,” a male voice said.

“He’s here,” a woman’s voice answered.

Both voices were accented, sounding Russian or Slavic of some kind. Steve reached up to his comm and dialed up the volume, trying to catch their voices more so JARVIS could run an analysis.

“The Soldier’s here,” the male voice said. Steve stiffened. “We should take him out and go.”
“That’s not why we’re here,” the female voice replied.

Steve lifted his wrist. “They’re HYDRA,” he said quietly. “Bucky, don’t get captured.”

“Copy,” Bucky’s voice answered. “Location?”

“Stay where you are,” Steve hissed.

Steve felt a spike of frustration from his bondmate but ignored it. He crept closer to the two kid HYDRA agents, pulling out his phone and texting a few commands to JARVIS. He didn’t get too close but circled around to catch their side profiles. He took a picture of them, then sent it to JARVIS and put his phone back in his belt.

“Age range estimated,” JARVIS said in his ear. “18 to 25.”

Steve bit hard on his lip. HYDRA was recruiting kids, now. He switched back to the audio grenade.

“– Can you look for him?” the boy asked. “Maybe you could –”

“If I drop this shield, we’ll be spotted,” the girl snapped back. “Look for him yourself.”

Steve could guess who they were looking for, if it wasn’t Bucky.

“On foot in the grass,” Sam reported in. “Locale?”

“Fifty feet in,” Steve whispered. “Quiet.”

Sam didn’t answer. Steve tucked behind a large stone angel and dug through his pack for stun grenades. “All units,” he whispered into his wrist, “perps are kids, possibly affiliated with HYDRA. JARVIS estimates 18 to 25, accents put them from Eastern Europe. I want to take them in alive, stunned only.”
“Copy,” Natasha answered.

“Copy,” Sam echoed.

Steve hesitated before adding on: “They’re likely looking to take me in.”

“Don’t you do nothing stupid,” Bucky warned.

“They’ve got some kind of shield projected over the graveyard,” Steve continued, ignoring Bucky and the continued frustration through their bond. “It probably also controls the zombies. Keep them distracted, Nat, Sam, and I will take out the kids.”

“Copy,” Sam and Natasha said.

“Roger that,” Stark said.

“Take point out there, Rhodey,” Steve added.

“Copy,” Rhodes said.

Steve crept closer, then switched back to the audio from the kids.

“– they said he’d show up,” the boy said.

“I’m concentrating, Pietro.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“He will.”
“But –”

“Shh! I have to keep them moving!”

Steve lifted his wrist and tapped a nail against the hard comm unit four times in rapid succession, then gave a long pause, tapped it once, waited, tapped once, added a sharper tap, then twice in slow succession. He followed it with a long tap and three short ones. Morse for Hey, B.

He waited.

“Was that Morse code?” Stark called.

“I read you,” Bucky answered.

Steve tapped his nail against the comm unit hard, sharp, hard and sharp again, paused, gave three long taps, paused, two long taps, another pause, and a single sharp tap; come.

“On my way,” Bucky said.

“Rogers, you don’t gotta resort to Morse to have secret conversations with your lover,” Stark threw in, “you can use a private channel.”

“He’s being stealthy,” Bucky snapped.

Steve ignored it altogether. He took a cautious glance from behind the headstone where he was hiding, then ducked back under. Cautiously, he crept away from where the two kids were gathered around a large stone basin, towards the front of the cemetery. He didn’t need to give Bucky directions, the bond would allow him to find Steve.

Sure enough, Bucky crouched low near him a minute later. “What are we looking at?” he whispered.

“Remember that village in Austria, with the witch doctor?” Steve said under his breath.
Bucky cast him a glance. “No.”


Bucky peered over his headstone. “Kids,” he said. “Where’s the red light coming from?”

“Look closer,” Steve whispered.

“Cap,” Natasha said over the comms, “that girl…”

“Yeah,” Steve answered. “She’s creating the barrier with her bare hands.”

“Holy shit,” Sam murmured.

“You mean there’s a necromancer?” Stark demanded. “Awesome!”

Steve pulled out a mirror and angled it to see past the headstone. The boy was shifting from foot to foot, standing at the girl’s shoulder, and she was crouching over the stone basin he’d seen earlier. Her hands emitted an intense, red light, one raised toward the sky, the other moving over the basin, which was filled with more red light.

“How do we play this?” Sam asked.

“Stun only,” Steve answered. “Take them in for questioning. She’s probably controlling the zombies, I don’t know what the boy can do, but he wouldn’t be her only backup if he were normal.”

“I’ve got stun grenades,” Natasha said.

“Sam?” Steve prompted.
“Yeah, I’ve got them, too.”

“On my signal,” Steve said.

Bucky caught his eye. Steve gave pause and Bucky signaled for a hold, then crept away. Steve let him go, waiting until he came to a stop thirty feet away.

“Now,” Steve said.

Natasha, Sam, and Steve each threw a stun grenade. They arced through the air, collided with an invisible barrier, and were repulsed in opposite directions. Steve dove into a roll to avoid his own reflected stun grenade, and when he came back up, the two kids were no longer alone.

Instead, there were thirty-odd armed and armored HYDRA agents surrounding them.

“Aw, shit,” Steve sighed.

He dove into another roll behind a mausoleum as the HYDRA agents opened fire. Steve drew his side- arm again, swung his shield off his back and plotted a route across the cemetery to Bucky’s position.

“All units, forget the zombies, there’s a HYDRA strike team in the cemetery!” he shouted over the gunfire. “Move forward and attack when ready!”

“Nobody be stupid!” Bucky called.

“En route!” Rhodes answered.

“I’m radioing Mikhailov for backup!” Stark said.

“Maybe he’ll listen to you,” Steve replied bitterly.
Steve jumped up and into the fray. He took out two agents with his side-arm before one of them shot it out of his hand. He ducked beneath his shield and ran for the other side of the graveyard, looking for openings in the line HYDRA agents towards the two kids, who were by then crouching low on the ground over the large basin. The girl had released the barrier shielding the cemetery itself and was focusing on the basin instead.

“That basin has got to be how she’s controlling the zombies!” Steve called into his comm.

“How?” Sam demanded.

“I don’t know!” Steve answered. He dropped behind the base of a large statue, then threw his shield and took out another four agents. He saw Bucky ducking behind a headstone, popping up to fire off a shot, ducking and running again. “Don’t kill the kids, repeat, do not kill the kids!”

“Copy,” Sam and Natasha answered.

“If they try to kill you –” Bucky said.

“You still don’t kill them!” Steve snapped. He stuck his hand out and caught his shield, then jumped onto the statue, threw it again, and jumped back, flipping and landing on his feet before taking off to catch the shield on its rebound. “They’re kids, Bucky!”

“Police are on their way,” Stark said. “This was 100% a trap.”

“Noted,” Steve answered dryly.

He dropped into a roll, landed behind a wide headstone, caught his shield and signaled to Bucky for a second handgun. Bucky rose to take a potshot, then ducked and pulled a heavy Glock from his belt. Steve nodded and Bucky slid it across the grass. Steve grabbed it, lifted with his shield covering his head and torso, then fired at the HYDRA agents.

“Lemme get a distraction,” Sam called.

“What’s red, white, blue and distracting?” Steve countered.
“You better fuckin’ not –” Bucky started to say.

Steve jumped the headstone and ran for the center of the cemetery.

“I’M GONNA KILL YOU, ROGERS!” Bucky yelled.

He vaulted headstones, blocked bullets with his shield, ducked behind a statue and ran for the center. There were twenty or so agents left, all of which focused their fire on him. Steve used his shield to reflect a few bullets into them, taking out at least two and injuring a handful more, then slammed into the nearest agent. He smashed the soldier’s face in with his shield, then slashed out at the legs of the agent next to him with the shield and shot a second point-blank through the gut.

Steve took to the chaos and used his opportunity to break the necromancer’s focus. He threw his shield at the girl and –

There was a blur of movement and his shield vanished. Steve threw his body into a roll, then swept the legs of a nearby agent and snatched him to use as a human shield and looked around wildly for his actual shield. How had it just vanished?

Something hit him on the back of the head and sent stars into his vision. Steve released the HYDRA agent and stumbled, then felt the impact of bullets in his Kevlar body armor before Natasha dropped out of the sky and took out the agent shooting at him. Steve spun around, his head spinning, and saw the boy holding his shield.

“Hand it over and you won’t get hurt,” Steve told him. Were there two of him?

“Ah, no?” the kid answered, then vanished.

Steve blinked, staggered sideways, and fell to his knees. He reached up and touched his helmet, then shook his head hard and pushed himself back up.

“You FUCKIN’ IDIOT!” he heard Bucky yelling.
Steve punched a guy in the face instead of answering him.

“Rogers, you want evac?” Sam yelled.

“I’m good!” Steve answered.

“Don’t listen to that damn fool!” Bucky yelled from somewhere.

He wasn’t very coordinated, but his suit was bullet-proof and he was still quick enough to dodge headshots. He kicked the gun out of a man’s hands, then slammed his fists into him and sent him flying. “Where’s that little rat with my shield?”

“Here!” a voice said happily right in his ear.

Steve saw a flash of red and silver, then his shield collided hard with his face and he collapsed backward. Arms caught him, his stomach swooped and Steve, dizzy out of his mind and feeling blood gushing from his nose, saw the ground getting smaller and smaller.

“Sorry, Cap,” Stark’s voice, robotic from the suit’s speakers. “But your Alpha threatened to cut off mine, Rhody, and Sam’s balls if one of us didn’t get you out of there. Also Natasha’s, if she had any to cut off.”

“I said I was fine,” Steve mumbled. He reached up and touched his nose, then winced. “Ow.”

“If we’re not done in fifteen minutes, you can come back,” Natasha said over the comms. Steve’s dizziness intensified just hearing her and he ripped out his comm unit impulsively. “Sit tight until then,” he heard distantly.

The headset slipped from his fingers. “Shit,” Steve muttered.

“Those things are expensive, you know,” Stark told him.

Steve saw Clint waving, then his weight hit his feet and Steve stumbled when Stark let go of him.
“Watch Mom for me,” Stark told Clint, then took off again.

“Don’t call me mom,” Steve answered in a slurred voice.

“You sound like shit,” Clint said cheerfully. “Almost worse than you look.”

Steve touched his nose again, and his fingers came back covered in blood. “Lucky me,” he muttered.

Steve shook the blood off his fingers, feeling grossed out by it. “What the fuck happened?” he demanded, dropping onto his ass and then immediately regretting it; he hissed in pain and rolled onto his side.

“You okay?” Clint asked.

“Yeah.” Steve said through gritted teeth. “Bucky pulled out before his knot went down when JARVIS called. Ow.”

“Ooh,” Clint muttered, “that shit hurts.”

“The fuck would you know?” Steve grumbled. He propped himself up on an elbow, pulled binoculars from his belt and focused them on the cemetery. “Why the fuck did I even say that aloud?” he added under his breath.

“I’ve been on the other end,” Clint said, ignoring his second question. “I guess it would be worse for you than Nat, anyway.”

Steve winced, nodding. “Shit hurts,” he mumbled.

“Shit hurts,” Clint agreed. The entire time he’d been talking to Steve, Clint had been firing arrows into the still gathered hoard of zombies, explosive ones this time around. “Anyway, we’ve got a speedster on our hands.”

“Stark’s gonna magnetize it,” Clint said to him. “And grab the speedster while he’s at it if we’re lucky.”

“Great,” Steve said. He wiped his nose, then grimaced at the blood getting on everything and looked around for something to stop the bleeding with. “You got tissues?”

Clint shook his head. “Sorry, man,” he said, “swapped ‘em for extra arrowheads.”

“Great,” Steve repeated, less pleased.

He touched the bridge of his nose, winced at the flare of pain, then grabbed it and, gritting his teeth, reset it. Pain throbbed through his skull, making his eyes water, but he could feel his nose already healing. That actually hurt worse.

He lifted the binoculars and zoomed in on the cemetery. Most of the HYDRA agents were on the ground already, but the girl was still kneeling by her basin. Stark was throwing things at her, but they were all being deflected by another shield.


He didn’t get an answer. Which he should have expected, seeing as he’d dropped his headset.

But in the binocular’s vision, Steve saw Iron Man approaching the girl at a slower pace, just walking. Steve watched, and the girl finally looked up from what she was doing.

She lifted her hands from the basin. All the zombies surrounding the cemetery fell to the ground immediately as the girl brought her hands together above her head; what sounded like a sonic boom echoed through the area. Steve fell backwards as the pain in his head tripled and Clint actually fell off the building.

Spots appeared in his vision and Steve blinked several times. He realized that his ears were ringing, and that was all he could hear. He sat up, squinting, and saw the cemetery devoid of their enemies.
Natasha and Bucky stood at opposite ends of the courtyard, Stark, Rhodey, and Sam hovered nearby. The ground was littered with HYDRA operatives, but the longer Steve looked, the more things seemed out of place.

Then it hit him. Or rather, his shield collided with the back of his head again at the same time that Steve realized none of the HYDRA agents were bleeding, and he hit the rooftop as his head spun for the third time.

Someone grabbed the back of his suit and lifted him. Steve blinked, then guessed he was having hallucinations, because Rumlow was standing in front of him.

“Hiya, Cap,” Rumlow said, his voice distant and echoey, like the Alpha was speaking underwater. “How’s life treating you?”

Steve lifted his gun and shot Rumlow in the chest. Rumlow looked down at the bullet hole, then back up at him.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Rumlow remarked. “You could’ve killed me again.”

“Shit,” Steve said.

“Where’d your manners go, Cap?” Rumlow asked. “Don’t you know it’s unladylike to swear?”

Steve shot him again. Rumlow laughed and Steve fired again, and again, until his gun clicked and he realized he’d emptied its clip. Rumlow was still standing. His eyes were glowing red.

“We’re just waiting on extraction at this point,” Rumlow told him. “Good job separating yourself from your team, by the way, we were thinking it would be a bitch to capture you with that monster of a dog you call your Alpha at your heels. Hey, Cap, if your Alpha’s a dog, you know what that makes you?”

Rumlow was grinning at him. “A bitch.”

Steve turned the gun over in his hands and clobbered Rumlow on the forehead. Rumlow actually
dropped him but didn’t do more than wince. There was abrupt shouting, the sound of helicopter blades whirring, a distant whine like a heavy gun powering up. Steve staggered backwards, his feet hit the edge of the building; he stuck out his arms, snatching at the air, and Rumlow sighed heavily.

“Plan B,” he said, then kicked Steve hard in the chest, sending him flying off the roof.

Chapter End Notes

*whoops my finger slipped*

*the rest of the gag reel*

lexi: “Still a lil’ feisty, huh?” [Bucky] murmured” in public
me: in public
lexi: he’s a thot
me: he is

lexi: let the record show that my bf is here but he has nothing to say
me: the record will show that

lexi: “Watch yourself, kid,” Steve [said]” before you wreck yourself!
me: omg
lexi: if steve were into memes he’d totally say that

lexi: “My guess is they’ve got cloaking tech that works.” wow savage

lexi: “Laugh it up, birdbrain,” Steve [said]” SAVAGE rude

lexi: huh interesting headshots don’t work so they’re not left for dead zombies
me: they’re more like evil within zombies which are nasty
lexi: oh ew

*lexi and ta’es begin arguing about ta’es trash anime waifus. he has a type and it’s blonde sociopaths. he does not agree. lexi is offended that none of ta’es’s waifus are who she likes*
me: i hate it when mom and dad fight
lexi: omg she just said ‘i hate it when mom and dad fight’
lexi: oh what are your pronouns today kiddo
me: uhhhhhh
lexi: lmao, long pause
me: i don’t know? she/hers fine today i think
lexi: long ass pause, uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
*anyway, they resume arguing and ta’es tries to use the fact that lexi reads smut aloud as a factor against her but lexi wins bc she always wins*

lexi, to the moth in her bedroom she’s encouraging to leave her tablet for a lamp: if you die, that’s a you problem

lexi: “okay it’s not dying. ‘clint?’ steve started” i’m just imagining steve geing like “cliiiiiiiiiiiiint do you have something???????”

lexi: “i will celebrate the vulva like the fine cuisine that it is” omg
me: a mood
lexi: i love iris
me: i mean the only one i’ve ever tasted is my own and it tastes like potato chips
lexi: potato chips?
me: yeah it’s salty i have a salty pussy
lexi: i wish i tasted like potato chips! ta’es don’t look at me suddenly! don’t ask why i wished i tasted like potato chips! you should have seen the look he gave me it was so judgemental.
Lexi: okay but what do i taste like? I’ve never tasted myself i cant bend in half
Me: i've only ever licked my fingers. Actually wait--
Lexi: PLEASE DONT PROVE TO ME THAT YOU CAN
me: im proving to myself! I cant totally do it but i could if i worked at it!
me: anyway, ta’es what does lexi taste like?
Ta’es: a light mellow taste? I dont know I'm in my zone while I'm down there don't ask me to recall that

lexi: “Woo-hoo!” Bucky screamed from the center of the hoard.” omg he is a child
me: lmao
lexi: he is a literal child
me: you’re not wrong
lexi: i mean it’s refreshing to not see him being depresso, like, he’s just having fun playing call of duty: zombies

*we get to pietro and wanda’s first lines*
lexi: shit
me: HA!
lexi: i hate you

me: *whispering* quiet, quiet
lexi: lmao please

lexi: “Steve tucked behind a large stone angel –” yikes

lexi: *in baby voice* awwww i hate you why would you do that don’t kiss me again
me: are you talking to your cat or your bf i can’t tell
lexi: to my boyf
lexi: “He’s being stealthy,” Bucky snapped.
me: ohmygod tony you can’t just ask why people are being stealthy
lexi: lmao, so inappropriate

lexi: “Crap, Natasha said” wait no, “Cap”
me: same thing
lexi: i mean you’re not wrong

me: wHeN LiFe GiVEs YoU lEmOns

lexi: “Steve punched a guy in the face” i thought that said a gay and i was like steve wouldn’t do that he would never

lexi: “I guess it would be worse for you than Nat, anyway.” Steve winced, nodding. “Shit hurts.”
me: they’re bonding
lexi: wow whatta mood what a bonding moment

lexi: “Rumlow was grinning at him. “A bitch.” you know who’s a bitch?
me, giggling: who?
lexi: rumlow

lexi: well, that’s it. i need like my hero academia
me: i don’t have that but i do have this!
*starts playing I NEED A HERO*
lexi: what are you playing
me: i need a hero
lexi: oh. lmao.

in conclusion,
lexi: why do you write so damn much.

anyway, come shout at me on tumblr or yell at lexi for letting me do this to steve. love y’all, see you next week!
**Chapter Summary**

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*  
*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*  
*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

**Chapter Notes**

*On October 3rd, he asked me what day it was. I said, *time is an illusion you fuck.* Anyways, I’m not late bc time is an illusion. Wait, there was a cliffhanger last week? Are you sure? Maybe I shouldn’t update—No don’t attack me! Here you go, pls enjoy and pls comment comments make me giggly and smiley and a smiley baby is a happy baby which means less work for Lexi.*  
*This week’s meme is sponsored by my probable-sister-in-law’s baby sister, Emily/Eloise. I don’t actually know which is your name bc people call you both. You can find the playlist on my Spotify [here](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/your_playlist_id) and update I won’t be transferring the playlists for *Edges* blurred to YouTube bc I discovered that you can make folders on Spotify desktop and the issue of my playlist menu being cluttered has been resolved that way. I may or may not go back and re-create the playlists for intertwined. The meme of the week can be found on my [imgur](https://www.imgur.com) and the chapter cover is on my [Tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com).*

*Here are some bloopers btw*

Let the record show that Lexi is recording bloopers because her throat is very sore so Moony will be reading this time. She went to a BTS concert and now she sounds like a walking advertisement for just say no to smoking.  
Moony: She had fun  
Lexi: YWAH but I sound like a 40 year smoker. Even my mom doesn’t sound this bad!  
Moony: You can use capitals  
Lexi: F**ck capitals  
Moony: Okay where did I leave off right *reading* wait are you there  
Lexi: *silence*  
Lexi’s Boyf: *silence*  
Moony: Hello? Are you there? Am I talking into the either? Hello? My name is Heinrick? I was the one who sent 36 wild dogs into your apartment?  
Lexi: PET ME  
Moony: I can’t, I’m not in the same state  
Lexi: I wasn’t talking to you!
Boyf: but you were because you’re in a voice chat?
Lexi: shut up and pet me
Boyf: o-oh
Lexi: if you don’t, you can get out out of my damn bed

lexi: *starts wheezing as she tries to comment on what is probably ta’es’s anime*
me: wow
lexi: i Hate™ EVERYTHING

*lexi’s bf as she continues wheezing her way through judging his anime*
Steve Rogers Needs A Hug
“— and then I’m gonna sew your ass to the couch and you can get a fuckin’ catheter implanted because you’re not fucking going anywhere ever again, you stupid motherfucker, fucking dumbass…”

Steve gave a long, low groan.

“Hey! Fucker! Look me in the eye and tell me you weren’t being stupid!”

“… kinda guy talks to his wife like that?” Steve mumbled under his breath.

Bucky went quiet. Steve thought he heard laughter.

“Shut up, Stark.”

“I’m recording this.”

“Hey! Delete it!”
Steve winced as he shifted into a sitting position. He covered his eyes with a hand, then blinked and tried to look around.

“Hey!” Bucky snapped, appearing so abruptly in his vision that Steve gasped. “You’re on fucking bed rest, moron!”

“What’d I do?” Steve muttered.

“You fucking rolled off of a building!” Bucky snapped.

He looked very pissed. Steve made a face, then hissed and touched his nose; it still hurt.

“And you didn’t fucking call for help!” Bucky kept on scolding him.

“I shot Rumlow ten or twelve times,” Steve mumbled. “What happened?”

Clint floated into Steve’s vision. Or walked, more likely.

“We walked right into a trap,” Clint reported. “You nearly got snatched. Lucky for you, your boyfriend had a flamethrower and torched the guy who snuck up on us.”

“It was Rumlow,” Steve remembered suddenly. “But – Rumlow’s dead?”

“Whoever it was, they vanished,” Bucky said. “Why didn’t you call for help?”

“I was busy trying to shoot him,” Steve answered. He reached up and touched his head, wincing. Maybe he’d been seeing things. “I think I have a concussion.”

“Yeah,” Bucky scoffed, “you fuckin’ do. Your skull is fucking fractured.”
“Really?” Steve muttered, running a hand over his skull. It was wrapped in bandages. “Ow.”

“No shit,” Bucky growled.

Steve waved dismissively in his direction. Bucky moved closer and grabbed his hand, squeezing it hard.

“You scared the shit outta me,” he said quietly.

“Sorry,” Steve mumbled.

Bucky kissed his hand, still holding onto it tightly. Steve’s vision was starting to clear up and he cast a glance around the room again. The door was open, but he could have sworn he’d heard Stark’s voice earlier.

“How long have I been out?” he asked.

“About twenty-four hours,” Clint said. “Give or take. Doc said you were in a self-healing coma.”

Steve blew out his breath hard. “That would explain the headache,” he muttered, touching his temple.

“You’re stuck here for observation,” Bucky told him. “I can take you home in another forty-eight hours.”

“And you’re gonna sew my ass to the couch?” Steve asked him dryly.

Bucky scowled. “I’m thinkin’ about it,” he admitted.

Steve pulled his hand free of Bucky’s and reached up to pat his Alpha’s cheek. “Just remember that if you do that, you can’t fuck me ever again.”
Bucky went red and Clint laughed. Steve settled back against the pillows and shut his eyes, exhaling carefully. His ribs felt tender, they’d probably just healed. Breathing hurt, at least. He’d have to do his best not to laugh. His nose was sore; again, just healed. He had a throbbing pain in his right knee and ankle, probably fractures that were on their way to healing.

His ass didn’t hurt anymore at least. Steve gave an experimental shift, then scowled and opened his eyes again, sucking in a breath hard.

“What?” Bucky demanded, leaning over him. “What’s wrong? I can call the doc–”


“Oh,” Bucky said, then the color rushed back to his cheeks. “Uh. Right. I’ll get some.”

“Wait, what?” Clint asked.

Bucky wasn’t going anywhere, though. He glanced at the door, then at Steve, then looked at Clint. “Could you go up to our apartment and grab some stuff?”

“I’m confused,” Clint stated.

“My period finally decided to start,” Steve grumbled under his breath. “With great timing.”

“There’s pads in our bathroom,” Bucky explained to Clint. “Special ones for male Omegas.”

“Oh,” Clint echoed slowly. “Yeah, sure, no problemo. Yo, JARVIS, Barnes is giving me temp access to his apartment.”

“Please confirm, Sergeant Barnes,” JARVIS said pleasantly.

“Yeah, confirmed,” Bucky answered. “You hungry, Steve?”
Steve thought about it. “I could go for a burger,” he decided eventually.

“We’ll get takeout,” Clint told them. “Red Robin sound good?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, feeling better already. “With the fancy steak fries and a big chocolate milkshake.”

“You got it, buddy,” Clint said, walking backwards. “I’ll be back in a minute with those pads.”

Clint walked into Natasha on his way out. He apologized and Natasha simply pushed him on, entering the room with a bundle of peach-colored fluff in her arms. She dropped into an armchair in the corner and began knitting.

“Hi,” Steve said to her.

“Rogers,” she answered.

“Am I hallucinating again?” Steve asked Bucky, “Or is Natasha knitting in my hospital room?”

“She’s really there,” Bucky said. “And really knitting.”

Steve looked at her. “What?”

“What?” Natasha answered. “Can’t I want to finish this?”

She shook out whatever it was she was making. It was about three feet wide, almost that tall, and visibly soft.

“What is it?” Steve asked.
“A gift,” Natasha answered simply. “I heard Clint say something about Red Robin. We getting burgers?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “You want in?”

“Yeah,” Natasha decided. Her knitting needles clacked as she carried on knitting. Steve was still confused, but he figured he shouldn’t push it. Natasha was entitled to a hobby. “We should have a team meal.”

“Sure,” Steve said, tipping his head away. He shut his eyes and exhaled. Everything hurt, except his ass, which just felt gross. “Burgers for the whole team.”

“You’re on vacation,” Natasha said abruptly.

“I am?” Steve replied, looking back at her. “What about the inquiry?”

Natasha continued knitting. “JARVIS,” she called, “put on President Obama’s statement to the press from this morning.”

Steve looked at the TV as it switched on. The US President stood at a podium, looking presidential, with cameras flashing in his face and several microphones attached to his podium.

“I called this press conference to address the behavior of Congressman Daniel Wenham,” President Obama began in a… presidential… tone. Steve wasn’t feeling very descriptive. “I allowed him several liberties in his running of the Project: Insight inquiry because I suspected that his loyalties were divided. And as I suspected, Congressman Wenham has ties to HYDRA. He has resigned from his office pending a formal hearing and has been replaced by an interim representative until the elections in November.”

Steve gawked. He looked at Natasha, who simply waved at him to keep watching.

“I would like to issue a formal apology to Captain Steven Rogers,” President Obama declared. Steve gaped further. “His service to this nation is unprecedented, as was the mistreatment he suffered at the hands of this nation. The inquiry into the events of Project: Insight has been disbanded and Captain Rogers is absolved of any question of disloyalty or deception.”
“You’re fucking with me,” Steve muttered.

“It was, in fact, U.S. Senator William G. Brandt that organized the cover-up of Captain Rogers’ life,” Obama announced. “The evidence of which was found by CIA Agents Sharon Carter and Joseph Feuer only yesterday; the full records of Captain Rogers’ life prior to Project: Rebirth and proof that the late Senator Brandt had collected and hidden them in US archives.”

“What the fuck!” Steve shouted.

“The United States has shown a poor example of respect with how we, as a nation, have treated Captain Rogers in the fallout of his exposure as an Omega,” Obama said in the face of Steve’s disbelief. “I wish I could say that it was just Daniel Wenham’s actions as an affiliate of HYDRA that fed disrespect towards Captain Rogers, but this behavior began before Daniel Wenham launched the inquiry into Project: Insight. I would like to not only offer official apologies to Captain Rogers, but my own personal and sincere regret that he met any bigotry and misogyny in this nation. It’s inexcusable.”

“Fuck, yeah, it is,” Bucky said next to him.

Steve just pointed a hand at the TV, at a loss for words.

“Finally, I grant Sergeant Major James Barnes a complete and full pardon for the atrocities HYDRA carried out through his person,” Obama continued.

Now Bucky gawked.

“It is no question that Sergeant Major Barnes was not in control of his person and, as such, cannot be held responsible for any action made by his hands under HYDRA’s influence. I officially declare him a prisoner of war and he is entitled to all benefits and compensation that such a person is due. The members of the Avengers involved with the purge of SHIELD are also exempt from punishment for their actions, and as President of the United States, I give them my complete and unwavering gratitude for their service to this nation. Finally, Captain Rogers and Sergeant Major Barnes have been removed from active duty in the military and will be asked, asked and not required, to act as agents of the Department of Defense as Avengers only in the future.”

“Did I just get retired?” Steve muttered.
“Did we just get retired?” Bucky spluttered.

“Again, I cannot stress how ashamed I, personally, am of the mistreatment that Captain Rogers and Sergeant Major Barnes saw while in the service of the U.S. military,” Obama said. “It was a grievous wrong Captain Rogers suffered in being forced to consent to the fabrication of his life and the out-right fanaticism that fabrication lead to. It was a grievous wrong Sergeant Major Barnes suffered that it was implied he willingly joined the very organization he nearly died to take down. Both Captain Rogers and Sergeant Major Barnes have my personal regret that they were not given the respect due to them as, simply, human beings. Both Captain Rogers and Sergeant Major Barnes will be awarded the compensation they are owed for the disrespect and blatant hate they suffered while serving in the U.S. military.”

“Oh, my God,” Steve said quietly.

“Homophobia and misogyny are rampant within the military,” Obama said. “Captain Rogers is only one such example. And I assure you, Captain Rogers and the American people, that that hatred will be met with extermination of extreme prejudice. Any military member found to be promoting the ideas that Omegas, male or female, are any less than their fellow soldiers will be reprimanded. Any military member found to be promoting the idea that gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people, military or otherwise, are not due basic human respect will be reprimanded. Further, the kind of shaming that I have seen the American people doing after Captain Rogers admitted to having taken to sex work as a last resort in his youth will not be tolerated in the slightest. It is disgraceful that the personal liberty Captain America represents was so suddenly unavailable to Captain America himself because of his designation and his history, and I am ashamed of that reality.”

“Oh, my God,” Steve said yet again. He scrabbled to find Bucky’s hand and held it tightly.

“Those attitudes will not be tolerated in the U.S. military,” President Obama declared. “And I encourage the American people to not tolerate such attitudes in their homes or their schools or their workplaces. Captain America is no less Captain America because of desperate measures he took as a young man. Captain America is no less Captain America because he is not an Alpha. Captain America is an Omega, and he has earned our gratitude and respect tenfold already. We freely gave him that respect and gratitude before the truth of his designation was revealed and we should give it to him with no difficulty now that the truth is revealed. I say again, Captain America is no less Captain America because he is not an Alpha. Thank you.”

The TV shut off. Steve stared blankly at it for a while.

“So, you’re on vacation,” Natasha told him. She was still knitting. “You’re officially no longer in the
service of the U.S. military, and technically on as-needed duty as an Avenger only. As needed meaning no more small fish missions.”

“Did he say the same about me?” Bucky asked.

“Yep,” Natasha answered. “Welcome to the team, Barnes.”

Steve blinked. Bucky looked at him, then reached over and chucked a flesh knuckle under his chin gently.

“You okay?” Bucky asked.

Steve nodded slowly. “I… I didn’t expect that.”

“All your records have been released back to you,” Natasha spoke up. “The exhibit at the Smithsonian has been closed, pending remodeling and your approval.”

“All my records?” Steve muttered.

“Well, your birth certificate still hasn’t been found,” Natasha said, finally looking up at them. “There’s no reason why Brandt would have destroyed it and kept everything else, so we’re theorizing you don’t have one at all.”

“Makes sense,” Steve said absently. “I was probably born at home.”

Yeah, that’s what we thought,” Natasha said. “We being Agent Carter Junior and me.”


“Apparently,” Natasha started, “President Obama organized a secret task force to find it all when you said that you didn’t have any proof Brandt was the one who covered up your life. In addition to giving Wenham the floor in order to expose him as an affiliate of HYDRA.”
“Holy…” Steve mumbled.

“The Smithsonian issued an official apology for not giving you back any of your things before now,” Natasha went on. “The American History Association also issued an apology for spreading slander about you. That slander being that you were an Alpha. Your life is being removed from curriculum until you decide what to do with it.”

“With my history?” Steve questioned.

“I mean, that you did things is still included,” Natasha corrected. “But your personal life, that’s not being discussed in schools anymore.”

Steve blinked. “Holy shit,” he said.

Natasha returned to her knitting. “The press is only discussing how badly you’ve been treated for the most part. It seems the president’s public shaming of the public for being sexist and homophobic has worked, just like Nelson and Murdock said it would.”

Steve stared at nothing, feeling… Nothing. Actually, it felt like shock. A numb, distant shock. Nothing had worked out the way he’d been sure it would. Had it all been in his head?

“So, you two are free as birds,” Natasha concluded. “Hence, the team made a unanimous decision to send you on vacation.”

“Wait, what?” Steve spluttered, snapping out of his thoughts. “What do you mean, vacation?”

“As soon as you’re healed up, the two of you are on your merry way to the remote island destination of your dreams,” Natasha said, then frowned. “I think I dropped a stitch.”

“What the hell!” Steve burst out.

“What remote island destination?” Bucky asked suspiciously.
“Think New Zealand,” Natasha said, counting stitches as she spoke, “but not. It’s Tony’s private island.”

“Security?” Bucky questioned.

“The island was discovered in the late 70s, and then removed from every map JARVIS could find about nine years ago. Now only Tony has the coordinates,” Natasha answered. “Nobody lives there, it’s tiny, nobody inhabited it in the first place, and it was important to Tony that you know that.”

“Where is it?” Bucky pressed.

Natasha looked up. “I just said only Tony knows where it is,” she said. “It’s somewhere on this planet.”

Bucky still looked suspicious. Steve was preoccupied.

“You can’t just pack me off on vacation,” he insisted.

“Barnes, take your wife on vacation,” Natasha said.

“Alright,” Bucky agreed.

Natasha held out a hand to Bucky, her face blank. “There,” she said.

“I didn’t agree to this!” Steve spluttered.

“You agreed to take a honeymoon on Monday morning,” Bucky said in a smug tone. Steve gaped at him now. “Now we have a destination.”

“I agreed to go to Paris one day,” Steve tried to defend himself.
“Now you’re going to a private island so private only one person alive knows where it is,” Natasha told him. “It’s the dream of the poor, gay soul inside you, Steve. Let it live.”

Steve looked between Bucky and Natasha with accusation in his eyes. “I can’t believe this,” he said. “I’m being ganged up on by my own damn team.”

Bucky shrugged. “I always wanted to visit not-New Zealand.”

“You don’t even know what New Zealand is,” Steve accused him.

“So?” Bucky answered. “Honeymoon is code for sex vacation, Steve, just agree to it.”

Steve spluttered as Clint re-entered the room.

“I bring forth blood absorbers!” Clint declared victoriously, holding the package of pads above his head. “What’s this I hear about sex vacations?”

“We’re bullying Steve into taking a vacation,” Natasha told him. “Barnes is calling it a honeymoon, so it’s a sex vacation.”

“That’s what they are!” Bucky insisted. “You plan the wedding to happen right before the Omega’s heat, you have the wedding, you go on your honeymoon, nine months later, you’re parents; it’s a sex vacation!”

Steve covered his face with his hands.

“Well, seeing as you need these,” Clint remarked and Steve dropped his hands in time to catch the package of pads. He ripped it open and dug out one, then sat up, wincing. “Have fun with his food baby, though,” Clint added, “I’m ordering Red Robin from GrubHub.”

“I’m inviting the rest of the team,” Natasha said.
“Cool!” Clint said, pulling out his phone. “Steve, what burger do you want?”

“Bacon cheeseburger,” Steve said, tossing the blankets off his legs. “Buck, help me up.”

Bucky took his hands and steadied him as he stood. Steve clamped a hand on his arm for a second as his head spun, but once the dizziness passed, he started hobbling towards the bathroom.

“Classic bacon or barbeque?” Clint called after him.

“Barbeque!” Steve said over his shoulder. He banged his shoulder against the doorframe and let out a hiss of pain. “Help me walk in a straight line, will you, Barnes?”

Bucky pushed an arm around his waist and helped Steve stand straighter. Bucky shut the bathroom door behind them and Steve grabbed the handicap bars to lower himself onto the toilet.

“Huh,” Steve said as he lifted his hospital gown. He tried not to think of who had undressed him to get him into the hospital gown, because he was naked underneath. “I think the sheets need to be changed,” he told Bucky. “And I need underwear.”

“Be right back,” Bucky promised, dropping a kiss onto his forehead. Steve rubbed at his eyes, then sighed and bunched up a wad of toilet paper. Grimacing as leaning back made his ribs ache, Steve cleaned himself up and, because he had a gross curiosity for it, looked over his shoulder at it. Mostly blood, a few clots. He dropped it and flushed, standing up to wash his hands.

Bucky slipped back in. “Here,” he said, holding out a pair of white briefs. “The sheets didn’t have anything on them but I got new ones anyway.”

“Looks light anyway,” Steve muttered, taking the briefs and ripping open the pad package.

“Is that normal?” Bucky asked, hovering over his shoulder as Steve put the pad in the underwear.

“It’s what the doctor said to expect,” Steve told him. He tried to lift a foot, wobbled dangerously, and put it back down. “Fuck,” he muttered.
Bucky took the briefs from him and knelt down, holding them out. Steve sighed, but took his shoulders and stepped into them. Bucky pulled them up his legs, settling them on his hips, and Steve pulled him into a hug.

“Thank you,” he mumbled.

“What’re you thanking me for?” Bucky asked gently. “Basic human decency?”

Steve shrugged. “You don’t gotta –”

“I’m your partner, Steve,” Bucky said sweetly. “It’s natural. What else am I gonna do about it?”


Bucky kissed his shoulder. “Of course, sweetheart,” he said gently, “I’m here for you, whatever happens.”

Steve leaned on him for a second longer. Then he pulled his weight back onto his own two feet and cleared his throat. “C’mon,” he said, grabbing Bucky’s arm to keep himself steady, “there’s gonna be food.”

“And you keep ragging on me for keeping you fed,” Bucky grumbled, opening the bathroom door.

“What do you want from Red Robin?” Clint shouted the second they stepped out.

“Peace,” Bucky said.

Clint stopped. He opened his mouth, closed it, frowned, then pure terror or astonishment, Steve wasn’t sure, dawned on his face.

“That’s not on their menu!” Sam called from cupped hands.

“Hey, Sam,” Steve said. “When did you get here?”

“Just now,” Sam answered, casually saluting him.

Natasha tugged Clint’s phone from his hand, leaving him standing there with the fear of a thousand men in his eyes. “They’ve got typical American fare, Barnes,” she said.

“Whatsoever Steve ordered,” Bucky said. “So I know he’ll like what he steals from me.”

“Who said I’m gonna steal from you?” Steve demanded, lowering himself onto the bed. He winced and Bucky knelt to help him get his legs up.

“Because you’re a fry-stealing punk,” Bucky answered.

“I’m your punk,” Steve countered.

Bucky glared. “Dammit, you’re right,” he muttered.

Steve laughed and immediately regretted it. He grimaced and grabbed his ribs, falling back onto the pillows with a sharp exhale.

“You okay?” Bucky asked.


“Nobody make him laugh,” Bucky called.
Sam immediately puffed up his cheeks, stuck his thumbs in his ears, and went cross-eyed. Steve smiled and let out a soft exhale, shaking his head. Bucky waved his middle finger in Sam’s direction.

Sam dropped the face and his hands. “How ya doin’, bro?” he asked.

“Eh,” Steve answered. “Everything hurts and I’m dying.”

“You’re not dying,” Bucky said with a frown.

“I’m being sarcastic,” Steve sighed. “Everything hurts and my period decided now was the right time to show up.”

“Yikes,” Sam said sympathetically.

“Barnes, you want a chocolate shake, too?” Natasha asked.

“Sure,” Bucky said. “Steve can drink half of it.”

“Drink your own milkshake,” Steve told him.

Bucky gave him a look, raising his eyebrows. Steve processed what he’d just said, and what Bucky had said, and scowled.

“Fuck you,” he mumbled.

“Isn’t it usually the other way around?” Sam sniggered.

“Shuddup!” Bucky called.

“Bleeding —” Clint muttered. “Steve, you might be bleeding because of that thing you told me about.”
Steve looked at him. Clint frowned. “I just blurted that out without thinking about it,” he said. “But it is a possibility. Which you might want to get checked out.”

Steve flushed and looked away. “I’m fine,” he muttered.

“What did you tell him about?” Bucky asked, frowning too.

“Nothing,” Steve said quickly.

“Nothing,” Clint echoed.

Bucky looked at them both with suspicion. Sam’s grin faded slowly as Bucky settled his suspicious eyes on Steve.

Steve, though, was only paying attention to Bucky. He sighed and beckoned him closer, then cupped a hand over his ear.

“I might have mentioned that we’d just finished – y’know, when JARVIS called us about the zombies,” he whispered. “And you – The point was, it hurt like hell.”

“Oh,” Bucky said slowly. Then frowned more. “Should you get that looked at?”

“No!” Steve hissed, blushing again. “You can, later. I’m fine, I swear.”

“Alright,” Bucky muttered. “I’ll look. If something’s –”

“It’s nothing a bit of Vaseline can’t help,” Steve said under his breath.

Bucky sighed and touched his cheek briefly, dropping his hand to rub his wrist into Steve’s shoulder.
“Sam, what do you want from Red Robin?” Natasha asked.

“Lemme do it,” Sam said. “You two gonna go get it?”

“No, we’re ordering GrubHub,” Natasha told him.

“You ought’a find Tony and Colonel Rhodes, then,” Sam said. “And Bruce. Are we all piling in here?”

“That was the plan,” Clint answered. “We’ll go check with them after you’re done.”

Sam nodded, tapping at Clint’s phone. “Here,” he said a second later, holding it out. “All good.”

Clint took it, then waved to Natasha and left. Natasha sighed at her knitting, but put it down and followed him. Sam stood up from the chair he’d been occupying, sticking his hands in his pockets.

“If you wanna get anything to make Steve more comfortable, Barnes, I can keep him company,” he suggested.

Steve met Sam’s gaze, a frown bringing his eyebrows together. Sam was trying to get him alone. Why?

“You need anything?” Bucky asked him.

“The blanket from our bed would be nice,” Steve said carefully, then looked up at Bucky and smiled. “Maybe pillows? From your side.”

Bucky flicked his gaze toward Sam. Steve just smiled. Finally, Bucky gave a nod, then leaned in and kissed his cheek. Steve caught his hand and squeezed it, tracing his fingers over Bucky’s inner wrist, then let him go and watched him walk out. Sam pulled the door shut and walked up to the foot of his bed.

“What?” Steve asked.
“Do you know why everybody gets so weird when Barnes actively scent-marks you?” Sam said instead of answering.

Steve gave a shrug. “Nobody does it anymore. Natasha said something about it being tied to abuse these days.”

Sam gave a slow nod. He wasn’t looking at Steve. “It was linked to abuse in your days, too,” he said.

Steve tipped his head to the side. “Are you asking me if Bucky hits me?” he said sharply.

Sam gave a shrug, holding it for a long second before dropping it. “There’s some red flags,” he said. “The scent-marking, the fact that he doesn’t like people touching you.”

Steve shut his eyes and inhaled, bringing it in and holding it for a few seconds before letting it go. “I don’t like people touching me,” he said, opening his eyes and meeting Sam’s gaze. “It’s not Bucky. He said so yesterday –”

“Could’a been a cover,” Sam admitted.

“I don’t like people touching me,” Steve insisted. “Bucky’s always been careful to enable that. I didn’t like people touching me a long time before I started –”

He stopped, about to say *whoring*. He exhaled, and said, “turning tricks,” instead.

“It just so happened that that really drove it in,” he concluded.

“Tell me the signs are wrong,” Sam sighed. He uncrossed his arms and looked at Steve with hardness in his eyes. “But they’re some damn strong signs.”

“You’re reading them wrong,” Steve told him gently. “Bucky doesn’t hit me.”

“There’s more to abuse than hitting,” Sam pointed out.
“He’s not abusing me in any way,” Steve assured him. “And I’m not lying because I think it’s okay or I deserve it or whatever, that’s the truth.”

“Does he treat you bad at all?” Sam asked firmly. “He spent half the time you were under calling you an idiot!”

“No, that’s not him being abusive!” Steve answered sharply. “That’s how we grew up, Sam, we were raised closer than brothers, he’ll call me out when I’m being stupid and I’d do the same for him!”

“It’s all talk, then?” Sam asked. “Him threatening to beat your ass or kill you or –”

“God, yes, that’s all talk!” Steve interrupted. “That’s how we’ve always been!”

Sam looked uncomfortable. “You gotta admit it looks bad from the outside,” he said.

“Didn’t you and your wingmate exchange insults like that?” Steve demanded. “Didn’t you and Riley talk like that?”

“Riley wasn’t my boyfriend!” Sam countered.

“Bucky was my best friend before he was my Alpha,” Steve insisted. “I don’t know what best friends do these days, but that’s how we were when we were kids. I’d do something stupid and he’d call me out on it; I do the same to him! Didn’t you say your sisters call each other bitch with every other sentence? Isn’t that the same thing?”

Sam looked like he didn’t believed him, but he wanted to. “What does he call you out on?” he asked.

“Dumb shit like jumping out of planes without parachutes,” Steve answered tiredly. “Not calling for backup. Taking on guys bigger than me, picking too many fights, dumb shit!”

“Say you break a plate,” Sam cut off the end of his sentence. “What does he do?”
Steve shrugged. “Get a broom.”

“Say he wants sex and you’re not in the mood,” Sam asked bluntly. “What does he do when you say no?”

“He backs off!” Steve snapped, offended Sam would even bring sex into the conversation, let alone imply Bucky would do anything but.

“Say –”

“Sam,” Steve cut him off. “Bucky isn’t hurting me. He isn’t abusive and I’m not lying.”

Sam fell silent, looking at him with grim determination in his eyes. Steve stared him down.

“Alright,” Sam said quietly. “But if he ever –”

“He wouldn’t,” Steve interrupted sharply.

“If he ever,” Sam repeated, louder, “you can come to me. I’d like to think the rest of your team would say the same.”

“I wouldn’t ever need to,” Steve insisted.

Sam deflated. “I don’t mean to cast doubts on your bond,” he sighed, then swept a hand over his face and adjusted his stance. “Just – The signs are there. And I don’t wanna be the guy that ignores all the red flags because the couple looks happy on the outside.”

“We are happy,” Steve said quietly.

“How’s your depression since he got back?” Sam asked, gentler.
Steve dropped his gaze. “We are happy,” he repeated, even quieter. “Happy just… It hurts, y’know? I’ve been –” he broke off, sighing and then shrugging, “– dead inside for so long… Anything but hurts.”

Sam nodded slowly. “I know,” he replied kindly.

“And I’m really gonna try therapy,” Steve said, bolstering his courage. “I’m – It doesn’t matter – I’m trying to get better.”

“What?” Sam prompted.

Steve bit his lip, looking at his massive hands.

“It does matter,” Sam said. “Anything you’re feeling matters.”

“I got issues with –” Steve broke off, waving to his body. “I don’t look like I should. Bucky says I’m still attractive but…”

Sam was quiet for a second. Steve regretted saying anything at all.

“Here, hang on,” Sam said abruptly, tugging out his phone and crossing to stand nearer to him. “Omega men get put in their own barracks, but we share teams – Look, this is my buddy Evan Madini, he’s actually how I met the therapist I put you in contact with.”

Steve looked at his phone, at a picture of Sam and another African-American man, taller than Sam and of similar build.

“Look,” Sam said, zooming in on the second man. “That’s Larah’s little brother, Evan, in the military, buffer than me, and an Omega.”

Steve blinked.
“He presented at 16,” Sam told him, “did wrestling in high school even after he presented, fought to stay on the wrestling team because of it, joined the Air Force right out of high school, no serum, just his genes. You wanna say he don’t look like he should?”

Steve bit his tongue. Sam looked at him, then pointed at the phone.

“You know what says Omegas shouldn’t look like that?” Sam asked him. “The same creed that calls you and him girl-boys, Steve. The same edict that says Omegas shouldn’t be in the military at all because they’re too delicate. The stuff you’ve been fighting in Congress, saying you don’t deserve to be here because you’re an Omega.”

Steve bit harder on his tongue, refusing to look at Sam.

“That’s what’s telling you that because you’re an Omega, you shouldn’t be strong,” Sam told him. “The Steve Rogers I know doesn’t take bullshit.”

“Maybe you don’t know me that well,” Steve said very, very quietly.

Sam put away his phone. “Maybe I don’t.” he said. “But you know who does? What does Bucky say when you tell him you don’t think you’re attractive?”


“That’s the right answer,” Sam said firmly. “And now I know you’re not lying about those red flags. I don’t know what it’s like to be told my body is the wrong shape, Steve, but people have said to my face I couldn’t get anywhere in the Air Force because I’m black or a Beta. And my friend Evan? He faced that stuff all the time, both kinds. Larah, his sister, the therapist I recommended you, she saw it all the time. People told her she wouldn’t get her doctorate. She wouldn’t finish college at all, that she should stick to working with little kids because she was better suited for it as an Omega.”

Steve stared sightlessly down at Sam’s phone, at the picture of a man that looked just like he did, but hadn’t ever been stuck in a Vita-Ray machine.

“You’re not alone, Steve,” Sam told him. “You can ask Google the things you’re worried about and you’ll see a million other people saying, me, too. I faced that, too. It’s not just you.”
The door opened. Bucky stepped inside, carrying a bundled up blanket, and Steve held out his arms for it. Bucky laid the bundle on the bed, pulled out a pillow, and Steve took it, hugging it to his chest and hiding his face in it. Bucky’s hand landed on his shoulder, squeezing.

“I’ll step outside,” Steve heard Sam say. “Let you two have a minute.”

Steve nodded into Bucky’s pillow. He heard the door shut again, then Bucky’s hand swept around his shoulders.

“Scoot over,” Bucky murmured to him.

Steve shifted as best he could to make room. Bucky folded himself onto the bed beside him, shook out the blanket he’d taken from their bed, and covered Steve with it. Steve tucked the pillow behind his head, then let Bucky pull him into his chest and rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder. He pulled the blanket up a little higher, wanting to be surrounded more thoroughly by his Alpha’s scent.

“What did Sam want to ask you?” Bucky said softly.

“He was worried…” Steve started, then sighed. “That you were hurting me.”

Bucky’s arms tightened. “I’m not, am I?”

“No, no,” Steve said quickly, pressing a hand to Bucky’s chest and tilting his head up to kiss his Alpha’s cheek. “He was worried that you were… hurting me intentionally. Abuse. I told him off.”

“Oh,” Bucky mumbled. “I’m sorry.”

Steve shook his head. “Nothing you did,” he said. “Guess it was mostly me not liking touch, you getting protective.”

“You told me not to do that anymore,” Bucky pointed out.
Steve nodded. “I did,” he mumbled. “Still. Sam was trying to be a good friend.”

Bucky kissed his hair. “You need all the friends you can get.”

Steve nodded again. “I said why I wanted to see a shrink.”

“Yeah?” Bucky asked. “What’d Sam say?”

“Said it was the same attitude that says Captain America can’t be an Omega that says Omegas gotta be delicate,” Steve answered. “Showed me a teammate of his. Actually, the therapist I’m going to see, her little brother. Who’s an Omega.”

“Omega boys can be big strong guys,” Bucky murmured.

Steve nodded. “‘M still… It’s still hard. I don’t like being like this. You deserve an Omega who’s not broken.”

“You’re not broken,” Bucky said immediately. “Sweetheart –”

“’M a messed up, barren Omega,” Steve interrupted him. “Sure, Omegas can be buff, but I’m still barren, I can’t give you kids of your own. And I break down every ten seconds over the dumbest shit –”

“Stevie, I break down just as much as you do,” Bucky reminded him. “Besides, you know how shit I’d be around kids? Forget the fact that I’d make a shitty father, I’d never be safe around a kid. Maybe God didn’t mean for us to have any –”

“It’s not that I want them, it's that I can't,” Steve hissed. “That’s – It’s everything I was raised to be, Buck! Cook and clean and pop out baby after baby until I work myself to death raising them and keeping house! Then I got thrown into the opposite and I can’t do either thing right!”

That was the long and the short of it. Bucky deserved to have someone truly beautiful, he deserved to have an Omega who was pure, he deserved to have an Omega who was a virgin when he took her to his marriage bed. Steve was none of those things. He was awkwardly large and clumsy when he
wasn’t paying attention, his emotions were out of control and all he could do was bottle them up harder than they’d been before, he could act like a leader but the second he was alone he had no clue what to do or how to take care of himself. He was a mish-mash of all the worst expectations for Omegas and Alphas both. He made a shit Alpha, but he was even worse as an Omega. All he was was a burden.

Bucky held onto him tighter. “That’s not true,” he said gently. “And it’s not fair to you.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that it’s what happened,” Steve said.

“That’s why you need the therapy,” Bucky said abruptly. “Because you don’t believe me when I tell you it’s okay. But that’s okay, you don’t have to believe me right now. It’s okay that you’re barren, sweetheart, it’s okay that you feel out of place in your body, it’s not wrong, it’s nothing against you. You’re not broken.”

Steve buried his face in Bucky’s neck. “Feels a helluva lot like it.”

“Then we’ll be broken together, pretty,” Bucky promised. “And we’ll find a way to make ourselves whole anyway.”

Steve shook his head. He couldn’t be whole, not ever again. He’d given a piece of him away every time he accepted the going rate for a fuck or suckjob, he’d signed the rest away when he accepted Senator Brandt’s terms, and now there was nothing left of him. There was so little left of him he was preoccupied with his own petty woes when Bucky had suffered unimaginable torture seventy years in a row and all Steve had done was slumber in the ice off the coast of Greenland. He needed to go to therapy so he could learn to keep his shit together instead of dumping it on Bucky all the time, because Bucky deserved better. Steve was too selfish to tell him that he was better off with someone else, but he could damn well hold up his own weight while Bucky struggled to put himself back together. There was nothing left for Steve to put back into place, anyway. What did he have to fret over?

Bucky swept his wrist down Steve’s spine, then pulled the blankets over his body. “You gotta stay awake,” he said gently. “Doctors said now that you’re up, you gotta stay awake the next twelve hours to make sure you don’t have a concussion.”

“Fine,” Steve muttered.
“Hey,” Bucky said then, picking up his hand and shaking it gently. “You still ain’t drawn nothin’.”

“Do it later,” Steve answered.

He didn’t feel like doing much of anything just then.

“Your hands hurt?” Bucky asked him.

Steve shook his head.

Bucky sat up, pulled a nearby table over and flipped over a piece of paper. He picked up a pencil, pulled the table over their laps, and handed the pencil to Steve.

“C’mon,” Bucky said, “draw me somethin’.”

Steve looked at the pencil, then at the blank paper and blinked. “What do I draw?”

Bucky picked up his left hand and kissed it, then transferred it into his metal hand and laid them both on the table. “Draw that,” he said, gently squeezing Steve’s hand.

Steve looked at their hands clasped. Bucky’s fingers were thicker than his, but they were metal. They had motors and gears inside of them.

Bucky put his right arm around Steve’s waist, holding him up. “You can do it,” he encouraged. “Your hands are beautiful, sweetheart.”

Steve set the tip of the pencil to the paper. For a long moment, he just sat there, staring and feeling useless. That useless feeling condensed somewhere deep in his chest, then turned painfully bitter and angry.

He was familiar with feeling useless. Like a waste of space. Steve could remember walking to St. Maria’s Finishing School for Underprivileged Girls and seeing signs for the Eugenics movement calling people like him a pointless burden on others. He remembered his classmates looking down
their pretty noses at him when he showed up with busted knuckles and split lips from getting into the wrong fight. He remembered the looks of pity he got that were followed by poor boy, bless his heart, it’d be easier on everyone if he just died already. He remembered feeling useless.

Steve glanced at their hands, then looked back at the paper and started moving the pencil. Twisting it, shifting it, pressing it hard here and lighter there. Feeling useless triggered a wave of anger in him, bitterness at how nothing had ever been fair to him and here he was now, letting his teachers looks of pity reduce him to a sniveling mess because he was a broken and impure Omega. He was angry and he was selfish, and God could damn him to Hell and back if that meant another black mark on his soul, because Bucky was his. Bucky was his, Bucky had always been his, Bucky had always been there for him, and he was still here after he’d seen every way in which Steve was damaged and useless and he was still his. Steve was bitter and selfish, because he knew Bucky deserved so much better than him but he wouldn’t let him go to have it.

“That’s it,” Bucky said softly in his ear as the shapes of their fingers twisted together came to life on the page. “See? Your hands really are beautiful, sweetheart.”

Steve blinked and a tear landed on the paper, bleeding through the graphite. He worked around them. His heart was bitter and selfish, shamelessly clinging to Bucky’s love even though he didn’t deserve it. Under the pencil’s tip, the picture of their two hands clasped together cleared, and somehow the bitter selfishness in his heart translated into the way Steve held tightly to Bucky’s hand.

“Look,” Bucky murmured in his ear, reaching around to touch the paper as Steve dropped the pencil. “There’s your beauty, sweetheart. It’s in you, it’s inside you. It starts on the inside and works its way out.”

Steve turned and put his arms around Bucky’s neck, squeezing him hard. Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s back in return; his fingers dug into Steve’s body and they hurt, but Steve didn’t care.

“I love you,” Steve muttered.

“I love you, too,” Bucky answered. “I love you so, so much, Steve. Nothing could change that.”

Steve nodded into his neck. The Bible said God loved just like that. The Bible said Rahab had saved the nation of Israel. The same Bible he’d been taught to read with, the same Bible his teachers had used to hammer the idea that Omegas should be virgins when their Alphas took them to the marriage bed, the same Bible that had been shaken in his face by rabble-rousers who screamed that all girl-boys were incarnations of the devil sent to seduce mankind, the same Bible that promised what God put together, no man could tear asunder.
Well. So far, no one had torn him and Bucky asunder, and not for lack of trying. Father Elliot had told him that God had used Rahab rather than letting her die. Steve wasn’t dead yet.

Steve’s sins were long and exhausting. Bucky never held a single one of them against him.

“Nothing can change that,” Bucky murmured to him. “Nothing.”

[ @moonythejedi307, 10/23/2014, 10:03AM]

@POTUS really just did that. #SteveRogersNeedsAHug #BuckyBarnesIsn’tHydra

[october 23rd, location undisclosed]

“Did you really just tell me you failed to kill Captain America again?” Rollins hissed.

“Not like I got a lot of options here,” Rumlow snapped, “I’m literally a dead man walking!”

“We need a better plan than just throwing him off a roof,” Ward snapped.

“Like what?” Rollins and Rumlow snarled together.

Ward walked away, tapping a finger against his nose. “Dr. List,” he said, “how potent would a virus have to be to kill a super soldier?”

“Worse than Marburg,” Dr. List replied. “Faster, more infectious, multiply perhaps ten times the rate.”
“Could you make one?” Ward asked.

“Of course,” Dr. List scoffed.

“Here’s what we do,” Ward said, turning back to face Rollins and the reanimated corpse of Rumlow.

Across the warehouse, Wanda knelt over her brother, carefully encouraging the gaping wound on his stomach to heal itself. Sweat beaded her brow. She was nearly drained, about to collapse, but Pietro was losing blood fast.

“You’d think –” Pietro grunted in their native language “– they’d try to keep us alive. Not actually shoot us.”

“They don’t need you,” Wanda answered quietly.

“Yeah, they do,” Pietro said. “They need me to keep you in line. I die, you go insane and kill everyone.”

Wanda looked up, examining their handlers across the warehouse. “But you’re not going to die,” she said. “You’re going to live. And you’re going to find a way out.”

Pietro nodded sharply. “Just – Just patch me up. You need rest.”

“I’m nearly finished,” she murmured.

And she was. The wound closed, Wanda’s eyes rolled back in her head, and she slumped to the ground, unconscious. Pietro pushed himself into a sitting position, wincing at the pain of his barely healed-over wound, and turned her onto her back. He laid her legs out as best as he could in the five foot square cage they were kept in, then slumped against the iron bars and exhaled.

“Rest,” he mumbled. “We’ll make it out.”

Chapter End Notes
idk what were y'all so worried about with that cliffhanger. everything's fine. sneve and bucker are going on vacation. everything's great.

what?

these are not the bloopers you're looking for. wait.

Moony: “you stupid motherfucker, fucking dumbass…” I love bucky
Lexi: *sighs*

Moony: *like a middle school buddy* “You’re on fucking bed rest, moron!”
Lexi: *croaks* WHY ARE YOU READING IT LIKE THAT
Moony: it’s my voice!

Moony: “Really?” Steve muttered” REALLY? REAAAAALLY?
Lexi: *quietly laughing*
Moony: ITS LIKE THIS VINE [explains vine I've never heard of]
Moony, later: i found it

Moony: “His ASS didn’t hurt anymore at least. Steve gave an experimentory shift”
Lexi: WHY IS THERE SO MUCH EMPHASIS ON ASS AND SHIFT
Boyf: *wheezing laughter*
Moony: it's bc i live in the carolinas i have an accent

Moony: “I’m confused,” Clint said”
Lexi: mood

Moony: oh no Obama’s coming up! I have to read in Presidential tone!
Lexi: o h n o w h a t a n i g h t m a r e
Moony: *tries to talk* bahl hlah blah. Okay.

Moony: *tries to speak like Obama* Okay that doesn’t sound like Obama but I’m going
to stick with it
Lexi: idk whose accent that it is but its NOT OBAMA

Lexi: sweet fucking revenge bitch, you gotta take breaks OBAMA HAS ALL THESE LONG PAUSES
Moony: oh my god *takes long ass pauses*
Lexi: *quiet laughter*

Moony: “It was…… in fact,” *but with feeling*
Lexi: *chokes*

Moony: “What the fuck!” *but like flatly but screaming?*

Moony: fuck this is a whole paragraph! I knew Obama would have a lot to say but… dammit Obama!
Lexi: KNOW HOW I FEEL!!!!! It’s different when you realize “wow why do I write so much” when you’re reading!
Moony: thanks obama *softly, but with feeling*

*i look up one of obama's last speeches, then pause it at the wrong moment*

*obama:*

Lexi: WHY IS HE BRITISH
Moony: do you want me to do British
Lexi: NO
Moony: *continues with british accent*
Lexi: *yelling in a broken voice* STOP STOP CEASE AND DESIST
Boyf: can you say “I didn’t know this burrito came with fish eggs”
Lexi: Why?? *says it*
Boyf: because you sound really white when you say it
Lexi: BITCH *laughing*
Moony: wow you do sound really white
Lexi: FUCK OFF

Lexi: why do you sound like a senile old man?
Moony: I give up! It’s just one of those days where you think this is what’s happening

Lexi: it’s been like forty minutes and we’re still within the first few pages what the fuck

Boyf, looking at the bloopers: wait what the fucK WHY IS THAT RAT THERE
Lexi: *chokes*

Moony: “[Bucky] brushed a flesh knuckle against [Steve’s] cheek”
Lexi: meat palm
Moony: DAMMIT I WAS GONNA SAY IT FIRST
Lexi: ha i win bitch
Moony: no you don’t i’ll get you for this
Lexi: even with a broken voice i’ll still kick your ass!
Moony: I’d thank you for it
Lexi: *sighs* then i’ll just yell at you angrily OH WAIT YOU’LL LIKE THAT TOO
Moony: leave me alone mommy
[time passes]
Moony: Harder mommy
Lexi: you are, a brat, and i am, offended

Moony: “Barnes, take your wife on vacation,” Natasha said.
“Alright,” Bucky agreed.
Lexi: WOW TRUE LOVE

Moony: “It’s the dream of the poor, gay soul inside you, Steve. Let it live.”
Lexi: i ghost wrote this

Moony: “it’s a SEX vacation!”

Moony: “What’re you thanking me for?” Bucky asked gently.
Lexi: I thought you said gayly and I was like… well, you’re not wrong

Moony: “Sam fell silent, looking at him with grim determination” he’s filled with determination
Lexi: what
Moony: pls tell me you got my reference
Lexi: what
Moony: he’s filled with determination?
Lexi: no i don’t get it
Moony: *sharp intake of breath* i’m OFFENDED it’s from undertale

Lexi: oh my god. My thumbs are so fat!!
Boyf: are you… Okay?
Moony: I just had a terrible thought. What if they’re so fat so you can stick them up your bf’s ass?
Lexi: he would never let me?
Boyf: let you do what?
Lexi: stick my thumb up your ass
Boyf: *immediately* NO
Lexi: what did I say

*clearly, we know what lexi’s priorities are. bother her or me on tumblr and don't forget to comment ily*
shattering, shattered, breathing

Chapter Notes

y'all i have news. one, i went back home last weekend for lexi's birthday (GO SHOUT INTO HER TUMBLR AND WISH HER A HAPPY BELATED BIRTHDAY OR I'LL SIC THE WINTER SOLDIER ON YOU) and we read this chapter and part of next week's in person with some friends. y'all, it was great. two, my birthday's in two weeks and i'm Not Ready to be 19. three, i'll be going home again after my birthday and spending a couple of months there. imma sleep the shit out of those two months. also chill with the gays.

anyway, this chapter is short bc steve Thought some Thoughts and enough plot happened. this week's meme can be found here, the playlist is here and the cover can be found here. pls comment bc i love attention and comments make my day

See the end of the chapter for more notes
All the haters out there still angry about Cap being an Omega, die mad about it.
#SteveRogersNeedsAHug
“So, by quinjet, the island’s about fifteen hours away,” Tony was saying.

Steve glowered into his breakfast. He was stubbornly pissed about being forced into taking a vacation and no remote Pacific island could make him happy about it.

“I bought it because it was the only island that had no unique or endangered species native to it and no signs of civilization,” Tony continued.

He was talking to Bucky, the two of them standing at opposite sides of Steve’s hospital bed in the public ICU in Stark Tower. Tony had attempted to talk to Steve, but Steve was being stubborn and refused to respond. Bucky had his arms crossed over his chest and a skeptical look on his face, but clearly, that did not daunt Tony Stark.

“It’s not the biggest island, but it’s big enough that it’s got a rainforest and a grassy flatland and an inactive volcano,” Tony said.

“How do you know the volcano’s inactive?” Bucky asked.

“Hasn’t erupted in over a thousand years,” Tony said, shrugging. “No activity in that long, either. Steam vents are the worst of its action these days.”
“So there’s no predicted risk of it erupting while we’re there?” Bucky pressed further.

“Nah,” Tony said easily. “Even if it did, there’s a bunker underneath the beach house that can let you ride out the eruption and fall-out. I learned from Pompei.”

Steve was not going to be fascinated by visiting an inactive volcano. He was not happy about this vacation, period, volcano or no volcano.

“What about food?” Bucky asked.

“I’ll send you guys with a month’s worth,” Tony answered. “Then a month’s worth past that of non-perishable rations just in case.”

“How long are we gonna be there?” Bucky said, frowning.

“Two weeks,” Tony said. “Anything you don’t eat, you just bring back with you. Plus, there’s lots of edible fruits and vegetables on the island and plenty of fish. And there’s a pack of boar on the island, I guess you could go hunting, too.”

Tony scratched his goatee. “Not to mention the birds and hares and stuff. Okay, you can eat pretty much any animal. JARVIS will be active so he’ll let you know if something is a protected or threatened species or if it’s just a bad idea to kill it. Don’t eat the eels, their blood’s toxic. Oh, or the Komodo dragon. Just, don’t bother it.”

Steve looked up sharply. “The what now?” he demanded.

“Komodo dragon,” Tony explained. “It’s a giant ass monitor lizard. There’s a couple of them on the island.”

“What’s a monitor lizard?” Bucky asked, frowning.

“JARVIS!” Tony called.
The TV switched on and the image of a large-ish lizard took up the screen.

“Monitor lizards are large lizards in the genus Varanus,” JARVIS said in his usual pleasant tone. “They are native to Africa, Asia, and Oceania, but are now found also in the Americas as an invasive species.”

“What’s a Komodo dragon?” Bucky asked.

The image changed, becoming a huge ass lizard.

“The Komodo dragon, also known as the Komodo monitor, is a species of lizard found in the Indonesian islands,” JARVIS said. “It is venomous, territorial, and aggressive.”

“Don’t fuck with the big lizard,” Tony advised. “But I’ll also send you with a full stock of anti-venoms and all, because there are snakes on the island, too.”

“Why are there big lizards and snakes?” Bucky asked Tony in an almost exasperated tone.

“I refused to remove any of the native species,” Tony said, puffing up. “I did, however, do some landscaping and there are safe trails and fishing pools and all. I got these fancy electrical fences set up, JARVIS monitors the animals and keeps the dangerous ones in their areas. Which, granted,” Tony added, shifting his stance and shrugging, “is most of the island because I didn’t wanna fuck up the biome. But you can still go skinny dipping in the pool by the house without worrying about a wandering sea snake.”

Steve flicked his gaze over to Bucky at the mention of skinny dipping and then rapidly away. He was not going to become excited about this forced vacation. Skinny dipping or no skinny dipping!

“I will also warn you that the monkeys get around the fences,” Tony continued, “and since they’re not venomous, I stopped trying to keep them out of the people-area. So always put food back in the cupboards or fridge, I monkey-proofed them.”

“Monkey-proofed,” Bucky muttered.
“Baby-proofing, but ten times more complicated,” Tony answered. “That is, everything is biometrically locked and you have to scan a fingerprint to open it.”

“How do the monkeys get into the house?” Bucky demanded.

“It’s open-planned?” Tony said, shrugging.

Bucky scowled. “That means…?”

“A lot of open windows and doors,” Tony told him. “In, like, the main living spaces.”

Bucky scowled further. Steve was not going to coo over monkeys!

“Don’t monkeys throw shit?” Bucky asked.

“Not really,” Tony said, shrugging again. “But the house is equipped with plasma shields and it gets sealed when its empty.”

“How often do you use your private island?” Steve asked, looking at Tony.

“A few times a year,” Tony answered with a nod. “Pepper likes to wait out the seasons there now and then.”

Steve nodded while Bucky looked confused. “Seasons?” he said. “Like… winter?”

Tony made a grimacing face. “Uh,” he said reluctantly.

Steve prodded Bucky in the arm until Bucky leaned down. Then he whispered, “Heat,” in Bucky’s ear and Bucky stood back up straight, nodding.
“Anyway,” Tony said, clearing his throat. “The house will be dusty when you get there, nothing more. I would recommend opening up all the windows and doors to get the sea air in, but that also invites the monkeys. Capuchins are particularly curious; y’know, organ grinder monkeys?”

Steve nodded. Bucky didn’t seem to care if he didn’t know or not.

“There’s also some wildcats in the area,” Tony continued. “Avoid the tigers, leave them alone, they get around the fences sometimes but they keep to themselves. The fishing cats and leopard cats will come up to you probably, there’s a few friendly ones, plus there’s actual leopards, and then these little wildcats, the flat-headed cat, those are a protected species so leave them alone. They’re cute, but leave them alone. Lizards are also surprisingly curious, except the ones that like to bite things. The fish don’t know not to eat bait. Just avoid snakes in general? There’s some non-venomous ones but there’s also constrictors. I think that’s it?”

Tony tapped his goatee again, then snapped his fingers. “Watch out for the dingos, there’s a pack in the grassy flatlands.”

“What even is this island?” Steve muttered.


Steve exhaled. He was not going to be excited about wildcats or monkeys or curious lizards. Or the fact that the flora was bound to be magnificent let alone the terrain. He was not happy about this vacation. He was not going to get excited about it.

Steve’s nurse for the day, Vincent, knocked on the open door to the room. “Hey, Captain Rogers!” Vincent said cheerfully as he entered. “You about ready to head home?”

“Please,” Steve said pleadingly.

Tony sniggered and Steve hit him lightly on the stomach; Tony still gasped and bent over in the middle.

“You’re in luck!” Vincent answered Steve.
He put on medical gloves, then walked around on the side of the bed Tony was standing on; Tony stepped out of the way so Vincent could check the machines Steve was hooked up to and start deactivating them.

“I hear you’re going on vacation after this,” Vincent said, “that’s gotta be fun!”

“I’m being kidnapped is what’s happening,” Steve answered, shooting a glare Bucky’s way.

Bucky rolled his eyes pointedly. Steve stuck his tongue out. Bucky just rolled his eyes again.

“Hey, look on the bright side!” Vincent told Steve. “Island vacation of everybody’s dream!”

“You’re too optimistic,” Steve grumbled.

“Can we get that on record?” Tony asked, pointing at Steve with raised eyebrows of shock on his face. “Captain Optimism complaining about optimism!”

“Go away, Tony!” Steve sighed. “I’m blaming you for this!”

“It was Natasha’s idea!” Tony answered, throwing up his hands like a tantrum but already heading for the door. “You’ll be grateful after you’ve spent a night there! Trust me!”

“Go away!” Steve yelled again.

Tony flipped him off and walked backwards out of the door. Bucky rolled his eyes dramatically again. Vincent chuckled.

“Let’s get this IV out,” Vincent said then.

Steve lifted his right hand. He hardly felt the nurse taking his IV out, looking down in time to see Vincent taping a bandage over his skin after. Most of his other bandages had already been removed;
the wrappings around his head and ribs, namely. Steve was tender and sore all over, but nearly completely healed.

“Now, I don’t need to warn you to take it easy after this,” Vincent said, looking at Steve sternly. “All your achey-breakiness should do the trick. Right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve grumbled, waving a hand in Vincent’s direction. Bucky leaned in and raised his eyebrows and Steve pointed at him reproachfully. “Don’t you get started on me, too.”

“Don’t make me carry you everywhere,” Bucky threatened anyway. “I done it once, I’ll do it again.”

“I’ve gained a hundred and sixty pounds since then,” Steve answered dryly.

Bucky leaned in more. “You think I can’t carry you like I used to when you was itty bitty? Think again, Rogers.”

“Ooh,” Steve heard Vincent sigh. “I’m jealous, I want a big strong man to carry me everywhere.”

Steve colored and Bucky laughed. Vincent gave Steve a smile and removed the electrodes taped to his chest. Steve, though incredibly uncomfortable with hands so near his chest that weren’t Bucky’s, leaned back and held still so the nurse could carry on.

“Count your blessings!” Vincent told Steve in a firm, but polite tone. “You can get up and get dressed now, all the paperwork is taken care of, you are free.”

“I’m gonna carry you,” Bucky declared while Steve sat up.

“No, you are not!” Steve answered, pushing to his feet. A wave of dizziness hit him and Steve grabbed a hold of Vincent’s arm, the nurse still standing conveniently nearby, and he blew out his breath while he waited for the dizziness to fade.

“You alright?” Vincent asked.
“Yeah,” Steve said, “light-headed.”

“That’s to be expected,” Vincent answered with a nod. “It should go away in a few days.”

Steve nodded. He inhaled, then let go of Vincent when he felt ready to stand on his own. Bucky walked around to the other side of the bed, hovering nearby.

“Do you need any help to get dressed?” Vincent asked.

Steve shook his head. “Big, strong man to help me out, remember?” he said, trying for a smile.

Vincent laughed and bowed out. Steve reached for Bucky and his Alpha met him right away, taking his forearms to steady him as Steve stepped away from the bed. Bucky picked up a stack of clothes from the nearby armchair and Steve reached back to undo the ties of his hospital gown. He let it fall away, tossing it onto the bed, then took the shirt Bucky offered him. He needed help to put on his jeans, but Bucky didn’t hesitate before crouching and holding them for him, and Steve held onto Bucky’s shoulders to step into the pants.

He felt a hell of a lot like an invalid again, like after scarlet fever left him weak and clumsy for months when he was ten years old, but staunchly remembering that this was a fleeting weakness that would pass sooner rather than later helped him push down the bitterness. Bucky didn’t say a word as he helped Steve get his clothes on, then didn’t even let Steve try to put on his shoes and socks himself when he sat down in the armchair; Bucky just knelt again and did it for him.

As Bucky was tying his shoes, Steve exhaled and let go of some of the frustration, feeling grateful for Bucky’s presence instead. Vincent had been right, he needed to count his blessings.

In fact, that didn’t seem like a bad idea to do in general. He had heard that forcing oneself to acknowledge good things in one’s life on a regular basis actually improved mood and depression, but he’d never really had things he considered good enough to acknowledge on a regular basis to try forming the habit. Steve liked to tell his fellow Avengers to count their blessings often, to keep up morale when missions went awry or they were thrown a curveball, perhaps it was time he took his own advice.

Back in the 40s, if Steve had tried to form such a habit, he would have had nothing but himself to remember, but that was one of the conveniences of the future Steve was genuinely grateful for. He had a device in his pocket that he could say *remind me to do this* and it would, without fail, remind
him. Surely, there were apps or what-have-you that were designed for the habit of counting one’s blessings. Steve decided he would look.

Bucky stood up and dusted his hands. “Alright then, sweetheart, you ready?”

Steve nodded. He held out his hands and Bucky helped him stand, then took his waist while Steve squeezed his eyes shut against the light-headedness that plagued him. He gave in and hugged Bucky in order to stabilize himself, setting his cheek on Bucky’s shoulder and pouting.

“You alright?” Bucky chuckled.

“Everything hurts and I’m dying,” Steve grumbled.

Bucky kissed the top of his head. “You’re not dying, sweetheart,” he said, “’cause you ain’t allowed to die, remember?”

Steve smiled, then turned his head and pushed it into Bucky’s neck. He nuzzled his face against Bucky’s throat, then lifted his head – the room not spinning as much anymore – and met Bucky in a light kiss. They stood there for another minute, their noses slotted and their lips barely pressing until Steve drew in a breath and pulled back onto his own two feet.

“Come on,” he sighed, “you might as well force me into this vacation now.”

Bucky linked his arm around Steve’s waist and pecked his cheek as he turned for the door. “Remember, it’s the remote island destination of everyone’s dreams, Stevie,” he said teasingly.

Steve rolled his eyes, but deep down, he knew Bucky was right; that little counting his blessings habit he’d just decided he was going to make piped up to point that out, too.

“I’m only grudgingly consenting to this,” Steve told him. “And I fully expect that you’ll let me do whatever the hell I want while we’re there out of guilt for forcing me to go.”

“Sure, doll,” Bucky chuckled.
The hallway outside was filled with people; nurses talking to one another and to patients, patients in hospital gowns talking to family members or friends, family members and friends of patients standing around with patience or anxiety or relief written into the lines of their shoulders. Steve still had to lean on Bucky as they left his room, but instead of berating his body for failing, Steve focused on how easily Bucky lent his hands. Without hesitation or reluctance or even question. Bucky supported Steve’s weight gladly, even.

He was realizing slowly that all that devotion and worship Bucky was telling him about, Bucky really had been doing since the very beginning. From the moment Steve shook Bucky awake on Zola’s operating table in Austria; Bucky had blinked his eyes open and looked up at Steve with awe. Bucky had laughed and told Steve he’d been worshiping him the whole time and Steve hadn’t taken the time to think back and wonder about it. Now he was thinking about it, thinking about it hard, as Bucky supported his weight from the clinic’s ICU to the elevators and back up to their apartment.

“We should pack,” Bucky said to Steve as the elevator doors shut behind them.

“Gimme a second,” Steve answered.

Bucky walked him to the couch and lowered him down onto it. Steve leaned back against the cushions, careful with his tender ribs, and Bucky sat down beside him. Steve’s eyes closed as he drew in a breath and Bucky’s arms slipped gently around his shoulders and waist.

Steve was having an epiphany. October was nearly over and November was only a few days off. It felt like years had passed since Steve had pulled off the Winter Soldier’s mask to reveal the face of his Alpha underneath, but it had only been a month. Today was the twenty-sixth of October, that fight on the bridge had been the twentieth of September. Only thirty-six days had passed since then. It had felt so much longer.

Bucky laid his head on Steve’s shoulder, his nose near to Steve’s neck. Steve heard and felt Bucky exhalting naturally, heard and felt him inhale, heard and felt him exhale. Everything seemed so normal. The past thirty-six days felt like so much longer because Steve hadn’t taken the time to stop and just…

Exhale. Inhale. Steve heard and felt Bucky breathing naturally, easily, without worry to hitch his breath or tension to quicken it. Steve made a conscious decision and matched his breathing to Bucky’s. Natural and easy. He exhaled.
He thought about the three years he’d been alone. He’d walked around in a daze, numb and unfeeling. He’d let go of his heart and was just waiting for his body to collapse underneath him. Bucky’s sudden re-entrance had upheaved what little Steve had still had left with him and abruptly he’d been alive again. During the three years he hadn’t had Bucky, Steve knew perfectly well what depression was. He knew perfectly well that the reason he jumped into battle without thinking was not because he wanted to do his duty, but because he knew that if he jumped into battle, he might never come back. He knew perfectly well what it meant to be suicidal and that what he was feeling was exactly that. He had known perfectly well that he wanted to be dead and he’d been disappointed every time he jumped into battle and it didn’t kill him.

But Bucky’s sudden re-entrance hadn’t breathed new life into Steve. Objectively, Steve knew perfectly well that his mental state and well-being had gotten worse when Bucky had come back to him, pulled Steve out of the grave he’d dug for himself and back into living and breathing like everybody else. Before Bucky’s return, Steve had resigned himself to accepting that he would just walk around like his ghost had already fled its shell. He had resigned himself to the fact that he was alive and that he’d have to keep acting like he was fine when he wasn’t. It had been a lot like working the USO circuit. Steve had put on a costume and faked a smile and read lines. He’d put a key in his own back and wound himself up just like Brandt and his writers and advertisers had done. He’d smiled for the cameras. He’d kissed babies. He’d shaken hands and given hugs and when everyone was done with him, the key in his back had stopped turning and Steve had just flopped over at the waist until he had to reach back and turn the key again.

That mindlessness and numb nothingness had been alright with him. It had deprived him of all emotion, but it didn’t hurt. Bucky coming back had ripped his ghost out of whatever afterlife it had fled to and shoved it back into his body and that had hurt.

Steve was having an epiphany, because his ribs were tender and his nose still twinged when he crinkled it to laugh and his head still spun when he stood up, but that was all that hurt. It was like he’d woken up in the ICU to Bucky calling him a moron and the all-consuming burning that was feeling had gone out. The bonfire that was having emotion again had gone out. He just felt. He laughed and smiled and made wisecracks and stubbornly refused to be excited about going to a Pacific island with curious monkeys and fish that didn’t know what a hook was and it didn’t hurt.

Steve’s epiphany was this. He’d thought that he was going to have to live the rest of his life with an ache every time he laughed. He’d thought that the depression he’d sunk into would have tainted him like everything else and left scars when he tried to be happy. But no. Steve had decided that it was a good idea to count his blessings every day and to let Bucky support his weight without feeling guilty about it because Bucky wanted to do it and without realizing it, he’d laughed at a story from Clint about his childhood in an actual circus without feeling the happiness in his chest be soured by the reminder that it was unfamiliar. And that was all he’d done.

He’d thought the first step towards recovery would have felt more… Monumental. Overwhelming. He’d thought that this whole recovery thing in the first place was too daunting, that there was some canyon he had to leap across in order to go anywhere, but there was no canyon in sight and Steve
was matching his breathing to Bucky’s easy inhales and exhales and the only things that hurt were his freshly healed bones.

Before, Steve had felt like a statue, made of marble that didn’t feel or care and couldn’t break no matter how much he wished it would. Then Bucky’s return had been like a hammer to the chest, proving that he wasn’t made of marble at all, but a porcelain outer shell covering a tender inside, because the impact had left him shattering. He’d still been shattering, all the way up to now. Now all the pieces had fallen to the floor and he stood there, raw and exposed without his ceramic outer shell, but he hadn’t even noticed when he’d stopped shattering and simply been shattered. The change had been so simple and easy, he hadn’t noticed all his pieces falling to the ground, letting him breathe again at last.

He’d thought that the longer he thought about this easy happiness, it would slip away from him and he’d be reminded that such emotions were foreign to him. But there he was, sitting with his love on their couch in their home, about to go on a vacation alone with no excuses as to why he would be going anywhere by himself with a male Alpha.

And thinking about how lucky they were to be together now? It only made him feel happier.

Steve lifted his head off the back of the couch and put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky looked up, but didn’t resist when Steve pushed him down to lay on the couch cushions. From there, Steve climbed on top of him and fit his nose against the nape of his Alpha’s throat. Bucky put his hands on Steve’s back and started rubbing his wrist into small of his back exposed by his shirt riding up, casually and repeatedly scent-marking him in a way they wouldn’t have been able to get away with before. Steve twined his arms under Bucky’s head and basked in Bucky’s embrace. He felt happy, and it didn’t hurt.

“We lay ‘ere much longer,” Bucky mumbled in a half-thoughtful, half-lazy tone, “‘m gonna fall asleep.”

“‘Kay,” Steve answered happily. It didn’t hurt.

“You smell like naptime,” Bucky added.

Steve snorted and grinned into Bucky’s neck. “I smell like naptime?” he repeated incredulously.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered, chuckling lightly. His chest rose and fell and lifted Steve as he lay on him.
“All relaxed an’ happy an’ all. Kinda like – Like havin’ cookies and warm milk on a lazy Sunday, y’know whatta I mean?”

Steve snorted again. “No,” he said, but snuggled closer. “Take a nap, Alpha.”

One of Bucky’s legs hooked over his and Bucky’s arms locked behind his back. “If you say so, Omega-mine,” Bucky murmured absently.

Steve shut his eyes and let his breathing fall into an easy, natural rhythm. A few minutes went by, minutes that were quiet and unrushed and had no need lurking in them, and Steve heard Bucky’s exhaling turn into snoring. Steve felt just as relaxed and happy as Bucky had implied, and it didn’t hurt.

Lying there, Steve felt truly content. He knew that there were still steps he had to take. He still needed to see a doctor, he still had issues he needed to work on. But those steps didn’t feel so scary anymore. He’d thought he’d have to climb a mountain after he jumped the canyon to get the journey started, but the canyon had never existed. It had all been him. In fact, he didn’t feel so resigned about going to see a therapist anymore. In fact –

He was going to schedule his first appointment. Today. As soon as he had a nap with Bucky. Because Bucky was snoring already and Steve had become conditioned to start getting sleepy the minute Bucky started snoring sometime in 1944. Then he remembered it was a Sunday and he’d have to wait until morning anyway.

So Steve just fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

go steve!! get that mental health bby!! recognizing that you actually want to and can get better is a huge part of recovery, guys, but taking the first step can feel, as steve put it, like crossing a canyon or climbing a mountain. it can seem scary but know that all the work you have to do you can accomplish one step at a time. i hope you enjoyed this lil chapter, up next is the sex vacation. and whew, boy, do some things happen.

oh, the bloopers. we were reading it in person for once.

what’s up fuckers, we are all in the same damn room. the roster includes beth, lexi, and jules who is now my gf but in an open relationship. shit’s been witchy and gay. earlier
lexi spanked me once and called a brat (i think i deserved it idk what i was doing) and then at a different interval randomly pulled up my shirt and blew a raspberry on my stomach. i am not wearing pants or a bra, just a long tank top and lace panties.

jules: being smothered to death by moony’s hair would be the best way to die. to be fair, i have v thick hair.

jules: moony, just remember to call me daddy at my funeral
me: okay daddy

lexi: if i’m going to be smothered to death, it’s gotta be between a girl’s thighs
me: anything you say can and will be recorded in the bloopers.

beth: i am not responsible for anything that occurs in this past this

lexi: steve glow-ered
me: glower. like flower

lexi: glower?
beth: it’s glower

jules: *is eating a veggie burger*

jules: *is putting honey on their fries*

me: stopstopstop
everyone: *stops*

me: why are you putting honey on your fries????

lexi: i love that you were like stopstopstop, where’s the B?

jules: moony do you wanna try it?

me: *thinks about it* *leans forward and opens my mouth*

jules: *feeds me*

me: *does not like it ew* no daddy

we get distracted by actual cradle robber sebastian stan. what is that, you ask? Oh, you haven’t heard?

me: steve is being stubborn

beth: steve is stubborn!

me: he is

beth: you are steve

me: i am

we again get distracted, somehow the conversation of medusa and serial killers has been brought up.

jules: *is in the middle of speaking*

me: daddy

jules: *immediately focuses on me* yes?

me, trying to get back on topic but also giggling about this line: don’t monkeys throw shit?

jules: *throws a poop emoji pillow at me*

again, go wish lexi a happy birthday and pls comment ily
hey look ma, i made it

Chapter Summary

“Hey look ma, I made it”

Chapter Notes

whassup y'all, it's that time of the week, it's time for depressed-long-bean!steve and confused-grandpa-winter-soldier!bucky. if you haven't been paying attention, i started posting two new fics this week. Like Rahab and These Days. Like Rahab features an alternate timeline to World War 2 and the eventual assassination of Adolf Hitler, with our dear sneaky!steve and cap!bucky. These Days is the exact opposite and has cuddly!steve and not-cuddly!bucky in a college au where they're the dumbest gays to ever gay. y'all, it has the promise of some ill-advised drinking and forgetting a condom at the exact wrong time. Like Rahab updates on Mondays and These Days updates on Fridays, so you'll get buff depressed-long-bean!steve in between a skinny steve fic sandwich. that was phrased really wrong! i'm not going back to change it! anyway, lexi got mad about the length of this chapter and i read two-thirds of it. you can find this chapter's playlist here and the cover on my tumblr here.

guess who was still here for the reading of this chapter? we read the first third of this together with beth and jules, then the rest of it i read while lexi babysat and i dogsat. guess who had their hands full more. (the answer is jules.)

*i reach over randomly and pinch jules’s ear. jules giggles and kicks their feet. i scratch their ear and they start laughing. bc their ears are ticklish apparently*  
beth: wait what's happening??  
me: i’m tickling jules. their ears are ticklish  
beth: what??  
me: did you not know that?  
beth: no?  
jules: she doesn’t tickle me  
me: did you know that?  
jules: i don’t think i did?  
lexi: it’s a night of self-discovery  
*i start writing this down*
jules, noticing: ohmygod!
me: everything goes in the bloopers

lexi: “Bucky’s flesh hand –” meat palm
me: *dies*
jules: *dies*
beth: *is asleep*
lexi: maybe meat palm will be our always

me: i used a thesaurus for this
lexi: i can tell

jules and i sit back to back
jules: i’m a chair
me: you are
jules: i’ve always wanted to be a chair. thank you.
me: yw daddy

me, to the dog i’m watching: LINK. SIT. LINK. LIIINK. Leave the cat alone. NEIN. NEIIIIIN. GET YOUR FACE OUT OF HER BUTT. *makes loud “ah-ah” noises that mean no*

why am i yelling nein? my friends decided to train their dog in german. don't ask me why.

lexi: *heavy sigh*
me: *giggling* uncomfortably hilarious

me: what are you attacking? Why do you have so many crinkly plastic bottle to attack? Why do your parents hate me?

me: you're stinky but i love you link
Lexi: gay
Me: I WAS TALKING TO THE DOG
Lexi: sorry, it’s a reflex whenever someone says I love you
Jules: wait, do i have to share you with the dog now?

Jules: COFFEE
Me: COFFEE
Lexi: what the hell is going on are yall having a conversation???

Me: oh man my lisp is coming out, you know I’m gay because I have a lisp
Jules: oh shit me too
Lexi: wow first i can’t be pan because i’m dating a guy and now i don’t have a lisp so i’m not gay enough

me: there are still so many pages left! How are there so many pages left?
lexi: when you realize just how much your write
me: shaddup

me: *literally fighting with the dog over a toy*
me: i can’t throw it if you don’t give it to me. give.
link: *does not give*
me: fine, whatever
me, later: “Steve –” *dog drops the toy* TENKITS LINK *throws toy* *link runs after the toy. tenkits is a kill command he’s a hunting dog.* me: anyway

me: *screams as i am attacked by a dog, who is now in my lap. it's probably karma bc i made lexi read smut.*
Steve woke up with his face mashed against Bucky’s neck, with his mouth hanging open and drool pooling between his parted lips and Bucky’s throat. Bucky was stroking up and down his back, the sensation that had woken him, but he wasn’t sure if Bucky was awake or not because the motion was lazy and almost mindless, like it was so second nature and so easy for Bucky to begin petting Steve he could do it in his sleep. The sensation of drool pooling between Steve’s mouth and Bucky’s neck was, however, gross, so Steve sucked it back into his mouth and swallowed it. Then he nuzzled his face against Bucky’s neck and let his mind drift back toward sleep.

“We should go pack,” Bucky mumbled then.


Bucky laughed softly. His hands kept on lazily petting Steve, like second nature, and Steve inhaled a little deeper a few times before opening his eyes. Carefully, mindful of his tender ribs, he lifted onto his elbows and looked down at Bucky. Bucky smiled at him, his eyes half-closed and his face relaxed.

“Do I still smell like naptime?” Steve asked him.

Bucky chuckled once, his smile growing. Steve thought he was beautiful, so he bent and kissed Bucky’s smile. Bucky’s hands curled over his back and into his hair and his lips parted and Steve took it as an invitation to lick into his mouth. The kiss was, much like everything else, lazy and unrushed. Like they had all the time in the world.

As a matter of fact, they did have all the time in the world. There was no more aftermath of Project Insight to deal with. HYDRA’s greatest threats were a couple of kids. Steve and Bucky were quasi-retired and on vacation.

They really did need to pack. Technically, they weren’t leaving until the morning, but their bags wouldn’t fill themselves. Steve resolved that kissing Bucky counted as part of the waking up process and they could put it off for another five minutes. Bucky’s hands started wandering down Steve’s back and Steve wasn’t about to tell him he had to stop.

Their lips parted for breath and Steve leaned his forehead on Bucky’s. Bucky reached up and tangled
his hand into Steve’s hair again.

“You smell like me,” Bucky murmured.

Steve grinned at that, his eyes still shut. “Tends to happen when an Alpha and an Omega are attached at the hip.”

“You smell like mine,” Bucky said and Steve opened his eyes. Bucky’s eyes crinkled at the corners as his lips parted in a sunshine grin. “Like my mate.”

Steve drew in a breath. “Yeah?” he asked, almost disbelieving.

Bucky’s flesh hand came up to Steve’s neck and his fingers brushed over Steve’s unmarked scent gland, over the skin that healed too quickly for a bond mark to scar over. “Yeah,” Bucky whispered.

“ Took long enough,” Steve said crossly, then leaned in and kissed Bucky again.

It seemed like Bucky wasn’t about to tell him to stop either. They necked lazily on the couch for what felt like hours, enough that when they finally stopped and Steve lay back on Bucky’s chest, the sun was setting just outside their window. Steve wondered how he never noticed their living room faced the west, but the sunset over New York was bathing them in a pink and golden glow. There were sunspots in his eyes. Steve let his head rest just under Bucky’s chin, settling his arms at Bucky’s sides and curling the fingers of one hand into Bucky’s shirt. The skyline of Midtown outside was shiny and new and futuristic to him, buildings that were as tall as the sky and breached the clouds, creating a horizon that looked like it was made up of mirrors. Steve didn’t remember the last time he had just looked at the sunset.

“You smell happy,” Bucky said softly.

“’S ’cause I am,” Steve whispered.

Bucky’s arms circled around him tighter. Steve took the time to just look at the sunset.

“Remind me to call the number Sam gave me tomorrow,” Steve mumbled.
“Okay,” Bucky answered. His lips pressed to Steve’s hair. “Hey, Steve?”

“Hmm?” Steve murmured.

“Remember to call the shrink Sam told you about tomorrow,” Bucky said.

Steve sat up to look at him. Bucky cracked a grin and snorted; Steve hit his shoulder playfully and Bucky let out a louder laugh.

“You asshole!” Steve called, but he laughed, too. “Remind me sometime helpful!”

“I couldn’t resist!” Bucky laughed.

Steve hit his shoulder again. Bucky took Steve hitting him gracefully, still laughing his head off. Steve gave up and pushed up off the couch, getting to his feet and immediately regretting it as his head spun. But Bucky sat up and hugged his middle, stabilizing him, and Steve leaned on his shoulders instead of hitting them.

“We gotta pack,” Steve mumbled.

Bucky rubbed his face into Steve’s stomach. “You smell like cookies,” he mumbled.

Steve laughed. “I smell like cookies?” he chuckled.

“You do,” Bucky said, then hugged Steve tighter and nuzzled his stomach again. “Smell like gingerbread and sugar cookies.”

“Haven’t I always?” Steve asked, confused and amused by his Alpha.

Bucky hummed. “Always smelled like gingerbread. Smell like sugar only now.”
“I see,” Steve answered, smiling softly down at Bucky. “Maybe it’s that happy thing.”

The dizziness was gone and now Steve set his hands in Bucky’s hair, starting to pet him slowly. Bucky nuzzled his face against Steve’s stomach, a grin made lopsided by his cheek smushing against Steve’s body curling his lips.

“Smell good, sugar,” Bucky mumbled.

“Oh, I get it,” Steve said, then shuffled closer to the couch and pushed a knee into the V of Bucky’s thighs. Bucky immediately pressed closer to him and sat up straighter, inviting him in. Steve brushed Bucky’s hair back again and smiled down at him. “You want some sugar, Buck?”

Bucky nodded against his stomach. Steve felt a pleased and proud twist in his gut and pushed his fingers through Bucky’s hair again.

“Thought I smelled like naptime,” Steve said then, still carding his fingers through Bucky’s hair.

“Smell good enough to eat,” Bucky countered.

“Uh-huh,” Steve answered, a corner of his mouth lifting as he continued to pet through Bucky’s hair. “You wanna eat me, Buck?”

Bucky drew in a breath, then nodded again. Steve tipped his head to the side as he looked down at Bucky. He considered things, pursuing his lips, then bit his tongue as he came to a decision. He smiled at Bucky’s lashes laying on his cheeks and bit his lip instead. He was gonna have some fun with this.

“You were all fussy about gettin’ the packin’ done earlier,” Steve said. “You change your mind on a dime, don’t cha, Buck?”

“Caught a whiff’a somethin’ good,” Bucky told him.
“I see,” Steve said softly. He let his fingers slip one more time through Bucky’s hair, then when he brought them back, he curled his hand into a gentle fist instead. “I bet’cha wanna taste it then, don’t’cha?”

Bucky groaned quietly. He nodded against Steve’s stomach, then drew his hands back from behind Steve’s back to frame his hips instead.

“You got a sweet tooth, Buck?” Steve asked. “You wan’ a cookie?”

“You’re gonna fuckin’ kill me,” Bucky muttered.

“C’mon, play the game with me,” Steve said coaxingly, grinning. “You know what cookie’s slang for these days?”

Bucky lifted his head, his eyebrows brought together in the center. He shook his head.

“An Omega’s hole,” Steve said bluntly.

Bucky’s eyes got very wide. “Oh,” he said uselessly.

Steve laughed as Bucky’s face flamed. He took the hand that wasn’t fisted in Bucky’s hair and touched his cheek tenderly. They hadn’t had the opportunity to pick up where they’d left off when the zombies showed up before now; for one thing, Steve had been healing more than a dozen broken bones, for another, he’d been trickling blood on and off the first day or so he’d been in ICU. Bucky had stayed with him all three nights he’d been there, Steve had woken up with Bucky’s dick poking him in the back every day, but he couldn’t do much about it with his ass bloody. Of course, he’d offered to jerk or suck Bucky off, but Bucky hadn’t felt comfortable with the idea of doing it in a hospital bed. Steve hadn’t been averse to it, as there was nobody in his room most of the time. He wouldn’t have said no to a mutual handjob and that would have only taken a few minutes.

But, now they were home, and Steve’s period had only lasted a day. He smirked down at Bucky and his wide eyes, caressing his cheek.

“Y’know, people say all kinds’a fun things these days,” Steve continued. “Hell, you can pretty much say anything you want but as long as you do it right, like –”
Steve gripped Bucky’s hair tighter and pitched his voice a little lower. “You wanna get a taste of my kitty?”

Bucky’s pupils were rapidly dilating. Steve grinned wider.

“Holy fuckin’ shit,” Bucky exhaled.

“You said you wanted me to be feisty,” Steve answered, crooking an eyebrow with a smirk.

“I unleashed a monster,” Bucky muttered. His thumbs dug into Steve’s hip bones. “Keep doin’ it.”

“Oh, I will,” Steve told him quickly, then stroked his cheek again. “Of course, if you really wanna get a cookie, Barnes, you gotta earn it.”

“Yeah?” Bucky asked softly, his lip curling up at the corner. “What do I gotta do, doll?”

Steve bent low, pushing his knee harder into the V of Bucky’s thighs and canting his hips closer to Bucky. He’d learned a lot on the streets, but he’d never brought it home and used it on Bucky. Not until now.

“Pack your fuckin’ bag, Barnes,” Steve said breathily. “Do mine while you’re at it.”

“You teasin’ little shit,” Bucky answered, jumping up off the couch and grabbing him by the waist.

Steve laughed as Bucky crowded up against him, then hastily blocked Bucky from kissing him by pressing a hand over his mouth. “You want your sugar,” he said, giggling, “you gotta work for it.”

“Teasin’ lil’ shit,” Bucky muttered behind Steve’s hand, then grabbed his wrist and started trailing open-mouthed kisses down his palm to his wrist.

Steve smirked some more as Bucky started sucking on his scent gland, figuring he’d let Bucky whet
his appetite before sending him on his way. Bucky licked and kissed the scent gland in Steve’s wrist, seeking his sugar-fix, while Steve leaned back in Bucky’s arms and watched with a smug eye. This was a hell of a lot better than simply being passive, like he’d always been in the past. This was ten times better, no, fifty times better. Steve could feel Bucky’s arousal almost as strongly as his own through their bond and it just stirred his blood for more, to do more, to be more.

“Get movin’,” Steve declared, then slapped Bucky’s ass.

Bucky yelped and jumped and Steve laughed at him, tugging his wrist from Bucky’s grip and giving him a shove to the center of his chest. Bucky stumbled a little, his eyes wide, and Steve raised his eyebrows.

“Do I gotta tell you twice?” Steve asked him.

Bucky snapped off a salute. Steve rolled his eyes, then slapped Bucky’s ass again as he hastened away.

“You tryna give me a heart attack, Rogers?” Bucky called over his shoulder.

“Somethin’ like that,” Steve answered smugly.

“Fuckin’ ‘ell, I made a demon,” he heard Bucky grumbling as he pushed into their bedroom.

Steve wandered in behind Bucky, passed him, and laid himself back on their bed. He watched Bucky dig around in the wardrobe for a few seconds, then got an idea. He considered it. Wondered if it was too much, then remembered Bucky’s raw sincerity when he promised that he wanted nothing more than to worship Steve.

Steve curled one arm behind his head, then took the other and let his fingers trail down his own chest, watching Bucky bending at the waist to sort a suitcase out of the mess of things at the bottom of the wardrobe. Steve figured that if Bucky wanted to kneel as a supplicant before him like an altar, Steve kinda wanted him to do it.

Which meant his idea? If Bucky wanted to kneel as a supplicant, then he’d sure as hell enjoy whatever service Steve let him give up, or whatever show Steve decided he wanted to put on. He inhaled deeply; he knew the scent of an Omega’s slick was detectable by any good Alpha from
rooms away, but really, all he could ever smell was a faint, sugary scent. Bucky, he knew, was a very good Alpha.

Steve watched as Bucky stood bolt upright and hit his head on the top frame of the wardrobe. He laughed breathily and crooked the finger inside of himself a little further. He couldn’t quite get the right angle like this, with his hand tucked between his legs under his jeans as he lay on his back, but it was better than nothing. Steve watched Bucky spin around so fast he wobbled on one foot and almost lost his balance and just laughed again.

“You’re –” Bucky said dumbly, his eyes the size of moons. “Steve –”

“Better hop to that packin’,” Steve told him, letting his gaze drift away. He crooked his finger again, then slipped a second inside of himself and tried to probe deeper.

“Steve,” Bucky repeated, his voice ragged.

“What’d I jus’ say?” Steve asked him. He knew without looking that Bucky was watching him finger himself with his mouth hanging open uselessly. “You’ll collect flies, Buck. Better shut your mouth.”

“Steve,” Bucky said a third time. “What’re you –?”

“What does it look like?” Steve interrupted. He opened his eyes and turned his head to meet Bucky’s gaze. “Thought you wanted a cookie, Barnes? I don’t see you packin’.”

Bucky seemed to jerk out of his daze. He dropped to tug the suitcase out of the wardrobe, then – casting an awed look over his shoulder at Steve –, he hastened to the dresser and started stuffing the suitcase with socks and underwear. Steve watched him absently, just to make sure he was actually doing his job, but kept lazily fingering himself. As Bucky moved to shirts and jeans, Steve added a third finger.

“Better hurry up,” Steve called. “I ain’t got all night.”

Bucky cast him a wide-eyed look, swallowed visibly, then almost ripped the next drawer out of the dresser as he kept packing. Steve chuckled a little; he’d fix their bags properly in the morning, as it looked like Bucky was packing them clothes not remotely suited for an island destination in the southern hemisphere. It was cold in New York, sure, but it was bound to be hot and humid on the island. Matter of fact, if it was going to just be the two of them, they didn’t really need to bother with clothes, did they? Steve leaned his head back, no longer caring what Bucky packed, pushed his
fingers deeper and hummed as he pictured skinny dipping with Bucky on an island where they could only scare the fishes. What did fish care? They were fish.

Steve heard the zipper being almost ripped off as Bucky closed the suitcase enthusiastically and opened his eyes again in time for Bucky to drop on top of him and start attacking his neck. Steve laughed and hooked a leg over Bucky’s hip, pulling his hand out and making to wipe it clean on the bedspread. Bucky caught him by the wrist and sucked his fingers into his mouth.

“Look’it’chu,” Steve mumbled, smirking as Bucky sucked his fingers clean for him, “ya hungry, Barnes?”

“Fuckin’ starving,” Bucky answered, mumbling around Steve’s fingers.

“You wan’ your treat?” Steve asked him. Bucky groaned on his fingers. “Got some sugar for ya, Buck. You wanna taste?”

“God, yes,” Bucky said, pulling Steve’s fingers free of his mouth.

He licked once at Steve’s scent gland, then shimmied back down the bed to kneel, supplicant, between Steve’s legs. Steve lifted his hips and Bucky tugged the jeans he’d already undone off him, then grabbed his boxers and pulled them down, too. Bucky didn’t even get them all the way off of Steve’s legs, he got them down to Steve’s ankles and seemed too anxious to get at his sugar-fix to go any farther. Steve laughed at Bucky and kicked his pants off himself while Bucky ducked his head and licked slick off his inner thigh.

Steve reached back and grabbed a pillow from the head of the bed, then shoved it towards Bucky and lifted his hips again. Bucky stuck it under his lower back, then grabbed his ass and kneaded it with rough fingers while he licked Steve’s inner thighs clean. Steve lay back and enjoyed the feel of Bucky’s tongue just teasing him at first.

“C’mon,” Steve said when he’d had enough of teasing, “quit playin’ with your food, Barnes.”

Bucky growled. His fingers dug into Steve’s ass as he spread the cheeks apart, then he licked at the crevice of Steve’s ass, cleaning him up.

“C’mon,” Steve repeated, his voice coming a little harder; he lifted his hips towards Bucky’s face,
wanting more. “Eat your cookie,” Steve dared him, “’s good for you.”

Bucky growled yet again, but it was cut off as he buried his face between Steve’s legs. Steve let out a satisfied sigh, then his breath hitched and he pushed back into Bucky’s mouth.

“God, I love your tongue,” Steve mumbled faintly. “C’mon, Buck –”

He cut himself off in a whine as Bucky dug his tongue as far as it would go and closed his lips, sucking. Steve trembled in Bucky’s hands, lying back on the altar that was their bed. Bucky went hard worshipping him, his mouth a little bit pagan in his devotion. Steve arced off the bed, got his heels planted firmly on the mattress and lifted his hips off the bed completely. Bucky crowded closer, still kneeling as he extolled at Steve’s altar. Steve’s ankles and knees and core shook, but Bucky’s hands holding up his hips kept his ass in the air. His mouth was dedicated in reverence, Bucky’s tongue adulated in exaltation.

“C’mon,” Steve exhaled, “get your fix, Buck.”

A deep growl ripped from Bucky’s throat; Bucky lapped up the mix of his own spit and Steve’s sugar, then plunged back into his veneration. Steve cried out and arched his spine, throwing his forearms to the bed under his head to support himself and Bucky’s nails dug like claws into the meat of his ass as he ate Steve out like a starving man.

Steve could feel the fruits of Bucky’s homage pooling low in his gut. His head was spinning again, but Bucky’s gravitational pull kept him pinned in orbit as his universe revolved around his Alpha’s adoration. If Steve was Bucky’s altar to kneel and sing praises, then Bucky was a celestial object, pulling Steve’s breath from his lungs in gasps to Earth, his skin was burning up in Bucky’s atmosphere and his blood roared in its circumnavigation.

“Gonna let me eat your cookie ’til you come?” Bucky growled, his lips moving wetly against Steve’s skin. “Gonna let me drink you up, sugar?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, “get your milk and cookies, Buck.”

Bucky licked a stripe up Steve’s body, then a gasp punched itself from Steve’s throat as Bucky sucked him down and swallowed the pre-come tearing up from Steve’s body. Steve groaned aloud, feeling Bucky’s vocal cords vibrating like a toy as he hummed his approbation. Bucky lauded Steve’s body, licking and sucking and biting little marks into his skin; he seemed to gravitate back to
Steve’s ass eventually, as his tongue plunged back into the empty space it had left.

Steve didn’t hold back his vocal enthusiasm for Bucky’s thanksgiving. Bucky’s hands dug into his hips, then one of his arms curled around Steve’s ass and the other hand released him. Bucky’s flesh palm just slid up and took Steve in hand, pumping his dripping length and bringing sharper gasps from Steve’s lips.

He gave up on daring Bucky, on being demanding and directive. When words next made their way from the fog of his mind to his lips, Steve started begging.

“B–Buck,” Steve whined, only making his Alpha growl low in his throat again. “C’mon, quit playin’ around, lemme have it, Buck, please –”

Bucky’s tongue pulled from Steve’s body with a wet squelch; he licked up and Steve whined wordlessly again, shaking at every junction of his form.

“You want it?” Bucky asked him, his voice rough and wrecked; Steve loved it. “Wha’d’ya want, baby? Use your words, c’mon.”

“Wanna –” Steve started helplessly. He whimpered as Bucky’s thumb swept around him and dipped into his watering crown. “Buck –” he gasped out, cutting himself off to moan.

“Wha’d’ya want?” Bucky asked him again. His thumb didn’t stop moving, caressing both roughly and tenderly. “You got this pretty pink glow to ya, sugar, think I know what’chu want, but you still gotta tell me.”

Steve mouthed useless words, his breath coming too ragged for him to truly speak.

“I ain’t a mind reader, dollface,” Bucky said, “you wan’ me to keep eatin’ your cookie, baby? You want me to eat you up ‘til you come, doll? Or you wan’ me to suck on your dick and swallow you down? Or maybe you want me to get my cock out and stick it in ya. You gotta tell me what you want, pretty.”

Steve’s mouth watered. He finally let London bridge fall and dropped back onto the bed, immediately wrapping his legs around Bucky’s waist instead. He reached out and groped through the air until Bucky surged up and pressed over his whole body instead. Steve fisted his hand into
Bucky’s shirt as Bucky licked into his mouth, his tongue returning to its glorification but into Steve’s mouth this time. Steve moaned for him, let Bucky kiss him until he got distracted by the throbbing scent gland in his neck and Steve arched again, baring his throat. Bucky instantly started adoring it with his tongue, his teeth scraping Steve’s skin over and over to leave him tingling.

Steve heard Bucky’s belt rattling and figured getting rid of Bucky’s clothes was a good idea; he tugged on Bucky’s shirt until Bucky lifted off of him to tug it off and throw it across the room. Bucky bent again, licking at Steve’s scent gland, then kicked off his pants and grabbed Steve’s hips. Steve groaned at the weight pressing against him, slipping into the gap of his spread thighs easily. He tugged on Bucky’s hair without his clothes to get a handhold on, Bucky growled and dragged his lips from Steve’s scent gland to his ear.

“You wan’ my cock in you, doll?” Bucky growled. He pressed down again and Steve choked on an inhale. “That what’chu want?”

“Yes,” Steve whined.

“If that’s what’chu want,” Bucky chuckled darkly.

Steve was panting, out of breath and feeling like he was dying for Bucky’s touch. Bucky’s teeth scraped his scent gland again and Steve shimmied his hips until he could loop his legs around Bucky’s back. He dropped a hand to Bucky’s shoulder and dug his nails in. Bucky braced himself on his elbows, his arms framing Steve’s head, bent his head to lick at Steve’s scent gland once more, then shifted his knees for better leverage and started to press in.

Steve threw his head back in a groan. Bucky panted against his neck. He stopped fully seated, then gave a slow, testing thrust. Steve groaned again.

“You want me to make you a mess?” Bucky said in Steve’s ear. He abruptly yanked his hips back and slammed into him and Steve cried aloud. “You want my milk in your cookie, baby?”

“Yes!” Steve gasped. “Buck, yes, please –”

Bucky slammed into him again; Steve’s lips were stretched in a prolonged scream. Bucky closed his lips over Steve’s scent gland, sucking on it like it was his favorite food, as he properly pounded into Steve.
For Steve, already strung out and on edge, it didn’t take long for him to come. He cried Bucky’s name and Bucky gave two or three more reckless thrusts before his knot popped and he collapsed on top of Steve. Steve let out a quiet, involuntary whimper and Bucky propped himself back up on his elbows to lick apologetically at his throat.

Steve circled his arms around Bucky’s neck. “Get down ‘ere,” he mumbled.

Bucky met his lips in a kiss without hesitation. Steve, sated and sleepy, pulled Bucky’s head into his neck when the kiss broke and locked his wrists at Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky parted his lips over Steve’s scent gland and suckled lightly on it, bringing a pleasant buzz over Steve’s already deep post-coital bliss.


“Love you, too,” Bucky answered.

“Wake me up when y’r knot goes down,” Steve said then, closing his eyes and sighing contentedly.

Bucky nosed at his neck. Steve felt him inhale deeply, then exhale slowly. Steve matched his breathing to Bucky’s.

When Steve did wake up, it was to the smell of bacon and eggs cooking. He huffed and peeked one eye open, saw that Bucky’s side of the bed was empty, and pushed himself into a sitting position. There, Steve yawned and gave his ass an experimental wiggle on the bed. He felt a bit sore, no more than usual and no more than felt nice. The apartment felt cold on Steve’s bare skin, so he pulled the blanket off the bed and wrapped it around himself rather than actually get dressed and went in search of his Alpha.

Bucky was in the kitchen, cooking bacon and eggs at the stove as Steve had suspected. Steve walked up behind him and flopped onto his back.

“Y’r knot took all night to go down?” Steve muttered sleepily.

Bucky laughed. He turned around and pushed an arm around Steve’s waist, pulling him in and kissing his cheek. Steve, albeit disgruntled from having to get out of bed in order to seek out cuddles, pressed into Bucky’s side and hid his face in Bucky’s neck.
“You were out cold by the time it did,” Bucky told him, resting his cheek on Steve’s hair. “I didn’t want to wake you up.”

“Told you to,” Steve complained half-heartedly. “Wanted a shower.”

“We can have a shower after breakfast,” Bucky answered, pecking a kiss to the top of his head. “I figured eggs and bacon and toast wasn’t too difficult to figure out on my own.”

Steve hummed absently. He pushed his arms around Bucky’s torso and snuggled closer to his Alpha, tucking his face against Bucky’s neck and shutting his eyes.

“And I actually packed for real,” Bucky continued. “Instead of throwing six pairs of your jeans and all of your socks into a bag.”

Steve laughed lightly. “That was pretty funny,” he mumbled. He rubbed his face against Bucky’s neck. “You were funny.”

“I’m glad you were amused,” Bucky chuckled. “I kinda had higher priorities.”

Steve grinned into Bucky’s neck. “Yeah?” he said softly.

Bucky’s arm around his waist tightened. “Hell yeah,” he murmured.

Steve hummed again happily and settled against Bucky’s side more properly. “I’m glad you liked it,” he mumbled again.

Bucky kissed his hair. “I’d like anything you do.”

Steve snorted. “Anything?” he asked teasingly. “What if I wanted to call you daddy?”

Steve chuckled to himself, enjoying his joke, and after a minute, he realized Bucky still hadn’t
answered him. Steve lifted his face from Bucky’s neck – blinking against the bright morning light coming from the vast windows in the living room – and frowned at Bucky, whose face had gone slack.

“Bucky?” Steve pressed.

Bucky blinked once. He jerked a little and looked at Steve with wide eyes.

“Uh,” Bucky said intelligently.

Steve gasped and his hands flew to cover his mouth. Bucky’s face went very red. Steve slowly lowered his hands.

“You want me to call you daddy?” he whispered.

“No!” Bucky said much too quickly.

Steve glanced at the stove, then grabbed Bucky’s shoulders and steered him away from it. He pushed Bucky onto a stool, said, “Sit,” and went to finish cooking the bacon and the eggs. Bucky continued blinking.

Steve wound up tying his blanket just under his armpits because he didn’t want to accidentally catch it on fire. He flipped the eggs, all twelve of them, then took the cooked bacon off the flames and used tongs to get it out of the pan and the gathered grease. Steve automatically went looking for a jar to collect the grease in, then realized they didn’t have one already. So he rummaged in the pantries until he found one. He poured off the grease, put it aside to cool before he stuck it in the fridge, and plated the eggs with the bacon. He found the toast already cooked and buttered, somehow still warm, and put both plates on the counter in front of Bucky. Bucky, who was still wide-eyed and red in the face.

Steve got out forks, then checked the fridge in case they had any juice and found apple and cranberry. He squinted at the cranberry, then decided it was only worth drinking when he had a UTI and pulled out the apple. Bucky seemed relatively fine, considering the massive mound of self-discovery Steve had accidentally thrown him into, and Steve wanted his juice, dammit.

Steve took two glasses of juice to the breakfast counter, sat them and himself down, and leaned over to kiss Bucky’s cheek. “Eat your breakfast, daddy.”
Bucky jolted. His cheeks doubled in their red color and Steve cackled.

“Not fair!” Bucky called, lunging and grabbing Steve around the waist. He almost knocked Steve off of his stool, but only because Steve was laughing too hard to balance himself and at any rate, Bucky yanked him back upright before he could actually fall.

“Your face!” Steve wheezed. “I’m sorry –! I’m not sorry!”

“You lil’ skink,” Bucky growled, burying his face in Steve’s neck and biting down on his scent gland. Steve yelped and Bucky licked him half-apologetically; only half, as Steve was still giggling.

“We probably should talk about it, though,” Steve managed to get out between chuckles.

Bucky pouted. “Do we have to?”

Steve snorted again, smiled and cupped Bucky’s face. “Do you want me to call you daddy or not?” he asked, still giggling.

Bucky’s eyes dilated, he gulped, then shook himself bodily like a wet dog. Steve snorted yet again and Bucky let go of him to sit upright. Steve kept laughing, and Bucky shifted on his chair, then adjusted the front of his sweats. Steve laughed harder.

“Shuddup,” Bucky grumbled.

“Do you want me to call you daddy or not?” Steve asked again, trying to contain his laughter.

Bucky glanced at him, then away. He picked up his fork and dug into his eggs. Steve covered his mouth with a hand, snorting, then leaned over and kissed Bucky’s cheek again, startling him.

“I’m not against the idea,” Steve reported.
Bucky dropped his fork and his eyes got twice as big. Steve failed at holding in his laughter as Bucky’s jaw dropped and his mouthful of fried egg combined with his giant eyes made him look fifteen years younger. Steve pulled a page from Bucky’s book and tapped a knuckle on the underside of Bucky’s chin, effectively shutting his mouth for him.

“You’ll collect flies,” Steve chuckled.

Bucky swallowed hastily. “Whatdoyoumeanyou’renotagainstit?” he gasped in one breath.

Steve shrugged. “I don’t know,” he admitted, “if you’re calling me Mrs. Barnes and you wanna be called daddy, I guess that means you don’t want me acting like a little kid, so I don’t got anything against the idea.”

Bucky blinked. Steve giggled some more.

“We can talk about this on vacation,” he said, reaching out and touching Bucky’s cheek. “When you’ve gotten your brain out of your pants.”

Bucky actually looked down and Steve threw his head back laughing. He hugged himself as he laughed harder than he really had in years.

“Shuddup!” Bucky called again, but he was starting to laugh, too. “I’m gonna get you back for this, Rogers, one’a these days, you’re gonna wake up and realize you’re into something, I don’t know what, and we’ll see who’s laughin’ then!”

“Both of us, I hope,” Steve said weakly. He wiped tears from his eyes and shook his head. “But I’d be happy to discover kinks with you if you want.”

Bucky swallowed. Steve leaned over again and kissed his cheek for the third time, then picked up his own fork and tucked in.

“There’s Internet on the island,” Bucky said abruptly.

Steve sat up straighter, smiled as he chewed, and then nodded.
Bucky shrugged. “You, uh, you wanna…?”

Steve swallowed. “Yes?” he asked, smirking.

Bucky glared at him. “Don’t make me say it,” he said.

Steve grinned. “I seem to remember something about needing to use my words,” he teased lightly. “I ain’t a mind reader, y’know.”

Bucky picked up his fork and pointed at Steve with it. “You’re a menace, is what you is, Rogers. A damn menace and you know full well what you do.”

“I don’t know,” Steve answered, still teasing. He slipped off his stool a little bit and pressed against Bucky’s side, fluttering his lashes. “You gotta tell me what you want.”

“I honestly wanna get this damn breakfast down so we can get on our vacation,” Bucky confessed, then gripped Steve’s hips and swiveled on his stool to pull Steve against his chest. “But I want to get my hands all over you more.”

Steve pressed their foreheads together and smiled. “You wanna make this vacation productive?” he asked softly.

Bucky nodded. He pressed their lips together briefly, then ducked his head and started scenting Steve’s neck. Steve lifted his chin, happy to let him.

“I want anything you’re willing to give me,” Bucky said into Steve’s neck. “Anything at all, sweetheart.”

Steve’s smile softened. He tipped his chin down, blocking Bucky from retreating from his neck, and circled his arms around Bucky’s back. He let out a gentle, quiet purr and Bucky nuzzled his neck in answer.
“We should eat,” Bucky said.

“Gimme a minute,” Steve answered.

Bucky hugged him a little tighter and didn’t say another word. Steve reveled in his Alpha’s scent, mellow and happy and content; both enjoying breathing in Bucky’s scent and soaking it into his skin. He wanted to feel claimed and Bucky’s face pressing against his scent gland was just what he needed.

They did, in fact, eat. Steve was hungrier than he’d realized and was grateful Bucky had made six eggs and twice as much bacon and toast for each of them; he told Bucky so and Bucky puffed up his chest like a pleased kid Alpha told they were a good provider for the first time. Steve laughed at him and leaned in for a kiss, returning to sopping up egg yolk with his toast after.

After eating, Steve took the dishes and washed them. Bucky dried and put them away. Steve had somehow managed to forget he was wearing a blanket instead of clothes, but kept it tied under his arms to keep it out of his way until he actually got dressed. After they’d cleaned up the kitchen, they headed back into their bedroom and Steve went looking for their suitcase.

He noticed the box sitting by the TV stand only then. Steve stopped just outside the doorway, frowning as he looked at the box, and Bucky walked up behind him, slipping his hands around Steve’s waist. It was a plain, brown box; nondescript, but large. It looked heavy.

“How long has that been there?” Steve asked, gesturing to the box.

“Since the day before yesterday,” Bucky answered, tipping his head against Steve’s temple and nuzzling his face a little. “I had to let in the delivery guy.”

“Must have been torture,” Steve snarked. He pulled away from Bucky and picked up the box; it was heavy. He hefted it into his arms, then looked at it and frowned more. “What is it?”

“Don’t know,” Bucky answered with a shrug. “No explosives or radio signals or nothin’. Didn’t look past that.”

Steve shot Bucky a look over his shoulder and carried the box into their bedroom. He dropped it onto the unmade bed, then adjusted his blanket to bring it higher up his chest, and looked the box
“You got a knife on you?” Steve asked.

Bucky walked up beside him, raised his eyebrows, then started dropping knives onto the bed by the box. Steve watched with increasingly lifting eyebrows as Bucky pulled knives from places on his person Steve felt sure he should have noticed. There was one put down the front of his sweats for heaven’s sake!

Bucky tossed a twenty-sixth knife onto the mattress and gave Steve a flat look. “I don’t have any knives,” he said dryly.

Steve just shook his head and picked up a pocket knife. He flicked the blade open and while Bucky started storing up his excessive amount of sharp objects again, Steve cut open the tape sealing the box shut.

Steve closed the blade before he handed it back to Bucky, and opened the flaps of the cardboard box. He pulled away a few sheets of tough brown paper covering the top, then frowned into the contents.

“What is it?” Bucky asked.

Steve’s mouth slipped open, but he didn’t have an answer. He picked up a pair of penny loafers, so worn their warm red leather had faded into brown and the soles were softened to the point that they’d lost their stiffness. He turned them over in his hands, then plucked the penny from the pocket of the right shoe and turned it over in his hands. The copper was almost green, but the date was still legible.

The penny had been minted in 1917. Steve looked at it, then grabbed the penny from the other shoe and held it up to the light. It had been minted in 1918.

“So, what is it?” Bucky asked again.

“My shoes,” Steve muttered.
Bucky raised an eyebrow. “Your shoes?” he repeated. He looked at the penny loafers Steve that was no longer holding, then leaned back and looked at Steve’s feet poking out from the blanket. “I hate to break it to ya doll, but those ain’t gonna fit ya.”

“No,” Steve said, dropping the pennies into one palm and grabbing Bucky’s shoulder instead. “These are my shoes. That I wore to school.”

Bucky stopped looking at Steve’s feet. He looked at the penny loafers instead and his mouth fell open.

“That’s –” Bucky started and didn’t finish.

Steve tucked the pennies back into their pockets hastily, then put the shoes on the bed and started digging out the old books lining the top of the box. Clearly, this was from the Smithsonian, all the things that they’d kept of Steve’s and had only recently realized they should give back. All the books were all put into protective plastic sleeves, copies of Walt Whitman’s poetry and Wuthering Heights and cookbooks Steve hadn’t ever read outside his home ec classes. There were his old comics, volumes of Zorro that were visibly deteriorated and obscure science fiction comics like Buck Rogers in the 25th Century that he’d had to go all the way into Queens to pick up and there –

Steve lifted his mother’s Bible from the box. It had its own box, a clear plastic one that was clearly meant to protect it from the elements as it was much older than any other book Steve had owned. His mother had come to America with one suitcase and this Bible in her hands.

Carefully, Steve opened the lid of the case. He touched the leather binding, then opened the front cover. He touched the date of his mother’s marriage to his father, then turned the page and looked at the date of his own birth, then the dates of his father and mother’s deaths. There were no other records transcribed in it. Four dates, just four dates.

Bucky set a hand on Steve’s shoulder. Steve jerked, then inhaled sharply and glanced Bucky’s way. He looked back at the Bible in his hands, then pushed past Bucky to get to his nightstand. The Bible was still in good condition, the paper seemed robust enough; the binding needed repairs, but that was all. Steve took a pen from the nightstand drawer, then clicked the end and pressed it to the line just beneath his parents’ marriage date.

November 9th, 1943, he wrote with a surprisingly steady hand. James Buchanan Barnes to Steven Grant Rogers.
Bucky’s hand came to rest on Steve’s shoulder again. Steve straightened up, looking down at the fresh ink just under the old and faded set, then took a deep breath and clicked the pen again.

“Y’know,” Bucky said gently behind him, “we’ll still be on the island for the ninth.”

“I know,” Steve answered quietly.

Bucky’s arms slipped around his waist and he hooked his face over Steve’s shoulder. Steve gingerly closed his mother’s Bible, then stood there staring at the faded gold lettering on its leather front.

“You gonna look through the rest’a that box?” Bucky asked him quietly.

“Yeah,” Steve said, but didn’t move yet.

Bucky kissed his shoulder, then rubbed his cheek against him. Steve worked an arm around Bucky’s waist in return, took a deep breath, and closed the clear lid of the Bible’s case.

“She’d be proud of you,” Bucky told him.

Steve just nodded. He slipped from Bucky’s arms, walked back around to the box, and started lifting books from it again. He put all his school books in one pile, the novels and books of poetry in another, and the comics in a third. There was a scrapbook near the bottom, containing newspaper clippings that Steve had started when the war had begun in Europe, but had never finished. His last enlistment form stamped 1A was tucked into the final page. He put the scrapbook down gently, then started pulling out the worn clothes underneath the books.

Steve had been the same size as his mother by the time she died, so when the museum labeled his clothes as hers, it had been half-true. She and he had shared a wardrobe and when he’d had to leave the brownstone he’d grown up in, he’d taken all her clothes as his. There wasn’t much. Several house-dresses with patches and frayed hems. There were three sets of identical black skirts with now yellowed blouses and blue plaid vests, and one gray blazer with the same plaid trim that had been his school uniform. The black ribbons he’d used instead of proper bows to tie around his collar were missing, but Steve doubted anyone would have thought to keep a handful of frayed ribbons. There were his winter boots and rain boots and a pair of nicer Oxfords and some plain black Mary Janes that Steve had only worn to graduation and only because he hadn’t had a choice with the dress code. There were a few pairs of slacks that Steve had worn as often as he could, some shorts that he’d gotten away with wearing during the summers but had more often than not been scolded for because
his knees had always been visible when he did, and sitting at the very bottom –

Steve lifted out Bucky’s old jacket with cautious fingers. He unfolded it, almost reverently. Then he pulled it close and buried his face in it; it smelled like must and mothballs and old cotton. Bucky gripped the back of Steve’s neck, his thumb rubbing tenderly into a tense muscle. Steve pulled the jacket back, then stepped back from the bed and shook it gently. Dust fled from it, settling on the floor, and Steve held it up to the light, examining it. It was in decent condition.

Steve left the bedroom. Bucky trailed after him, stepping around the tail of the blanket that Steve was still wearing instead of clothes. Steve headed for the storage room they hardly used, opened the washer, and laid the jacket in it. He closed the lid without adding soap, then turned the dial to *Delicates* and changed the water temperature and load size before pressing start. The washer hummed to life and Steve knelt to look through the window as it started filling with water.

“You wanna take it with us?” Bucky asked, his hand settling on Steve’s shoulder.

Steve just nodded. He watched the water rising for a moment, then got up and headed back into the bedroom. There was nothing but another case in the box from the Smithsonian, a wooden box this time, that when Steve lifted the lid off, contained a very old baby doll.

“Oh,” Steve clucked his tongue, pulling the limp doll from its box and taking it in his hands.

Like everything else, its once pristine color had faded over the years. Its frock had once been a pink plaid, the frills a crisp white and the little boots sewn to its fabric legs a deep black. Now, the frock matched the beige skin and the frills were yellow and only the boots retained their original color. The yarn that made up the doll’s hair was a darker yellow than it had been when Bucky had first given it to Steve and it was missing one of the buttons that had been its eyes. Its stitched smile had a loose thread.

“I don’t remember what you called it,” Bucky said, his voice close to Steve’s ear.

Steve let out a soft laugh. “I never called her anything,” he answered, brushing at the yellow yarn with gentle fingers. “Just baby.”

Bucky nudged his cheek against Steve’s, his arms slipping around his waist, and Steve touched the thick black thread that made up the doll’s smile.
“You wanna take it, too?” Bucky asked.

Steve shook his head. “What if a monkey got at it?” he posited, then laughed again, a little sadly. “No, I’ll leave her here.”

Bucky kissed his cheek, then rested his chin on Steve’s shoulder. “Whatever you say, sweetheart.”

Steve laid the doll on the bed carefully. He looked back into the box one last time and found a piece of cardstock under where the case containing his doll had been. He picked it up, saw the Smithsonian’s logo on one side, then flipped it over.

*Shipment 12 of 35.*

“What…?” Steve whispered, looking over the card.

*Shipment 12 of 35. Inventory: Books (see full list below), comic books (see full list below), clothing items (see full list below), 1 baby doll toy.*

“There’s thirty-four more boxes coming?” Steve muttered. “I didn’t – I didn’t have enough stuff to fill thirty-five boxes!”

“Maybe some of the shipments are furniture pieces,” Bucky said. “Like your ma’s rocking chair.”

Steve opened his mouth, then stopped. He twisted to look at Bucky.

“How do you know they had her rocking chair?” he asked.

Bucky looked at the card in Steve’s hands for a moment. Then he shrugged guiltily. “I checked out the museum while we were still in DC?” he said in a hesitant tone.

Steve gawked. “You dropped me off at Sam’s house and went to a museum?” he spluttered.
“I followed you to the hospital first,” Bucky said quickly. “And while you were still sleeping, I did some reconnaissance.”

Steve blinked. Bucky abruptly pecked his cheek.

“I love you, please don’t make me sleep on the couch,” Bucky said.

Steve laughed. He dropped the card onto the bed and threw his arms around Bucky’s neck, pulling him into a hug. Bucky’s arms circled his back, one gently cupped his ribs and the other hooked around his shoulders and neck. Steve rested his face in Bucky’s neck, a smile curling his lip and he nudged his nose against the scent gland in Bucky’s neck.

“You’re dumb,” Steve mumbled.

“Love you, too,” Bucky grumbled.

Steve pulled back again, then looked at the stacks of books and old clothes covering their bed. He tipped his head to the side, then decided that he didn’t want it left out the two weeks they’d be gone but didn’t want to figure out what to do with it yet. So he re-packed the books into the box, then his old clothes and shoes, and picked up the box to carry over to the wardrobe. He dropped it onto the floor, kicked it into a neater position, then finally tugged off the blanket he was wearing like a toga and threw it at Bucky.

“Help me make the bed,” Steve said.

“Or –” Bucky started, his eyebrows raising.

Steve leveled a finger on him. “If you say we could make the bed later and use it now, I am gonna make you sleep on the couch.”

Bucky shut his mouth. Steve gave a satisfied nod and collected the two things he’d left out from the box from the Smithsonian; his mother’s Bible and his doll. These he set on his nightstand, then set about straightening the pillows and sheets.
“You could at least get dressed if you’re not gonna put out,” Bucky said.

Steve waved his middle finger in Bucky’s direction, but left the unmade bed and walked over to his dresser. He felt Bucky’s eyes on him, probably watching his ass, but dug out underwear and a pair of jeans. After shrugging them on, Steve rifled through his drawer of shirts for a minute before straightening up and scowling at his selections. Steve looked over his shoulder at Bucky, eyes narrowed, then down at his drawer of shirts. He grabbed one, then walked over to Bucky and poked him in the chest.

“Trade,” Steve said.

Bucky looked down at the shirt he was wearing. “What?”

Steve grabbed Bucky’s sleeve and tugged on it. “Gimme,” he said.

“Why?” Bucky asked, but was already pulling the shirt over his head.

Steve took it happily, tossed the other shirt at Bucky, and pulled the better option over his head. He inhaled and let out a content sigh, then stepped in and hugged Bucky again, since he hadn’t put the new shirt on.

“I’m confused,” Bucky said.

“None of my shirts smell like you,” Steve mumbled.

“Oh,” Bucky said slowly. He hugged Steve back and nuzzled his face into Steve’s hair. “I get it.”

“Mhmm,” Steve hummed vaguely. Satisfied, he pulled away from Bucky and walked around to finish making the bed. “Hey, don’t just stand there bein’ useless, help me with this.”

“What does it matter if the bed’s unmade?” Bucky asked, almost groaning, but he moved around to the other side of the bed anyway after tugging on his new shirt and started fixing pillows and sheets like Steve was doing. “Nobody’s gonna be in here anyway.”
“But then it will be unmade when we get back,” Steve answered, fussing with getting the pillowcases neat. “We should really clean up around here before we go, too. I know I haven’t done any cleaning since we got here and I doubt you have.”

“The robots do it!” Bucky said.

“Robots can’t do everything,” Steve told him, moving on to fixing the blankets. “Doesn’t matter how smart they are, they ain’t got human eyes.”

“I seem to remember some snot-nosed brat goin’ off on his mama about how it ain’t gonna hurt nobody if the bed ain’t made,” Bucky replied snarkily.

Steve gave the blankets a shake and laid them out over the sheets before looking up and answering:

“Bucky, that was you.”

Steve laughed at Bucky’s object shock and indignation and left the bedroom to step into the bathroom. He checked under the sink for cleaning tools, but there were only several packages of male Omega branded menstrual pads. Steve raised his eyebrows at the sheer quantity, then got up and went into the kitchen to find a broom, some bleach, and a sponge.

Bucky followed along behind Steve, standing just in the corners of his vision while Steve looked in the cabinets under the sink in the kitchen. The space was, thankfully, stocked with a number of cleaning implements, and Steve found a broom and dustpan in a tall cupboard tucked away in the corner. He went back to the bathroom and Bucky again followed him. Steve set his rag and bleach on the vanity counter, then tidied up the floor so he could sweep.

He saw Bucky leaning on the door frame, arms crossed over his chest and just watching him, and Steve elected to focus on his task rather than the way Bucky’s lips were curling at the corners. There wasn’t much to sweep up, but he took care of the floors and emptied the dustpan into the waste bin.

Steve held out the broom and dustpan to Bucky. “Go sweep the kitchen and living room, would you?” he asked
Bucky pushed off the door frame with a dramatic groan, but took the broom and dustpan as Steve had directed.

“Wipe down the kitchen counters while you’re there!” Steve called after him.

“Yes, yes,” Bucky answered, his voice drifting as he walked away. “Nag, nag, nag…”

Steve rolled his eyes, knowing Bucky didn’t mean it. He made quick work of cleaning up the vanity, then took the time to clean the toilet and wiped up spots from the floor. He left the rag on the floor when he was done and sprayed down the clawfoot bathtub and the shower off to the side with the bleach. By the time he finished spraying the tub, the fumes were making him lightheaded again and Steve ended up just kicking the used rag out of the bathroom and towards the laundry hamper in the corner.

Steve walked out of the bedroom to find Bucky in the kitchen, wiping the island counter with a sponge. Steve wandered closer and put the bleach away, then washed his hands in the sink and moved to hug Bucky from the back as he continued wiping off the counter.

“Bleach fumes in small spaces don’t mix with concussions,” Steve mumbled.

“See, I told you, you should’a left it to the robots,” Bucky answered.

Steve huffed, then let go. “Hurry up so we can get on the move.”

“You told me to do this!” Bucky called after him as Steve walked back into their bedroom.

Steve just snorted at him. He lifted the suitcase off the floor and set on the bed, then opened it up and peered inside. Bucky had, in fact, re-packed it already. There were clothes rolled up in one end, then toiletries shoved in another. Steve looked through the bag, then headed over to his nightstand and unplugged his phone and tablet to stick in the suitcase with the rest of their stuff; though his phone went into his pocket. He found his laptop and its charger, then packed it as well. Steve considered the suitcase after that, wondering if they would need anything else.

There was a small box tucked in the suitcase that Steve hadn’t noticed before. He frowned, stepped closer and pulled it out, then hesitated instead of opening it. Steve squinted at it for a while, curiosity growing in him. It looked suspiciously like a Tiffany box.
Steve put the box back. Clearly, Bucky had put it there with some sort of plan, and Steve wasn’t about to ruin whatever surprise Bucky had come up with. He shut the suitcase and zipped it, swung it onto the floor and extended the handle, then walked out with it.

“We should buy you clothes when we get back,” Steve said, parking the suitcase by the couch. “You’ve only got the two pairs of jeans; you can’t keep wearing my sweats.”

Bucky grunted in affirmation that he’d heard Steve. Steve looked down at his bare feet, then walked back into the bedroom and dug out shoes and socks. He grabbed a sweater, too, just in case it was cold on the plane, dropped it onto their suitcase, then headed to check the washing machine. It was finished, so Steve put Bucky’s old jacket into the dryer and set it up to dry on the delicate cycle. He walked back into the kitchen, just as Bucky tucked the sponge he’d used behind the faucet.

“Thanks,” Steve said, then reached for him.

Bucky wiped his hands off on a towel before pulling Steve into his arms. Steve set his cheek on Bucky’s shoulder, his forehead touching Bucky’s neck, and shut his eyes.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asked softly.

Steve shrugged. “Feel fine,” he said.

“Not that I’m complainin’ ‘bout it, doll, but you’re real touchy this morning,” Bucky added on. “More than usual.”

Steve shrugged again. “Probably ‘cause of sleeping in the ICU.”

Bucky hugged him a little tighter then. “Next time, we’ll ask them for a bigger bed.”

Steve huffed. “Don’t think they make bigger hospital beds, Buck.”

“We’ll ask anyway,” Bucky said. “‘Cause I know you and there’s gonna be a next time.”
Steve rolled his eyes, but circled his arms around Bucky’s waist tighter. “‘Fraid you’re probably right,” he muttered. “Kinda hard not to get injured in this line’a work.”

“Kinda hard not to get injured when you’re a fool dumbass,” Bucky answered and Steve laughed. Bucky dropped a kiss onto his temple, then straightened up. “C’mon, if we’re gonna cuddle, let’s do it on the couch.”

Steve followed Bucky happily down the single step to the living room and onto the couch. Bucky pulled Steve onto his lap, bracketing his arms around Steve’s waist to hold him against his chest, and Steve let his head tip back to rest on Bucky’s shoulder.

“What are we waiting for now?” Bucky asked him.


“Sure,” Bucky said.

Steve lifted his weight from Bucky’s chest for a second, leaning forward to grab the remote off the coffee table. He leaned back and Bucky’s hands circled his waist again, coming to rest, metal lying over flesh, on his stomach. Steve switched on the TV, then opened up the guide.

“I don’t know what we should watch,” Steve admitted.

Bucky nuzzled the side of his face almost absent-mindedly. “Whatever you want,” he said.

Steve shrugged, then flicked through the guide some. He didn’t watch TV very often, so half of the shows were things he didn’t recognize. He came to Animal Planet and figured it was better than nothing. He selected it and set the remote on the coffee table.

There was some show about fishing on, which seemed fortuitous, considering that he and Bucky would probably be fishing while on vacation. Steve tuned it out, however, shifting in Bucky’s arms to face Bucky as he lay on his stomach, then shut his eyes and set his face in Bucky’s neck.
“Wake me up in an hour,” Steve mumbled.

“Sure, doll,” Bucky answered.

“An’ I mean it,” Steve added, reaching up and prodding Bucky’s face with a finger; Bucky had the nerve to laugh. “Shuddup,” Steve grumbled, settling further in Bucky’s arms.

“Okay, okay,” Bucky chuckled. “Guess it didn’t take you long to take havin’ a TV at home for granted.”

Steve just huffed a short laugh. He let his body go limp, his breathing slow and even out. He nuzzled his face into Bucky’s neck absently, his consciousness dimming. Bucky’s flesh hand slipped from underneath his metal one and he started stroking gently down Steve’s spine. Steve made a mental note to get some blankets for the living room; the only thing that would make this better would be if they were wrapped up in a blanket. He fell asleep.

Bucky jostled his shoulder what felt like not even a minute later. Steve lifted up, slipping his hands onto the sofa beneath Bucky to put his weight on his elbows rather than on Bucky’s gut, and blinked a few times.

“Been about an hour,” Bucky reported. “You have a nice nap, doll?”

Steve hummed vaguely, then put his face back in Bucky’s neck. Bucky laughed, then shook his shoulder again.

“C’mon, we gotta get goin’.”

Steve sighed, but pushed up from the couch and stood, stretching. A wave of lightheadedness hit him and Steve swayed where he stood, blinking hard, but Bucky shot up and caught his waist before he could stumble.

“You alright?” Bucky asked.

Steve nodded, then regretted it. “Oof,” he grumbled, leaning into Bucky. “Concussions aren’t fun.”
“They sure ain’t,” Bucky chuckled, snaking his arms around Steve’s torso. “Incentive not to fall off a building next time you’re fighting zombies.”

Steve huffed. The dizziness passed and he pulled himself back onto his own feet, patted Bucky’s shoulder and headed for the laundry room. He had to bend over to open the dryer, but fortunately, he didn’t get a new rush of dizziness from doing it. He shook out the jacket, now fresh and clean, then turned around and – as his Alpha had clearly followed him – he took Bucky’s wrist and started rubbing it all over the jacket. Bucky pulled it from Steve’s hands and took over the motion himself, working his scent into every inch of the fabric.

Steve watched, then happily took it back from Bucky when he’d seemed to cover the whole thing with his scent. Steve raised it and buried his nose in, breathing in deeply, then let out a content sigh.

“Better?” Bucky asked.

Steve nodded. He gave Bucky’s shoulder a light push and Bucky stepped back so he could exit the laundry room. Steve flipped off the light as he left, let Bucky shut the door and Steve headed for the sofa again. He opened their suitcase a crack and pushed the old jacket into it, then straightened and looked around.

“Are we ready?” he asked.

Bucky shrugged. “I think so,” he said, “unless you wanna take a toothbrush to the tiles.”

“Ha, ha,” Steve answered dryly. He picked up his sweater, then glanced at Bucky. “You should go grab a jacket or something, ’case the plane is cold.”

“Should I go ahead and put it on now so it’ll smell like me later when you wanna steal it?” Bucky asked him, teasing.

“Sure,” Steve replied, still dry. Bucky laughed and Steve shook his head as he tied his sweatshirt around his waist and extended the suitcase handle.

Bucky exited the bedroom with a sweatshirt in hand, flipping off the light as he left. Steve held out
his hand towards Bucky. Bucky took it and Steve walked with him towards the elevator.

When the doors opened, they stepped inside and the bar above the closing doors lit up as though in greeting.

“Good morning, Mr. and Mr. Barnes,” JARVIS said.

Steve startled, then gawked at the ceiling. “What did you just call us?”

“Mr. and Mr. Barnes,” JARVIS repeated.

“I’m not –!” Steve spluttered while Bucky threw an arm over Steve’s shoulders with a laugh. “Did Stark tell you to call us that?”

“He guessed it would be amusing,” JARVIS replied.

“I think it’s a swell idea, Mrs. Barnes,” Bucky cooed in Steve’s ear.

Steve elbowed him back. “You only think that ‘cause you’re doing your stupid Alpha thing.”

“Would you prefer me to refer to you as Mrs. Barnes instead of Mr. Barnes?” JARVIS asked.

“No!” Steve said quickly, his face flushing as Bucky laughed. “What happened to Captain Rogers?”

“I can refer to you as Captain Barnes,” JARVIS offered.

“Oh my God,” Steve muttered, raising both hands to cover his face. “What the fuck.”

“I like this plan,” Bucky said cheerfully.
“If you would like, I could refer to you as Captain and Sergeant Barnes,” JARVIS continued. “Or Mr. Barnes and Captain Barnes.”

“For the record, my name is still Rogers,” Steve said, dropping his hands.

“Don’t mean it ain’t funny as all hell,” Bucky told him, still chuckling under his breath.

“Sir has manually added to my programming that I am to refer to you by the name of Barnes,” JARVIS admitted then.

Bucky let out a loud guffaw and Steve glowered up at the ceiling. “Can I have it be noted that my name is still Rogers?” Steve said firmly.

“It is noted, Mr. Barnes,” JARVIS replied politely.

“This is priceless,” Bucky wheezed softly next to Steve.

“Shuddup, Daddy,” Steve snarked in Bucky’s direction.

Bucky stood bolt upright, his eyes got wide, and he gulped. Steve raised his eyebrows at him.

“Who’s laughin’ now?” he asked pointedly.

“For your peace of mind, please be aware that the security footage from this elevator is not monitored by anyone but myself,” JARVIS piped up.

Steve hadn’t even thought about that. “Thanks,” he said towards the ceiling, then looked back at Bucky and poked him in the gut. “Who’s laughin’ now, Daddy?”

“Please stop,” Bucky squeaked.
Steve sidled up to him and looked at Bucky through his lashes, a grin curling his lip. “You gettin’ uncomfortable, Buck?”

Bucky gulped again. Steve leaned in and pressed a slow, deliberate kiss to Bucky’s cheek.

“I got your number, Daddy,” Steve said softly in Bucky’s ear.

“Uh…” Bucky muttered.

Steve rubbed his cheek against Bucky’s, then slipped back with a smirk. Bucky shook himself and blinked several times. Steve chuckled to himself.

“Are you ready to exit the elevator?” JARVIS asked.

Steve could bless that AI. He tugged a strand of hair behind his ear and cleared his lungs, then glanced at Bucky and raised his eyebrows. Bucky met his gaze, then went red and turned around to put his back to Steve. Steve saw him fixing his pants and pressed a hand to his mouth, stifling his giggles. Bucky turned around and leveled a scolding finger on him, but didn’t say anything to him.

“We’re good,” he told JARVIS instead.

The elevator doors parted. Steve rolled their suitcase behind him and Bucky took his hand as they exited. The common room wasn’t empty, like Steve had thought it would be, rather, the whole of the Avengers – minus Thor – were gathered on the couches.

Sam sat sideways in an armchair, his bare feet dangling over the side and his neck supported by the armrest, reading something on his phone. All of them were on their phones, actually, with nothing but quiet music playing over the speakers to connect them. Clint and Natasha were sprawled on one end of the massive sectional sofa, their legs tangled together in the middle. Bruce was slumped on the other end of the sectional, his shoes hanging off the end of the ottoman. Stark –

Steve made a conscious decision.

– Tony took up the middle of the sectional, lying on his stomach with one arm hanging off the
couch. His feet were shoved under Clint’s butt and his face was smushed on Bruce’s shoulder. He was snoring.

“Hey,” Steve said.

Sam was the first to look up; he sat up in his armchair and swung around to sit in it properly. “Hey, honeymooners,” Sam called with a grin.

“It’s not a honeymoon!” Steve sighed exasperatedly.

“It’s what your boy keeps callin’ it!” Sam insisted, throwing out an arm to point at Bucky.

“Hey, Stark!” Bucky called.

Tony woke with a snort and propped himself up on an elbow. “No, I don’t want any green goop!”

Bucky looked taken aback. Tony frowned at himself. Bruce slowly looked away from his phone to eye Tony with concern.

“Since when did you start talking in your sleep again?” Bruce asked.

Tony frowned harder. “Since when have I talked in my sleep at all? ” he demanded, then pushed himself up further. “And how do you know that I do?”

“You used to talk in your sleep all the time,” Bruce said dismissively, “I assumed you knew you did.”

Tony gawked at Bruce.

“Different, slightly less disturbing subject,” Bucky said, causing Tony to look at him. “Thanks for telling the ceiling to call Steve Mr. Barnes.”
“Oh, for the love of –!” Steve started under his breath.

Tony cackled. He fell onto his shoulder, grabbing his stomach, and fully cackled.

“Whoa, Jarvs calls Steve Barnes?” Clint spoke up. “Yo, J, identify the people in this room!”

“Occupants of this room are Clint,” JARVIS started, “Natasha, Sam, Sir, Brucey-bear –”

“I told you to change that!” Bruce interrupted.

Tony’s cackling redoubled.

“– and Mr. and Mr. Barnes,” JARVIS concluded.

Steve sighed, shaking his head.

“Ha!” Clint cheered, kicking Natasha. “Cap’s Mr. Barnes now!”

“I heard,” Natasha answered without looking up.

“I never changed my name,” Steve said loudly. “And we never got an official marriage certificate, for the record.”

“There’s a notarized statement filed in Besançon, France declaring the two of you to be as good as married,” Natasha said, waving a finger over her shoulder at them.

“There’s what?” Steve asked, startled.

“One Corporal Timothy Dugan and one Sergeant James Barnes walked into the city hall of Besançon on January 29th, 1945, and paid the head of the marriage license office to sign a piece of paper saying you two had had a private ceremony on November 9th, 1943,” Natasha recited.
“Records state that Corporal Dugan was mildly inebriated, but they paid thirty dollars more than the fee to have such a statement filed so nobody questioned it.”

Steve turned to look at Bucky, his mouth open.

“I don’t remember doing that,” Bucky admitted.

“Legally, that means France considers you married,” Natasha said, finally turning around.

“Ha!” Clint cheered.

“I’m throwing imaginary rice at you,” Tony spoke up.

Steve continued to stare open-mouthed at Bucky.

“You didn’t know?” Bucky asked, his eyebrows slipping together.

“You –” Steve started, then stopped to swallow a lump in his throat. “You told me you had a surprise for me after –”

He couldn’t finish. Bucky frowned at him.

“After what?” he asked.

“We intercepted Zola’s train on February first,” Steve said very, very quietly.

Bucky’s face softened. The room was now quiet but for soft guitar strings coming from the speakers in the ceiling.

“I didn’t tell you?” Bucky said.
Steve shook his head again. “You just said you had a surprise,” he answered under his breath.

Bucky exhaled deeply. He reached up and touched Steve’s cheek, rubbing his thumb over the crest of his face, then brushed back Steve’s hair and dropped his wrist to rub it against Steve’s shoulder. Steve reached up and took Bucky’s hand, holding it against his shoulder.

“I’m still throwing imaginary rice,” Tony piped up. Steve jerked and looked at him; Tony was, indeed, miming pitching handfuls of something in their direction.

“I got the urge to start singin’ Kiss the Girl,” Sam said.

“I ain’t a girl!” Steve answered, finally snapping out of his daze.

“Kiss the Boy!” Sam corrected. “Sha la la la la la, don’t be scared, you got the mood prepared, go on and kiss the boy!”

Bucky pulled Steve in by the waist and planted a kiss on his cheek. Steve rolled his eyes.

“Is our jet ready to go?” he asked Tony pointedly.

“Oh, yeah,” Tony said, waving a hand. “JARVIS is on board, he’s got the route ready and all, you got some coolers and boxes with the non-perishables, and the robots at the house should have the place dusted and all by the time you get there.”

“New sheets and everything,” Bruce spoke up, nodding. “Took him four months to program those things to change the sheets right.”

“The sheets will be freshly laundered!” Tony insisted. “Have fun on your honeymoon!”

“It’s not a honeymoon and I’m maintaining that I’m being coerced into consenting to this,” Steve countered, grabbing their suitcase handle and heading for the helipad.
“There’s a whole case full’a Durex in there!” Sam called after them.

Steve showed Sam his middle finger without turning around.

“I don’t know what Durex means, so joke’s on you!” Bucky called back as Steve pushed open the glass doors.

“You’ll see!” Sam answered, laughing.

“They don’t need condoms,” Steve heard Natasha say as the doors shut again.

Steve was mildly grateful Natasha was defending them and mostly annoyed that there was a case full of rubbers taking up space in their jet. They would only take up unnecessary space, since Steve and Bucky obviously would not be using them.

“You know how to fly this thing, right?” Bucky asked as they climbed the gangplank.

“Course I do,” Steve answered. “Besides, I’ll only be co-pilot to JARVIS.”

“Good morning, Mr. and Mr. Barnes,” JARVIS said yet again. “Are we ready to take off?”

“Yep,” Steve said, parking their suitcase and slipping it into a luggage net so it wouldn’t slide around while they were moving. “You can prepare for takeoff.”

Steve took Bucky’s hand and headed up to the cockpit as the gangplank lifted smoothly, closing with a hiss. Steve dropped into the pilot’s chair, leaving the co-pilot’s for Bucky, and did a quick check of the controls.

“How much fuel we got?” he asked JARVIS.

“There is forty hours worth of fuel loaded into the quinjet and another forty stored onboard.”
Steve rolled his eyes; Tony being over-prepared again. He couldn’t really fault the man for it, but eighty hours of fuel for what would only be a thirty-hour round trip seemed a bit excessive.

“Does this thing have weapons?” Bucky asked then.

“There are three options for turret cannons,” JARVIS answered him. “It should also be said that Sir is developing phase cannons that, and I quote, are modeled after the Enterprise.”

Bucky looked confused. “Okay?” he said.

Steve looked at Bucky with a soft gasp. “You’d actually love Star Trek,” he said. It had been the only thing he’d thought when Stark had wrangled him into watching four hours of the original series a few months after the Battle of New York, that Bucky would have loved the hell out of it. “We should watch Star Trek while we’re gone,” Steve said.

“Okay?” Bucky repeated, still confused.

“We are ready for lift-off,” JARVIS reported.

“Right, let’s go,” Steve said.

The engines hummed under their feet and the quinjet lifted smoothly off the helipad vertically. Steve leaned back in his seat, watching out the windshield as the jet gained altitude and New York steadily got smaller.

“We could watch it on the way there,” Steve said, turning his head to look at Bucky.

Bucky shrugged, leaned back and put his feet up. “Why not,” he said.

“JARVIS, can you play the first episode of Star Trek: The Original Series on the display?” Steve requested.

“Of course,” JARVIS answered.
The display screen switched on to the intro of the pilot episode, an array of fuzzy stars and the main theme beginning.

“They’re in space,” Steve said unnecessarily.

“Cool,” Bucky said with a grin.

That was how they spent the fifteen-hour flight. JARVIS gave them updates at the end of every episode, but the autopilot was powerful enough that Steve didn’t need to do hardly anything the entire time. The most, he had to visually confirm what JARVIS said satellites said they ought to be seeing out the windshield, usually a whole lot of blue. Bucky was enraptured by Star Trek the entire trip.

They raided the food supplies for food three or four times, making sandwiches with the vast selection of foodstuffs in the coolers; which were definitely stocked well enough to keep up with a pair of super soldiers over a month’s time, let alone two weeks. Steve decided that, again, he wasn’t going to fault Tony for the over-preparedness.

By the time the island came into view, it was past midnight their time and while Steve was still enjoying the show and Bucky’s awed expression, he was pretty tired. He had to switch off the show and do some actual piloting for the landing, but he was still playing second fiddle to JARVIS still. Steve didn’t mind, it meant nothing went wrong that probably would have if he’d been in charge considering how tired he was. The jet set down on the roof of a long, flat building, ringed by floodlights, but it was still daylight where they now were. Steve released the controls and the engines switched themselves off.

“Thank you for flying Stark Airlines,” JARVIS said pleasantly. “Please thank your pilot as you disembark.”

“Thanks, JARVIS,” Steve laughed, getting up.

“You’re a real neat fella,” Bucky added, patting a control panel.

The lights in the jet dimmed to a warm yellow hue that Steve interpreted as the AI being pleased. Steve took out his and Bucky’s suitcase, then grabbed the handle of one of the coolers and started dragging both out. Bucky got the other cooler and the box with the rest of the food, and the two of
them stepped off the gangplank.

Steve took pause to look around. The beach house they stood on top of was surrounded by trees, most of which were taller than the house. There was a green-covered mountain in the distance, probably the dormant volcano Tony had mentioned. The trees were lush and vibrantly colored, and the air rang with the calls of birds, the rush of water, and nearby, the chattering of monkeys.

“Wow,” Steve whispered.

“You can say that again,” Bucky agreed softly.

The two of them just stood there for a long moment, exhausted as they were, as they took in the expanse of the island. Steve just listened, trying to pick out the number of different bird calls audible in the air. He lost count somewhere around forty and gave up.

“C’mon,” Bucky said, bumping Steve’s shoulder with his. “We got plenty of time to stand around and gawk.”

Steve shook out of his stupor and followed Bucky to an elevator platform off to the side. They stepped onto it and Steve pressed a button with a down arrow that made the platform begin a smooth glide from the roof to the ground. The area around the house was paved for a short bit, then cut off to show bright green grass in a ring around the house. There were several dirt paths that Steve could see as well as he and Bucky headed for an opening that seemed to be the front door, and a stream was visible near the edge of the trees some ten yards off.

Bucky stopped by the front door, held out an arm to keep Steve back, then raised his metal hand and formed a fist, holding out his index finger. Steve raised his eyebrows as Bucky slowly advanced his finger onto the open doorway.

“What are you doing?” Steve asked.

“Shh!” Bucky answered. He poked the open doorway.

A flash of bright purple light deflected Bucky’s finger and Bucky jerked his hand back, waving it as though to rid himself of a burn.
“Stark said the house had plasma shielding,” Bucky reminded Steve. “How do we turn it off?”

“Uh,” Steve said. He stepped forward. “JARVIS?”

The doorway lights up with purple light again, which faded just as quickly.

“Welcome,” JARVIS’s voice came from the interior.

Bucky threw out a hand to stop Steve and poked the doorway again with his metal hand. When nothing happened, Bucky shrugged, picked up the cooler handle, and walked in. Steve followed behind him.

They entered into a kitchen/sitting room combo. The floors were a polished white surface, with a white shag area rug taking up the floor of the sitting room. The kitchen cabinets were white, the countertops white marble, the stools around the breakfast bar and the sofas and chairs all white. The walls were all papered in birch-bark patterns, tasteful modern art pieces themed in silver and white filled the walls, and draped over the back of the sofa was a bright red throw blanket, the main piece of color in the room. Steve looked around, considering the monochrome decor.

“Pepper decorated,” he decided.

“If you say so,” Bucky answered, shoving the box of food onto the breakfast bar and leaving the cooler at the bar's end. “You wanna crash?”

“Please,” Steve sighed, dropping his cooler halfway to the kitchen.

“The bedroom is through here,” JARVIS said helpfully and a pair of wall-mounted lamps flanking a shut door flashed.

Steve dragged the suitcase through there. The bedroom was themed in blues rather than whites, but had the same birch wallpaper as the sitting room, just with blue-themed modern art. There were two tall dressers, both black, a black desk, a black bed frame, and the area rug was a circular gradient of deep blue to gray. The bed linens were all deep, royal blues, the lamps on the nightstands were made of blue glass, and the vase of false hyacinths on the desk was royal blue as well. There was a
window behind the bed, but heavy blue curtains framed it that Steve guessed would block out the light. Steve lifted their suitcase onto the desk, opened it up, and dug out his pajamas without ceremony.

“You must brush your teeth,” Steve told Bucky, taking out their toiletries.

“Fine,” Bucky sighed.

There was an attached bathroom, again, with royal blue themes. Steve stopped paying attention to the decor, brushed his teeth, splashed his face with warm water and slipped past Bucky back into the bedroom to change. He left his clothes in a dark gray wicker hamper in the corner, slipped on his soft sleep pants and a loose shirt, then pulled the curtains over the window. He was right about them being blackout curtains; once they were shut, the only light came from the bathroom and the open doorway. Steve closed the door to the bedroom, then turned back the duvet on the bed as Bucky left the bathroom, turning off the light as he did.

Steve pulled back the sheets and was pleased to discover that they smelled fresh and clean, just like they’d been promised. He climbed into the bed, noting that the mattress was softer than he usually liked, and settled down. Bucky changed into pajamas before joining him, pulling Steve against his chest and lifting the blankets up to their chins.

“Love you, doll,” Bucky mumbled to him.

“Love you, too,” Steve answered.

They promptly crashed. Steve slept the sleep of the dead, but eventually, his dry mouth and full bladder woke him.

Steve slipped from the bed, careful not to wake Bucky, and went to relieve himself first. After washing his hands, Steve left the bedroom to find a glass of water, and found that it was the middle of the night outside. He found cups – square, blue glass – in the third cabinet he checked and filled it at the sink. He sipped it, deemed the tap water to be perfect, and started back for the bedroom.

There were more open doorways on the other side of the house, red warning lights above them indicating – probably – that the plasma shields were activated. Steve lingered by them, looking outside at the natural beauty of the island. There was probably a waterfall of some kind nearby because he could hear the water gushing. The birds were still singing, but calls that sounded totally
unfamiliar. As he looked outside, Steve saw movement in the moonlight and his breath caught.

A lean, powerful tiger prowled the grass outside the house. It was barely twenty feet from Steve. As he looked on, the tiger paused, looked around, and then met his gaze. Steve stood very still; he nearly forgot about the plasma shields keeping the house safe from the outside. Tony had said that there were fences keeping out the more dangerous inhabitants of the island, but that the monkeys and cats could sometimes get past them.

Steve held the tiger’s eye contact for a long time. Then it seemed to deem Steve no longer worthy of its attention and it moved on, disappearing into the trees. Steve slowly let out his breath.

He reached out and touched a panel by the doorway. The light above the doorway turned green and the plasma shields dropped. Steve slipped out into the night, then just stopped. He turned his gaze heavenwards, looking up at the vast sea of stars above him.

Steve hadn’t seen this many stars since the war. He felt beautifully dwarfed by the massiveness of the sky.

Even in the 40s, light pollution had blotted out half the stars in the sky. His mother used to tell him stories about her childhood in Ireland, of how you could never count the stars looking down on you, and she’d spoke of them with sad wonder. Steve had once promised her he’d see those stars, and though he wasn’t standing in her homeland, he was still looking up at a sky that was so full, he couldn’t hope to count the number of stars.

“Hey look, Ma,” Steve whispered very, very softly. “I made it.”

Steve heard Bucky’s footsteps, but continued to stand there, looking up. Bucky’s hand slipped over his shoulders, then he came to stand next to Steve.

“It’s beautiful,” Steve said.

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed quietly.

Steve’s gaze slipped down to Bucky’s face. Bucky hadn’t been looking up.
“Sure is,” Bucky murmured, his hand squeezing Steve’s shoulder.

Steve’s breath caught. Bucky tipped his head back towards the house.

“Come back to bed,” he said, starting to pull on Steve’s shoulder.

Steve followed Bucky back inside. The plasma shields switched back on behind them and Steve walked behind Bucky back into the bedroom. He set down his glass of water, then climbed into the bed and laid down next to Bucky. His Alpha drew him in, nose settling at Steve’s neck, and Steve let his eyes shut again.

Chapter End Notes

yes, if you didn't listen to the playlist, the chapter title is a p!atd reference bc i'm emo. i hope you enjoyed this longer chapter and go check out the next two segments of same story; told different ways now that you're done with this chapter. leave some comments, tell me what you thought, and i'll actually see you tomorrow (i hope you'll be there anyway) with an update to Like Rahab. ttyl.

the rest of the bloopers

lexi: why are you making me do this “you want some sugar buck?” why are you making me read this
beth: wait what
lexi: why are you like this
beth: bc it’s moony

lexi: who is this sex fiend
me: bucky told him he could be more assertive and he was like “i could?” so he’s trying
lexi: who is this sexy fiend

lexi: “i bet you wanna taste it then?”
jules: *sniggers*

lexi: “you want a cookie? you know what cookie’s slang for these days?”
jules: ohmygod
lexi: jesus christ
beth: wait which steve is this again???

lexi: “You wanna get a taste of my kitty?”
jules: *snorts*
lexi: i hope you’re suffering moony
me: *dying*
lexi: “He’d learned a lot on the streets, but he’d never brought it home and used it on Bucky” that was your first mistake. you have expertise, use it
jules: oh my god!
beth: *wakes up* what!
lexi: you have expertise you use it!
beth: advice from lexi. why are you awake?

lexi: “bucky said dumpling – dumbly”
me: dumpling
jules: dumpling
me: yes?
jules: that’s a blooper

lexi: “eat your cookie, it’s good for you” no it’s not but okay
beth: ohmygod
lexi: it begins

lexi: “get your milk and cookies, Buck”
jules: ohmygod
lexi: ohmygod

lexi: “Steve started begging”
she looks at me
lexi: i hate you

lexi starts reading in plain flat monotone. it’s the dullest smut you’ve ever read.
lexi, flatly: “you want my milk in your cookie?”
me and jules: *dying*
beth: *is asleep again*

lexi: “wanted a shower”
beth: i thought you said a gay shower and i was like i guess that’s true

lexi: “ – twelve eggs –”
jules: wait what the fuck??
me: they’re super soldiers!
jules: oh okay
me; i mean six eggs for one person – my brother/your mans used to eat five eggs at a time beth
beth: okay?

lexi: “Steve shrugged”
me: shrugged
beth: shrugged?
jules: it’s that time of night
lexi: no i just can’t speak
me: she just can’t speak

me: lexi, you are an anonymous hedgehog
jules: i dated a hedgehog once
me: oh
me: sonic?
jules: no, his name was jack
jules: this seems very familiar
lexi: i read this already last time
jules: No like this sounds familiar
me: do you want me to call you daddy, daddy?

me: “didn’t want it to catch FIIIIIRE” AAAAAH THERE’S A DOG IN MY LAP
WOULD YOU STOP JUMPING.

me: *regular interruptions of reading because of pupperino*
me: what are you staring at? You weird dog.

me: “fifteen years younger” more like 20 years at this point, he looks 35. Because he’s
old. Torture.

me: “you, uh, you wanna…” wink wink
me: “you wanna make this vacation productive”

me: HEY HEY STOP ATTACKIN THE CAT. Actually the cat looks fine i don’t
know the rules about attacking cats? Carry on?

me: “Bucky’s face pressing against his scent gland” *in british accent* gland? Gl a n d?
*reads next sentence in british accent*

me: “You got a knife on you?”
Lexi: BUCKY LEGIT ALWAYS HAS A MILLION KNIVES ON HIM LIKE A
FUCKING CARTOON CHARACTER BEING ASKED TO REMOVE THEIR
WEAPONS

*all of us look into old comics that Steve would have had for the time being. Also
laughter because of “buck rogers” the lovechild of steve and bucky*

me: a BOX WITHIN A BOX WITHIN A CASE WITHIN A BOX

me: "inventory: Books (see full list below), comic books (see full list below)"
me: THAT’S THE SMITHSONIAN BEING SHADY BECAUSE COMIC BOOKS
ARE SEPARATE FROM BOOKS!

me: "Trade, Steve said" G I V E M E Y O U R C L O T H E S

me: “Mrs. Barnes”
Lexi: bucky, can you get his dick oUT OF HIS ASS PLEASE

Me: “cleared his thumbs” THUMBS??? LUNGS???

Lexi: those two would literally never wear condoms anyway. There really is no reason
give them any.

Me: LINK YOU’RE FINE. THIS IS A REALLY COOL MOMENT OKAY DON’T
RUIN IT!
me: “hey look, ma, I made it” *but in a country accent*
Jules: i MAYD ET
Me: link, PLEASE JUST BE PATIENT FOR THE GAY MOMENT
*link, whines like he’s dying because he’s gay like me*
me, later reading lexi’s notes: do i really yell that much?

lexi, in conclusion: let the record show, this chapter is long as fuck. bottom of page 97
to bottom of page 129. 14k. i don’t care that the last few chapters were short moony
that’s LONG AS FUCK!
it's my birthday! it's also the same day iRL as it is in the fic only in 2014. i'm proud of myself. i don't have a playlist or a cover for you rn bc this weekend was super hectic but i'll make one later pinky promise. i started posting my Cap Big Bang fic and so far it's binge worthy, so if you haven't checked that out yet, head over when you're done here. always thanks to my beta lexi who makes this fic so much better

date here are the bloopers and i added the cover (find it on my tumblr [here](#) i'm sorry i forgot

me: you are an anonymous ferret
lexi: aw cute i love sneaky bois
me: i always think of malfoy when i see ferrets
lexi: WHY WOULD YOU COMPARE ME TO MALFOY
lexi: I THOUGHT WE WERE FRIENDS
lexi: HOW DARE YOU

*discord pings*
lexi: who just joined
me: hi daddy! i should not have said that so loudly
jules: hi

lexi: *stopping mid sentence* oh! hi!
beth: hi i saw you guys were all on and thought i’d pop in to see what you were up to
lexi: let the record show Beth is awake at 10pm
lexi: what a momentous occasion
beth: so what are you doing
lexi: we’re reading about coffee
beth: yes i heard that why are we reading about coffee and what is steve doing with the coffee
lexi: he’s brewing fancy coffee bc moony sold their fucking soul to coffee and starbucks and they’re not even trying anymore
me: okay i have always been a slut for coffee starbucks didn’t do this to me
*they all spend another ten minutes judging me on my love of coffee*

beth: okay but you still haven’t answered which book is this
me: which book is it
lexi: it’s depressed-long-bean! steve
beth: okay thank you
beth: anyway, i was just popping in to say hi, so hi, bye, have fun with whatever you’re doing with coffee
me: you make it sound like steeb’s doing something wrong with it!
beth: anything that isn’t making art with it is wrong!

me: fuck you lexi
lexi: no thanks i’m not interested in children
me: what!
lexi: *continuing to read*
me: *shocked squawking noises*
jules: *laughter*
lexi: *ignoring me*
i am over 18, btw, just to be clear

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Steve woke to the trilling of some exotic bird just above their window. Bucky was still snoring, but Steve slipped from the bed. He wandered out into the kitchen, the smooth flooring cool but not cold under his feet. Steve came to stand in front of the plasma shielded-door, just staring out at the wildlife outside their walls.

As he stood there, listening to the singing of birds and breathing in crystal clean air, Steve decided the only thing that would make the moment better was a fresh cup of hot coffee. He turned away from the doorway and checked the box of non-perishables. Rooting around in it, Steve produced a bag of coffee beans.

Organic decaf Sumatra, the label read. Steve made a face at decaf, figuring Stark had packed that for them rather than regular since caffeine didn’t do anything to either Steve or Bucky’s bodies except in excessive amounts. At least it looked decent, though Steve wouldn’t have cared nor noticed a difference if it were Folgers or Maxwell. The beans weren’t ground, but there was a grinder on the counter near the coffee maker. Steve looked at the coffee maker, squinted at it, then looked at the grinder and the beans.

“Hey, JARVIS,” Steve whisper-asked.

“Yes, Mr. Barnes?” JARVIS whisper-answered. The AI’s voice came from a single speaker just above the kitchen counter, as though to keep the sound from carrying.

“How many beans do I need to make a pot of coffee?” Steve asked.

“Filling the grinder to the first line will make four cups of coffee,” JARVIS answered. “The second to make six, the third to make eight, the fourth to make ten. Fill the water reservoir to the corresponding line.”

“Thanks,” Steve replied, opening the bag of beans.

He made a full ten cups, figuring it would stay hot and they could drink it throughout the day. The grinder was fairly loud, but pausing to listen proved that there was no sound of movement coming
from the bedroom. Steve put a filter in the coffee maker, poured the freshly ground coffee into the filter, then detached the water reservoir to fill it at the sink. When Steve lingered over the buttons, JARVIS instructed him on how to use the machine while still restricting his voice to the single speaker above the counter.

The coffee maker gurgled in the refreshingly familiar way that coffee brewers do and Steve set about unpacking the food. The coolers were stocked with mostly staples; vegetables and fruits, dairy products, what looked like far too much Greek yogurt, eggs and various condiments. The non-perishables box had spices and cupboard fillers, certainly enough to keep them satisfied for two weeks let alone well-prepared. Looking over the great options that he had, Steve decided he was going to take a stab at some gourmet cooking these next two weeks.

Starting with breakfast. He was starving. Steve snuck back into the bedroom to get his tablet out of the suitcase, but Bucky was still snoring so he didn’t have much to worry about. Returning to the kitchen, Steve took stock of the plethora of ingredients he had on hand, then spent a few minutes Googling gourmet breakfast ideas to get a thought for what he could make. Eggs Benedict looked both good and sufficiently difficult, so Steve started gathering what he needed to cook it.

“Might I suggest some music to work by?” JARVIS asked as Steve set up to make the hollandaise sauce. “Perhaps some old school jazz?”

“Y’know what,” Steve said, pausing to look up at the empty air representing JARVIS. “How about the Trouble Man soundtrack, Marvin Gaye?”

“An excellent choice,” JARVIS answered. “Now, I must ask you —”

JARVIS’s audio cut off and instead, a man’s voice played from the speaker behind Steve.

“Ya like jazz?”

Steve turned around, frowning and feeling just a tad uncomfortable from the cadence of the voice. “Uh, yes? What was that?”

“Please do consider watching The Bee Movie, ” JARVIS’s voice returned. “I find it highly amusing.”
Steve blinked. “The… the what?”

“The *Bee Movie,*” JARVIS repeated. “It is, as the Internet likes to say, meme gold.”

Steve blinked yet again. He had not expected the AI to A, be able to find things amusing, or B, recommend movies for Steve to watch based off that amusement.

“Okay,” Steve said eventually. “*Bee Movie.* Sure. Why the fuck not.”

He returned to cooking and JARVIS’s voice was replaced by smooth jazz. Steve’s tablet showed a small *Now Playing* bar at the bottom, with the titles and duration of each track. The music proved to be largely instrumental, heavy on the sax and upbeat in melody for the most part.

Steve found himself nodding along as he cooked, enjoying the smooth rhythms of the music. He was glad Sam recommended it to him; music had been something Steve greatly enjoyed as a kid. He’d loved big band and New Orleans jazz, the palpable freedom of soul in the music and the way it was so clear the musicians loved what they were doing with every fiber of their being. Listening to the music and thinking of the music he’d enjoyed as a kid, old memories surfaced from parts of his life he usually tried to avoid.

Back when he’d been working the streets, there was one drag bar called The Big Apples that he had tried to frequent as much as possible; it had a full band playing almost every minute it was open. The band played mostly requests for tips when there weren’t drag shows playing, and once upon a time, a John had bought Steve a song. Steve, flustered, had said the first thing to pop into his head; Billie Holiday’s *I Can’t Believe You’re In Love With Me.* It was the only song he really knew and he’d regretted it right away because all it did was remind him of Bucky. Yet the John had thought Steve had been real cute and paid him an extra dollar after Steve had blown him in the alley because of it.

Steve tried to stop thinking about working in The Big Apples, but as Marvin Gaye’s *Trouble Man* soundtrack played on, that old bar kept creeping back up in his thoughts. He’d been nervous trying to work a bar at first, but within minutes of his loitering around the bar, the bartender had picked up on his deal and welcomed him. She’d introduced herself as Janice and told him that it was about time The Big Apples got themselves a working fairy and gave him a mixer on the house just to get him going. After that, Big Apples had almost been a new family to him.

A couple of the queens, Betty Boop and Alice From Wonderland, had shown him how to rouge his cheeks to make them look sharper. Janice had pulled out a baseball bat on more than one fella that had tried to buy Steve’s time a little too aggressively. After that John had paid the band to play *I Can’t Believe You’re In Love With Me* that one time, Frank and Eddie picked up that the song meant
something to him and played it at least once a week. Even a few of the regular customers had slipped
him money on more than one occasion without ever asking anything of him. Steve had liked Big
Apples, hanging around there made his job a little less unbearable. It had been shut down only a few
months after Steve had found it, but apparently, Janice and Betty Boop had come back after they’d
come home from the war and re-opened it.

It was actually still open. Steve hadn’t gone back yet.

Even as unpleasant as Steve found thoughts of his old job, he had always missed the sense of family
he’d gotten from Big Apples, the same he’d felt with the Howlies overseas, a lot like what Steve felt
with the Avengers now. He hadn’t had a lot of friends after his mother died. He’d first been evicted
and all the people who’d been kind to him while his mother still breathed seemed to not care enough
about him to go looking for him when he left. He didn’t have any friends from school, St. Maria’s
Finishing School had welcomed him with tight lips and cold shoulders and he’d been all too glad to
leave it. Then, when he’d gotten a new apartment in a much rougher neighborhood than the few
corners of Vinegar Hill where he’d grown up, his new neighbors never cared to know him. Then
he’d kept being rejected on the job market and one interviewer flat out told him *Look, sweetie, we
ain’t got room for a temp boy-girl that’s gonna be gone the minute he gets married.* The first friend
he made after his mother’s death – really, the first friend he made after losing Bucky had been
Eleanor, and she’d been killed barely six months after he met her.

The Big Apples had once been the closest thing to a family Steve had had in a long time. As Marvin
Gaye’s *Trouble Man* soundtrack ended, Steve decided it was time he go back.

“When would you like to carry on listening to music based on these tracks?” JARVIS asked.

“Sure,” Steve answered, half-concentrating on his cooking still.

He’d have to discuss it with Bucky. But Steve wanted to go back to Big Apples, even if he wasn’t
entirely sure of his motives yet, he was sure Bucky wouldn’t mind. Steve hadn’t really gone back to
Brooklyn at all in the past three years. He’d seen the bright lights of Midtown and dreaded what
Brooklyn had become and just hadn’t had the courage to go.

Hell, Steve ought to go back to Brooklyn in its entirety. Even the Winter Soldier had had the bravery
to get back to Brooklyn; Bucky had broken away from his handlers once while Steve had still been
in the ice and found the house where Steve grew up. Steve had a thousand different ghosts
wandering the streets of Brooklyn and it was about time he put them to rest.

Steve had clearly been very lost in thought, as he hadn’t heard any footsteps until Bucky’s hands slid
around his waist. Steve jolted and Bucky chuckled, ducking his face into Steve’s neck even before
Steve relaxed.

“Wha’s this?” Bucky mumbled, his voice pitched low and rumbling from sleep. “My Omega
cookin’ up a storm for no reason?”

“I can cook,” Steve complained faintly. “This is eggs benedict.”

“I have no idea what that is,” Bucky said happily, nuzzling Steve’s neck. “I do know that
somethin’s got your pretty head in a twist.”

Steve ducked his head, then nodded. “I thought… Maybe we should visit Brooklyn when we get
back?”

Bucky kissed his neck once. “Sure,” he answered easily. “Hey, we forgot to call that shrink Sam
gave you.”

Steve swallowed. He nodded again. “After breakfast?” he suggested.

“Yes,” Bucky repeated, kissing Steve’s neck again. “I smell coffee?”

Steve pointed and Bucky released him to go in search of coffee mugs. Steve had just finished
cooking; he spooned grits onto plates, layered bacon on top of toast and laid the poached eggs on top
of the bacon, covering it all with the hollandaise sauce. Steve set the plates on the breakfast bar, then
dug out forks and dropped a kiss onto Bucky’s cheek as he passed him to walk around the other side
of the bar. Bucky followed him with two cups of coffee, putting one in front of Steve and touching
the back of his neck briefly as he sat down. Steve leaned into his touch, momentary as it was, then
picked up his fork.

“This is good,” Bucky said, chewing. “What's this yellow stuff?”

“Hollandaise,” Steve answered. “I think I didn’t do it quite right.”

Bucky leaned over and pecked his cheek. “Still delicious,” he promised.
Steve shot him a smile and Bucky copied it; his Alpha reached over and knocked a finger under Steve’s chin and Steve’s smile grew.

“I like anything you cook,” Bucky promised.

“You’re a suck-up,” Steve answered easily.

Bucky laughed at him and dug back into his breakfast. Steve did, too; the food was good, despite the hollandaise being not quite right. Steve figured he didn’t have enough egg yolk or hadn’t cooked it right, as it was a bit runny. Still, he enjoyed it, and Bucky seemed to like it, too. The coffee was great as well, and perhaps Steve had to admit that the freshly ground organic Sumatran beans were better than Folgers.

When Steve had mopped up the last of his hollandaise with his toast, Bucky whisked his plate away and headed over to the sink.

“You cooked, I’ll clean up,” Bucky said over his shoulder.

“I can help,” Steve insisted, getting up.

“Nope!” Bucky insisted. “I’ve got it.”

Steve dropped back onto his stool. “Fine,” he grumbled. He propped his chin up on a fist and leaned forward on his elbow to watch as Bucky began to wash up. “What do you want to do today?”

Bucky sent a glance over his shoulder but carried on. “I figured we could go for a walk. See the sights?”

“Sure,” Steve replied. “We’ll have to bring my phone or something, so JARVIS can keep us away from the animals.”

“Stark said JARVIS monitored all activity,” Bucky agreed. “The Komodo dragons are apparently
on the other side of the island.”

“Let’s not seek them out,” Steve advised, laughing.

Bucky shrugged, turning as he dried a frying pan. “We could climb the volcano, get a peek of where they live from above.”

Steve shrugged as well. “Maybe. I saw a tiger last night.”

Bucky held up the frying pan, eyebrows raised. Steve pointed to a lower cabinet.

“A tiger?” Bucky prompted as he put away the pan. “Like, big orange cat with stripes?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “It was in the yard, just walking. It looked right at me.”

“A tiger,” Bucky repeated, turning around and setting his hands on the counter, a musing expression on his face. “Damn. Should’a woken me up.”

Steve laughed once softly. “If it had stayed long enough for me to catch my breath, I would’ve.”

Bucky chuckled, shaking his head as he turned away. “Maybe we’ll see it again today.”

“Only if we’re inside the house, I hope,” Steve exhaled. “JARVIS, are there any tigers within the safe area?”

“There are not currently any tigers within the bounds of the house’s grounds,” JARVIS answered. “There are, however, a group of Orangutans traveling across the grounds, a small group of Uakari monkeys making residence on one of the corners of the property, and a few stray Capuchin monkeys just outside.”

“Outside?” Steve echoed, jumping up and spinning around.
“On the west side of the house,” JARVIS reported.

Steve ran for the far side of the house, where they had entered the day before. He jumped onto a day bench to look out the window, peering around to catch a sight of the monkeys.

Then the blonde and black form of a hairy primate swooped down from the roof and landed on the wide ledge of the window right in Steve’s face. Steve yelped and fell backwards, toppling off the bench completely. The monkey screeched, audible through the plasma-shielded doorway nearby, and behind Steve, Bucky started laughing.

“I warn you, the white-headed Capuchins of this island are very bold,” JARVIS chimed in politely.

“Are you okay?” Bucky laughed, his footsteps approaching as Steve scrambled to his feet.

The monkey screeched through the window, like it was laughing.

“Oh, my God,” Steve breathed out. “JARVIS, you neglected to mention that Capuchin monkeys are assholes!”

“Most monkeys are,” JARVIS replied blithely.

Bucky, laughing, pressed up against Steve’s back and leaned heavily on him. Steve flipped the monkey in the window the bird, but it only screech-laughed at him again before vanishing. Steve huffed and turned in Bucky’s arms.

“I don’t like monkeys anymore,” Steve decided.

“Okay,” Bucky wheezed.

Steve showed Bucky his middle finger and gave him a shove. Bucky stumbled back towards the kitchen, still laughing, and Steve picked up the last of the dishes, putting them in the sink to deal with later.
“JARVIS, how many species of monkey are on this island?” Bucky asked behind Steve.

“There are nine species of monkey,” JARVIS answered. “Most of which are non-aggressive and remain within the confines of their territory.”

“Are there any monkeys around the fishing spot?” Steve asked, remembering Tony talking about the pool near the house.

“There are none,” JARVIS answered. “Sir has developed animal calls to warn the local monkeys away from the pool by mimicking normal monkey speech.”

“You wanna go skinny dipping?” Bucky asked Steve.

Steve sent a dry look over his shoulder, then wiped his hands on a towel and turned to head for the bedroom. Bucky followed behind him, sitting on the bed while Steve dug through the suitcase.

“What about insects?” Steve asked. “JARVIS?”

“Insect repellent is recommended,” JARVIS answered. “There are numerous species of insects upon the island, but none known to my knowledge are carrying any diseases. Mosquito bites are still annoying, however.”

“Right,” Steve answered. He took shorts from the suitcase instead of full-length jeans, tossing a pair to Bucky and keeping one for himself. “Any parasites in the water?”

“The water supply is regulated at the source,” JARVIS answered. “Harmful bacteria and parasites are eliminated there.”

“Thanks,” Steve said.

“Are we gonna go skinny dipping or nah?” Bucky asked him cheekily.
Steve ignored him. He shrugged off his T-shirt, replacing it with a fresh one, then swapped his pajama bottoms for the shorts. He grabbed socks and joined Bucky on the bed to pull them on, then went looking for his shoes while Bucky got dressed, too.

“There is fishing tackle in the hallway closet,” JARVIS chimed in. “I would recommend attempting the sport, it is quite relaxing.”

“Why not?” Steve said. He got up and went looking for the fishing tackle while Bucky finished getting dressed, then realized they hadn’t packed any insect repellent. “Is there bug spray in the house somewhere?”

“In the closet,” JARVIS answered.

Steve found the closet JARVIS was talking about and opened it; inside was a wide array of items, from the aforementioned fishing tackle, to a shelf laden with different suntan lotions. There was bug spray with the sunscreens, and Steve picked up a bottle of 100 SPF sunscreen to go with the bug spray just in case.

Steve put the bug spray and sunscreen on the counter, then unloaded the closet of the fishing gear. There were several rods, but only one tackle box; the tackle box was large and very heavy, so Steve guessed anything they might need was already in it. He looked over the fishing rods, wondering which ones they’d be better off using.

“I would recommend the red and black and the purple rod,” JARVIS spoke up. “Both are beginner rods.”

“Thanks,” Steve said, and put away the other rods.

Bucky exited the bedroom and Steve tossed the bug spray at him. “Suit up,” Steve said, smiling.

Bucky rolled his eyes. Steve used the sunblock lotion while Bucky sprayed himself with the insect repellent. Steve got whatever skin wasn’t covered by his clothes with the lotion, taking care to cover his nose and cheeks. He swapped with Bucky after he was done, then put the two bottles into the tackle box so they could re-apply it as needed.

“Can you grab my phone?” Steve asked Bucky.
Bucky held it up. “Already got it,” he said.

Steve decided this was worthy of a kiss. He walked over and laced his fingers behind Bucky’s neck, then pressed their lips together slowly. Bucky’s hands came to rest on his waist and Steve leaned into him, gently slanting their mouths together. When Bucky’s hands started to circle tighter around Steve’s body, one inevitably bound for his ass, Steve pulled back.

“C’mon,” Steve said, smiling at his Alpha, “let’s see the sights.”

Bucky pecked his lips again. “Can’t get a quickie in before we go, can we?” he asked.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Maybe if you try hard enough, we can scare the fishes later.”

Bucky flicked his eyebrows up and down, his grin hopeful. Steve gave his shoulder a shove and turned to picked up the tackle box.

Bucky immediately took it from him. Steve rolled his eyes, but didn’t fight it. He took the fishing rods, and Bucky disengaged the plasma shields from the inside by pressing a button on a control panel. After they left, Steve glanced over his shoulder and saw the plasma shields rising again.

Steve transferred both fishing rods to one shoulder and pulled out his phone. “So, JARVIS, can you direct us to the fishing pool?”

“Certainly,” JARVIS answered. “If you would head north, take the left-branching fork of the path.”

Steve held his phone in his hand so JARVIS could continue giving them directions, but Bucky slung his arm over Steve’s shoulders so they walked arm-in-arm still. As they entered the forest, Bucky squeezed Steve’s shoulders.

“You wanna call that shrink?” he asked.
Steve glanced at Bucky. His footsteps slowed for a second, then he nodded and pulled his phone a little closer to him so he could dig out the number. Bucky let his hand fall to Steve’s waist instead of his shoulders and pecked his cheek as Steve found Dr. Madini’s phone number in Sam’s texts. Steve took a steadying breath of the lush, clean air of the island, then dialed the number.

Steve held his phone up to his ear. The line rang four times.

“You’ve reached New Roads Omegas’ and Beta Women’s Shelter,” a woman’s voice answered. “If you are interested in booking an appointment with our health clinic, please press 1. If you want to book an appointment with our counselling staff, press 2. If you need to speak with someone right away, please press 3. If you are currently in an emergency, please hang up and dial 911 right away. If you cannot reveal that you are dialling 911, pretend you are ordering a pizza and persist, 911 operatives are trained to recognize that tactic. To hear this message again, please press 4.”

Steve dropped the phone from his ear and pressed 2. He lifted it again and it dialed.

“This is New Roads Omegas’ and Beta Women’s Counselling,” the same woman’s voice said. “All of our phone operators are currently busy. We appreciate your call and will answer it in the order in which it was received. You are the –” a more computerized voice “ – second caller in the queue.” The actual woman’s voice came back. “Thank you for your patience.”

“Stevie?” Bucky prompted.

“I’m on hold,” Steve mumbled.

Bucky snorted. He tugged on Steve’s waist and they started walking again while quiet music started playing over Steve’s phone. Steve put it on speaker and then muted his end so he’d be able to let his phone hang by his side again.

“Take the right fork,” JARVIS told them.

Within minutes, they reached a clearing and a long pond of crystal blue water fed by the waterfall Steve had been hearing. The bank was covered in lush green grass, the dirt path ending just past the edge of the treeline. The opposite bank was ringed by trees, the waterfall to the left of them came from a fifteen or twenty foot height, a picnic table sat on a rocky outcropping near the waterfall and overlooking the pond.
“Okay,” he started, “here’s the plan. You finish your phone call. Then we get naked and jump off the waterfall.”

Steve looked at him. Bucky looked right back. Steve raised his eyebrows.

“What?” Bucky asked defensively.

Steve laughed and leaned forward to catch Bucky’s lips in a kiss. Bucky set down the tackle box and pulled Steve in closer by his waist, his hands circling Steve’s ribs, and kissed Steve back enthusiastically. Steve simply dropped the fishing poles and circled his arms around Bucky’s neck, the phone still hanging from his hand. One of Bucky’s hands dipped down and his fingertips slipped past Steve’s waistband.

“You are the first caller in the queue,” Steve’s phone announced.

Steve and Bucky were startled apart. Bucky looked around wildly at first then jerked and glared at Steve’s phone.

“Cockblock!” Bucky snapped at the phone.

“Hi, you’ve reached New Roads Omegas’ and Beta Women’s Counselling, can I help you?” Steve’s phone said then.

Bucky slapped his hands over his mouth and Steve laughed again, quickly reminding him that it was muted before turning off speakerphone and unmuting it. He pressed the phone to his ear and sat down at the picnic table.

“Hi,” Steve answered the operator. “I was wondering if I could speak with Dr. Larah Madini?”

“Can I ask who’s calling?”

“It’s –” Steve started. He sat up straighter, blanking on how to actually do this. “Uh, Sam Wilson referred me,” he said, hoping the operator would just accept that. “Could you just tell Dr. Madini that? She’ll know what it means.”
“Could I have your name, sir?” the operator pressed.

Steve floundered. “It’s Steve,” he said.

“Could I ask what the nature of the call is?”

“I’d like to discuss booking an appointment with her,” Steve said.

“Are you aware that we only take Omega or Beta women patients, sir?”

“Yes,” Steve said, getting frustrated now. “I’m an Omega.”

The operator paused. Steve winced as he could practically hear them connecting the dots between his name and his designation and Sam Wilson being one of the Avengers. These people were professionals, Steve reminded himself, he wasn’t going to get written up in the tabloids for calling a counselling office.

“I’ll put you through to her office, sir,” the operator said.

“Thank you,” Steve mumbled.

Bucky sat down on the bench next to Steve and gripped Steve’s knee. Steve glanced at him and Bucky flashed him a quick smile before leaning in and kissing his cheek. Steve leaned against Bucky’s side, putting his head on Bucky’s shoulder.

The line clicked yet again.

“This is Larah Madini, and if I’m not talking to Captain Steve Rogers, buddy, have you got some dumbass luck.”

Steve blinked, and then laughed.
“I think I’m not actually a Captain anymore,” he mused in reply. “I kinda got retired?”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not a Captain anymore,” Bucky said.

“But you are that Steve Rogers,” Dr. Madini said.

“Unfortunately,” Steve answered.

“Alright, cool, I got about half an hour to talk. When were you thinking of booking your first session?”

“Uh,” Steve said. “Well, I’m currently on vacation? Bucky, when are we going back to New York?”

“November 13th,” Bucky answered.

“I’ll be back in New York November 13th,” Steve said into the phone. “What’s the first available appointment after that, I guess?”

“How about Wednesday the 15th?” Dr. Madini replied. “I have an 11 o’clock, a 3:15, and a 4:30.”

“Four-thirty,” Steve answered.

“Alright, that’s that,” Dr. Madini said. “To protect your identity, I’m gonna have you come in the employee’s entrance and one of our staff will let you in and do new patient paperwork with you before the appointment. Show up around, like, four.”

“Okay,” Steve said.

“Boring stuff out of the way,” Dr. Madini continued, “what kinds’a things are ya lookin’ to work
Steve gave pause. He opened his mouth and looked out at the greenery before him, watching a brightly colored bird preening its wings in a nearby tree.

“Sam told you things, didn’t he?” Steve asked.

“Sure,” Dr. Madini said. “But he only gave me his observations and, like, super vague ones at that. Which, in hindsight, makes total sense. What do you want to work on?”

“And you’ve seen the news?” Steve added.

“I have,” Dr. Madini replied. “Is the reason you want to see me related to some of the things you admitted during the Project Insight inquiry?”

“Yes,” Steve said. He clenched his jaw and swallowed, his gaze dropped to the ground and he shifted in his seat. “That’s most of it.”

“What else?” Dr. Madini prompted.

Bucky gripped Steve’s knee gently, bringing him back to earth. Steve exhaled deeply through his nose.

“I have depression,” Steve admitted with difficulty.

Bucky nodded quickly, encouraging him.

“And… body issues,” Steve muttered. “I think that’s what it’s called.”

“Okay,” Dr. Madini said. “What kind of body issues?”
Steve clenched his jaw again, looking down at his empty hand sitting on his knee. Bucky picked it up quickly with his metal hand and folded their fingers together, squeezing Steve’s hand gently.

“I’m not sure what the technical term would be,” Steve muttered.

“*Let me worry about technical terms,*” Dr. Madini told him. “*And feel free to be brief, this is only preliminary, Steve.*”

“I’m –” Steve started. “I’m unhappy with my body. I guess.”

“You guess?”

Steve bit down on his lip for a second. “I’m not happy about my body,” he said honestly. Forcing himself to get the words out. “I mean – You know what Captain America looks like? You know what I look like?”

“I do,” Dr. Madini said.

“I didn’t always look like this,” Steve said. “And sometimes – a lot –” he added from another nod from Bucky “– it makes me… upset.”

“Okay,” Dr. Madini said. “You can get more into this during face-to-face sessions, Steve.”

Steve tried not to sigh in relief. “Fine with me,” he replied.

“Is there anything else you think I should know before our first session?”

Steve glanced at Bucky, who was smiling, but visibly tense. Even without knowing Bucky’s body language, Steve could feel Bucky’s emotions through their bond.

“Is it okay if my Alpha comes with me to the first couple of appointments?” Steve asked, squeezing Bucky’s hand.
“I think that would be fair,” Dr. Madini answered. “We’re talking about Sergeant Barnes? Or is he no longer a Sergeant, too?”

“He was a Sergeant Major, and yeah,” Steve said.

“Okay,” Dr. Madini repeated. “Just to let you know, because I’m aware of former Sergeant Major Barnes’s past, we do have security professionals on-site.”

“It’ll be fine,” Steve promised her. “He doesn’t – He’s not dangerous,” he said. Bucky’s gaze dropped and Steve quickly squeezed his hand again, wishing he didn’t have to explain this. “Even if he goes Winter Soldier, he listens to me.”

“That’s fine,” Dr. Madini said. “And to be clear, I technically can only treat you, Steve. Your Alpha can join us when needed and he can always escort you to your appointments, but I can’t do couples’ therapy. We do have a couples’ therapist on staff, though.”

“It’s okay,” Steve said. “Uh, do you need anything more from me?”

“Nope,” Dr. Madini answered. “Your appointment is November 15th at 4:30, take the employee’s entrance in, arrive around 4 to go over new patient paperwork, yep, that’s it. Enjoy your vacation, Steve!”

“Thanks,” Steve replied a little bit numbly.

His phone beeped. Steve dropped it from his ear, looked at it, then lifted off the bench a little and shoved it into his pocket. Bucky detangled their hands and wrapped his arm around Steve’s waist instead, tugging him in some.

“You okay?” Bucky asked softly.

Steve lifted his gaze from the rocky ground. He looked at the green, growing things surrounding them. The life in the trees. Then up at the sky and the clearest blue he’d ever seen in his life, then to the water and wondered if it was an even clearer blue.
“I think so,” Steve answered eventually.

Bucky squeezed Steve’s waist. Steve leaned his head on Bucky, looking at the pond, then he eventually shut his eyes and just breathed in the spray coming from the waterfall.

“You wanna try that fishing?” Bucky suggested. “Before we scare off all the fish?”

Steve laughed. He turned and cupped Bucky’s face in his hands and pressed their lips together. Gently at first, then more firmly.

“We didn’t bring anything to put the fish in,” Steve reminded him.

“Well, that was dumb,” Bucky muttered, trying to chase Steve’s lips.

“We can go fishing tomorrow,” Steve said.

“Good plan,” Bucky answered, his hands gripping Steve harder abruptly. “I like that plan. I always said you were the brains of this outfit.”

Steve laughed again softly, then pushed off the bench with Bucky still trying to kiss him. Steve disengaged their lips and touched Bucky’s cheek briefly, then took the hem of his shirt in his hands. Bucky immediately dropped his gaze and sat back a little.

“Excellent plan,” Bucky said.

Steve rolled his eyes. He lifted his shirt over his head and shook it out before setting it on the picnic table. Bucky took Steve’s waist and pulled him closer, then rubbed his face all over Steve’s abs.

“Best plan ever,” Bucky said. “Better than that time you convinced Phillips and the brass that the whole squad had the flu so we could get a coupl’a days off. And that was a damn fine plan.”

“I was aided by the fact that you were flushed and sweaty ‘cause you were rutting,” Steve reminded Bucky with a smirk and raised eyebrows. “With me not even in heat. You should’a been
“ashamed’a ya’self.”

“Oh, I promise I was, babydoll,” Bucky said, looking up at Steve with big eyes. “I only vaguely remember what happened prior to convincing the brass we had the flu and after we got that bunk to ourselves, all I remember is a whole lotta your ass.”

“Half’a your life revolved around my ass,” Steve sniggered.

Bucky dropped a kiss onto Steve’s sternum. “And the rest of my life’s gonna revolve around your ass, sweetheart.”

Steve rolled his eyes. Bucky dropped a few more kisses up Steve’s sternum, then attached to his nipple and bit it. Steve jolted and Bucky chuckled, licking over Steve’s nipple apologetically.

“Are we gonna scare the fish or not?” Steve asked quickly.

“My bad,” Bucky answered, standing up. He kissed Steve on the mouth, then separated from him and stripped off his own shirt. After, he grabbed Steve by the waist and pulled him in to kiss him again. “Are ya wet, sugar?” Bucky murmured against Steve’s lips.

“S been two seconds,” Steve said, giggling abruptly. “You gotta give me a minute or two, Buck.”

Bucky growled softly and ducked his head into Steve’s neck; Steve automatically lifted his chin to bare his throat. Bucky rubbed his cheek over Steve’s skin, then stopped at Steve’s scent gland and closed his mouth over it. Bucky started sucking rhythmically on it and Steve hooked his fingers into the waistband of Bucky’s shorts.

“C’mon,” Steve mumbled, tugging on Bucky’s clothes. “Are we skinny dipping or not?”

Bucky lifted off of Steve’s neck and withdrew his hands to unbutton his pants. Steve took a step back and just watched Bucky getting his belt off, then he smiled to himself and palmed himself through his own shorts. Bucky glanced up and grinned at Steve before kicking his shorts and boxers completely off.
“Like what ya see, dollface?” Bucky purred, setting his hands on his hips.

“Mhmm,” Steve answered, not looking Bucky in the eye. “Think I like it a lot.”

Bucky laughed and reached for Steve. Steve obeyed and Bucky released his belt and shorts for him. Steve reached up and cupped Bucky’s cheeks in his hands and lifted Bucky’s face to press their lips together. Bucky slipped his tongue into Steve’s mouth as he pushed Steve’s shorts and boxers off his hips. Steve stepped out of them and pressed tight to Bucky’s body.

Bucky’s hands gripped Steve’s ass and Steve pushed his arms around Bucky’s neck before breaking their kiss and lifting his chin. Bucky moved his lips down Steve’s neck again, back to his scent gland, and Steve let him suck on it for a moment before speaking.

“Last one to the waterfall has to make dinner tonight,” he said, then tore away from Bucky and started sprinting the thirty foot distance.

“YOU PUNK!” Bucky roared behind him and Steve just laughed.

Steve didn’t run at full speed. Bucky slammed into Steve from the back a few feet from the waterfall and lifted him off his feet completely in a bear hug. Steve laughed again and threw his head back onto Bucky’s shoulder, a wide, beaming grin splitting his face as Bucky’s metal arm whirred with the strain of picking Steve up.

“Mine,” Bucky grumbled. “Lil’ shit.”

“My dumbass knothead,” Steve chuckled.

Bucky snorted. “I guess I deserved that,” he admitted, putting Steve back on his feet.

Steve turned around around and draped his arms over Bucky’s shoulders, still grinning. “I love you,” he said.

Bucky rubbed their noses together, a faint purr rising from the back of his throat. “Love you, too, Omegamine,” he murmured and Steve grinned wider.
if you enjoyed this, pls leave a comment bc it'd make my day. i'll get a cover and playlist added probably tomorrow? i'll also add bloopers tomorrow, they exist, i just don't have access to them rn bc i'm uploading this from beth's (future-sister-in-law) laptop. so, yeah, things will be added later, come back tomorrow. ily and ttyl.

bloopers!

lexi: “Steve decided the only thing that would make the moment better was a fresh cup of hot coffee” WOW
me: hahahaha
lexi: i love how you knew what i was just saying
me: lmao yeah it’s me
lexi: “y’know what would make this better?? the thing i sold my soul to!!”
lexi: “Organic decaf Sumatra” WOW YOU PRETENTIOUS ASS BITCH
me: it’s good! have you ever had sumatran coffee??
lexi: no. bc i don’t drink coffee.
me: … okay that’s fair

lexi: i’m just imagining this as like a sit com, like steve’s here happily making coffee and it’s peaceful and he’s making breakfast and then it flashes to bucky and he’s ugly drooling and snoring, like he rolls over and scratches his ass and then goes back to snoring
me: omg i’m dead

lexi: “Hey Jarvis?” “Yes, Mr. Barnes?” oh fuck off he’s still doing that

lexi: you have 420 words on steve making coffee
me:

lexi: “Thanks,” Steve replied, opening the bag of beeeaaaans” beeeeeeeeeeans
me: bEEEEEans

lexi: “ there was no sound of movement coming from the bedroom” again, that man is asleep. he can’t hear anything over the sound of his own snoring. like, it flashes back to bucky snoring

lexi: “the empty air representing JARVIS” it’s me, it’s my soul, i’m the empty air

lexi: “JARVIS’s voice was replaced by smooth jazz”
jules: isn’t his voice normally smooth jazz
lexi: you’re right his voice is like butter
me: ohmygod y’all

lexi: “Wha’s this?” Bucky mumbled, his voice pitched low and rumbling from sleep”
UGH when people’s voices are deeper from sleep UGH nut

lexi: “I smell coffee?” ugh you fucking coffee addict
me: will you stop judging me i’m not even addicted anymore!
lexi:
me:
lexi: anymore
me: fuck off

lexi: “I like anything you cook,” Bucky promised.” GAY Jarvis said in the background

lexi: “The coffee was great as well” IF YOU KEEP TALKING ABOUT COFFEE
I’M GOING TO PHYSICALLY FIGHT YOU
me: that is the last time the coffee is brought up

lexi: “Like, big orange cat with stripes?” no a big purple cat BITCH THE FUCK DO
YOU MEAN YES A TIGER
me: omg
lexi: my relationship versus their relationship

lexi: “You wanna go skinny dipping?” Bucky asked Steve.” can you get your dick out
of Steve’s ass for five seconds
me: um no?
lexi: lmao i know

lexi: “I have depression,” Steve admitted” i have Crippling Depression!
me, at the same time: I have Crippling Depression!

lexi: “YOU PUNK!” Bucky roared” this reminds me of that A/B/O thing with chasing,
like the Omega runs not bc of danger but just to be chased and it triggers Instinct in the
Alpha to chase and like claim them
me: yeah i’ve seen that
lexi: it always ends with like mating and pregnancy
me: y’know metaphorically, that’s what happens in kept boy
lexi: metaphorically
me: metaphorically
me: lemme write that down and then you can conclude
lexi: okie
lexi: *singing* i can concluuuuuude!

lexi, in conclusion: it’s not as long as the last chapter and i appreciate that. ummm you talk about coffee way too fucking much
me: *snorting*
lexi: and i’m really excited to see them doing domestic things like fishing. it’s cute.

end bloopers. don't judge my previous caffeine addiction. shhhhh. i can drink half-caf without getting a headache the next day. shhhhhhhhhhhh! it's st*b/ck's fault! the coffee was free!
uh so if you did not notice the chapter title, it is *fuck my mouth, daddy* and that should be an indicator that this chapter is very NSFW. like, it's only 28% plot. i actually calculated that, this chapter is 28% plot and 72% porn. in addition to this chapter being smutty, the next three chapters will all be smutty.

bc, you see, i had considered doing kinktober but just had too many things going on during then. so instead, i'm going to do No Shame November. like no shave november, get it? idk where i heard it but it's a thing i swear, so the next three chapters, the remaining chapters for november, shall be smutty and kinky and cover all of sneve and bucker's vacation sex. you're welcome?

as always, thanks to lexi for checking my writing. we couldn't read this chapter aloud but she left plenty of comments so there are still bloopers. second, do you guys like having playlists to go with the chapters? i didn't create one for this one or last week bc i was traveling both times, but it seems kinda like nobody listens to them so i might just stop? it's a lot of effort, anyway. i'll keep making the chapter covers, though, and you can find this week's chapter cover on my tumblr [here](link). when you're done here, i completed my Captain America Big Bang fic yesterday and, y'all, it's a ride. i can't tell you what percentage of it is purely plot but there's a significant chunk of smut. if you haven't checked it out, head over there when you have a chance and enjoy it. i also have the college au that was updated friday and the gays are proving to be very dumb, indeed. tomorrow i will be updating Like Rahab, with more WW2 hurt/comfort. and now, without further ado!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Once upon a time, Steve found expansive rainfall showers pretentious, annoying, a waste of money and water, and most importantly, something that only Rich People™ would ever own or operate and thus, Steve would never have so floppy a moral backbone as to have and use a rainfall shower.
Day three of vacation, Steve was starting to think rainfall showers were pretty nice. For the simple reason that because the shower was so massive, there was plenty of room for him and Bucky to waste time trying to empty the hot water tank.

“Y’know what I love most about you?” Bucky mumbled against Steve’s neck between kisses.

“Mmm, what?” Steve chuckled with a grin.

“You taste like cookies,” Bucky said emphatically with a grin to match Steve’s.

Steve laughed, soft and breathy that was cut off quickly by a moan as Bucky licked over his scent gland. They’d been lazily necking and grinding against each other for the past half hour, Steve was keyed up in all the best ways and his scent gland throbbed with every beat of his pulse.

“You’re a sugar addict,” Steve accused, and not for the first time.

“I ain’t denyin’ it,” Bucky answered happily.

“I prefer savory foods,” Steve said, looking through his lashes at Bucky.

Bucky ran his tongue up Steve’s neck and closed his lips over his ear. Steve shut his eyes with a light moan, leaning his head to the side as well. Bucky nibbled on Steve’s earlobe for a moment, then kissed his way back to Steve’s mouth and Steve happily let his lips part for Bucky’s tongue. They’d had pan-fried fish for dinner, fish they’d caught themselves, and Bucky still tasted kinda like the peppery sauce JARVIS had coached Steve through making.

As they kissed, Steve waited for an opportunity to bring up what he really wanted to be doing. The thought had popped into Steve’s mind while Bucky had been washing his hair earlier and now Steve couldn’t get it out of his head. It wasn’t often he craved this and it wasn’t often he craved it so bad. Steve could feel Bucky’s length weeping against his hip like it was mocking him.

“Buck,” Steve said quietly as his Alpha kissed back down his neck. “Can I ask something?”

“Hmm?” Bucky rumbled, his voice sending little vibrations into Steve’s scent gland and making
Steve rubbed his thighs together. “Wha’s up, babydoll?”

“You remember when you first got back?” Steve started. “I asked if I could —” he paused, looking for a delicate way to phrase it. As Steve thought, Bucky pulled off Steve’s neck, leaning back with his arms still locked around Steve’s waist. Steve cleared his throat. “If I could use my mouth on you,” he said eventually.

Bucky’s cheeks turned ruddy. He clenched his jaw and nodded a little.

“You didn’t want me to,” Steve continued.

Bucky dropped Steve’s gaze. Steve reached up and framed Bucky’s cheeks with both hands gently.

“Is that still true?” he asked. “Because I want to. A lot.”

Bucky sighed and glanced around the shower, clearly avoiding looking at Steve. He chewed on his lower lip the way he did when he was thinking and nervous and Steve leaned in to press a light kiss to Bucky’s cheek before laying his head on Bucky’s shoulder, so Bucky wouldn’t have to avoid looking him in the eye. Bucky sighed again, tightening his arms around Steve’s waist.

“I don’ know,” Bucky said. “It’s not – It’s not like I don’t want you to –”

“So what is it?” Steve prompted gently. “You can talk to me, Buck.”

“It’s hard to explain,” Bucky muttered.

Steve dropped a light kiss onto Bucky’s collarbone. “Take your time,” he said. “There’s no rush.”

Bucky nodded. While Bucky thought, Steve shut his eyes and let himself enjoy the feeling of being held, of the water hitting his back, of Bucky’s pulse beating against his forehead. He consciously acknowledged that this intimate moment was worth all the pain and trouble it had taken to get him there and that pain and trouble didn’t negate the fact that he loved getting to hold Bucky and be held. It was warm in the shower but not stuffy, dim but not dark. The steam took on Bucky’s scent, which had been stronger than Steve’s as of late. The luxurious shower didn’t feel pretentious or wasteful, it just felt blissful.
Bucky cleared his throat. “I think,” he began quietly. “I think it’s because – ‘cause I remember that – that doing it is supposed to be degrading.”

Steve just nodded, his head still tucked under Bucky’s chin. He understood that.

“And I don’t want to degrade you,” Bucky continued. “Especially not so I can get off on it. It’s just – It’s disgusting, what I remember about the way guys talked about it. You offered to do it and all I could hear was some guy I went to school with talkin’ about how he held his girl down so he could knot her mouth while she cried,” Bucky said, his voice twisted with shame and discomfort. “And I’ve hurt you enough already,” he told Steve apologetically, “I can’t do that to you.”

“I get it,” Steve said. He lifted up and kissed Bucky quickly, then pressed their foreheads together and cupped Bucky’s cheek. “It took me a while to not feel shitty about doing it, too. But,” Steve said gently, giving Bucky a smile, “that kinda attitude happens because Alphas were assholes.”

Bucky laughed a little, breaking into a smile. Steve rubbed his thumb against Bucky’s cheek, smiling back at him.

“It’s only degrading if someone makes it,” Steve insisted kindly. “And I know you wouldn’t.”

“I guess,” Bucky mumbled.

“What if I showed you?” Steve asked then, his gaze slipping down. “What if I –” he began, hesitating “– what if I was in charge?”

Bucky lifted an eyebrow. “In charge?” he questioned cautiously.

“Made it about me,” Steve suggested, looking back up. “Can’t be degrading for me if I’m… being in charge?” he concluded, floundering a little.

Bucky snorted, rolled his eyes and reached up to tap under Steve’s chin. “You’re gonna be my CO in the bedroom, too, Cap?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Ew, no,” Steve said, shoving lightly at Bucky’s shoulder. “That’s way too much effort for one
thing. But seriously,” he continued, sobering. “I’m fuckin’ craving sucking your dick, Buck,” he said soberly.

Then Steve paused and glanced down, looking down Bucky’s body as he threw together a fast plan. Steve intentionally sucked his lower lip into his mouth and let it pop back out, then looked back up and fixed his gaze on Bucky’s.

“So,” Steve said steadily, “give it to me.”

Bucky’s eyes widened very slowly. He blinked once, then cleared his throat almost nervously. As Bucky fumbled to find his brain, Steve ducked in and closed his lips over Bucky’s ear. He ran his tongue under Bucky’s earlobe and back over top of it, then suckled rhythmically for a second before breaking off and licking up the shell of Bucky’s ear.

Then he just stopped, pulling his lips back just enough so they brushed against Bucky’s ear as he whispered: “Give it to me, Buck.”

“Since fuckin’ when have you been –” Bucky spluttered, sounding like he’d been struck dumb; Steve was very pleased. “Since when have you been this? ” Bucky demanded, incredibly flustered.

Steve leaned back and shrugged. “Since you said you liked it,” he answered, smiling a little. “I thought, why the fuck not? I like it when you get flustered.”

Bucky blinked. Steve grinned to himself. Bucky blinked, then slammed Steve into the wall and started kissing him within an inch of his life. Steve was initially startled but didn’t take long to get with the program. He put his hands on Bucky’s shoulders and simply jumped to wrap his legs around Bucky’s waist; Bucky caught him by the ass and immediately started fondling Steve, digging in his fingers so hard Steve was hopeful Bucky might leave bruises.

Steve gave Bucky about ten seconds, then pushed him off. Bucky dropped him and stepped back, panting. Steve put his hand on Bucky’s shoulder and shoved him up against the opposite wall, much to Bucky’s widening eyes and Steve’s satisfaction.

“I said,” Steve murmured, “gimme.”

Bucky gulped, then nodded. Steve first pressed against Bucky’s body again and kissed his neck tenderly, then started dropping little kisses down Bucky’s torso as he shifted to his knees. Steve paused at Bucky’s chest to lick and suck at a nipple, making Bucky groan, but he didn’t spend long
there. Steve licked down Bucky’s abs, tracing the hard lines of his body with his lips and tongue.

There were short, stiff hairs growing back in steadily up Bucky’s stomach, between his pecs, over his inner thighs and groin, another reminder of Bucky’s imprisonment with HYDRA. Steve still remembered resting his nose in a much thicker patch of hair between Bucky’s legs, rose-colored vignettes of memories from both more than seventy years and less than three years in the past. Steve teased his way down Bucky’s body slowly now. He had more memories to make.

“You gonna suck my dick or what, dollface?” Bucky asked.

His right hand pushed into Steve’s wet hair and his thumb stroked over Steve’s temple; Steve leaned into his touch and looked up through his lashes, smiling.

“I’ll get to it,” he said. Then he grinned wider. “Daddy.”

Bucky turned another ruddy color and shut his mouth with a snap. Steve chuckled and ducked closer to tongue at Bucky’s navel for a moment before rubbing his cheek over Bucky’s hip.

“You gotta be patient, Daddy,” Steve purred. “I’m enjoying myself here.”

“Jesus Christ, Rogers,” Bucky muttered.

“Language, Daddy,” Steve scolded lightly.

“God’ll forgive me,” Bucky said quickly. “He’d understand.”

“Oh?” Steve prompted, then ran a hand up the inside of Bucky’s thigh, prompting Bucky to shuffle his feet apart and widen his stance. “You a lil’ bit shook up there, Daddy?” Steve asked.

“Just a little,” Bucky answered.

“Hmm, I must not be doin’ my job right,” Steve said, then ducked in and licked Bucky from root to tip without further ceremony. Bucky choked in a groan and Steve sat back on his heels, smirking up
at Bucky. “Is that better, Daddy?”

“Be real better if you quit fuckin’ around,” Bucky growled, opening his eyes after he’d shut them and lifted his head after he’d thrown it back against the shower wall. “What’chu waitin’ for, babydoll?”

“Oh, you know me,” Steve replied. He reached up and used his hand instead to play with Bucky’s length, letting go after barely a few seconds and making Bucky gasp again. “I like making sure I get a good lay’a the land before I go charging in.”

“I don’t believe that for one second, punk,” Bucky accused.

Steve shrugged a little, still smiling serenely up at Bucky. “Whatever you say, Daddy,” he answered and ducked in without warning again.

Sure, it had been four years (for him at least) since Steve joined the Army and stopped turning tricks to pay his rent, but once you learn how to deepthroat with little to no prep, you don’t forget. It’s like riding a bike. If the bike were a 9-inch long and nearly 3-inch wide dick. Steve relaxed his throat and swallowed Bucky entirely.

“Oh–oh, fuck!” Bucky gasped. Steve swallowed around the obstruction in his throat and Bucky let out an almost keening whine. “Stevie,” Bucky said breathlessly, “babydoll, sugar, sweetheart, pretty, fuck!”

Steve simply hummed in answer. Bucky groaned again and Steve pushed his mouth a little further on. He used his tongue to rub on the underside, drool pushed out of the corners of his mouth and Steve twisted his mouth a little in each direction just to get that spit over more of Bucky’s skin so he could utilize it to his full advantage. Steve kept swallowing, making his throat contract around Bucky, while Bucky groaned and cursed above him. Bucky leaned heavily on Steve’s shoulders, holding him in place, but Steve didn’t feel trapped by it. On the contrary, he felt spacey and loose-limbed with the weight of Bucky’s length filling his mouth and throat.

“Holy fuck, babydoll,” Bucky was babbling brokenly. “You’re so good, you’re too good to me, Stevie, you feel so good –”

Steve needed to get a deep breath at that point; he got a hand around Bucky and pulled his mouth back until his throat was unblocked, then just breathed in through his nose with his fist jacking what
his lips didn’t cover while Bucky’s tip bumped against the back of his throat. Bucky groaned louder, his thighs tensing and his knees shaking, and Steve brought up his other hand to pull further off so he could lick clean the crown. He closed his lips around Bucky again and pressed his tongue in, swirling it around the slit.

Bucky let out another soft whine. Steve popped off and simply let go of Bucky.

“Shit!” Bucky gasped, jerking forward and grabbing a tight fistful of Steve’s hair. “Shit, Steve, Stevie, c’mon –”

“Oh, did you need something, Daddy?” Steve asked calmly, smirking at Bucky.

“You fuckin’ lil’ shit, Stevie,” Bucky growled, clenching his hand in Steve’s hair. “Don’t you fuck wit’ me like that, punk –”

“I’ll fuck with ya like that if I want,” Steve retorted, leaning back on his heels and shifting his knees apart on the marble floor. “You can’t boss me around, Daddy.”

Bucky opened his mouth. Steve smirked some more and fisted a hand around himself instead.

“Baby,” Bucky groaned.

“Mmm, say that again,” Steve murmured, letting his eyes flutter shut as he started to work himself over. “I love the sound of your voice, Daddy,” Steve sighed out; that spacey feeling was getting stronger, especially now that Steve was touching himself and he only wanted more of it. He wanted to keep hearing Bucky’s fucked out voice.

“You look so good, babydoll,” Bucky said. “You’re so pretty like this, all flushed pink all over ya, doll. You’s a full-body blusher, Stevie, and I love it, I love how much you blush.”

“Buck,” Steve exhaled; he reached up with his left hand and started stroking Bucky again, just to make sure Bucky was still feeling pleasure, too. “You’re gonna hafta keep talkin’,” Steve said, then leaned in and gave Bucky’s crown a brief, wet lick that made Bucky groan again. “Gonna be hard for me to come without you in me,” Steve confessed, looking up at Bucky through his lashes. “I need you, Daddy.”
Bucky swore quietly under his breath and gripped Steve’s hair tighter. “That so, sugar?” he asked in a low growl. “Can’t come without my dick fillin’ up your pretty ass?”

“Uh-uh,” Steve mumbled, filling his mouth again to get a longer taste. He hummed as he swallowed pre-come and popped off again, looking back up at Bucky. “Gonna promise to fuck me right later?”

“I promise, babydoll,” Bucky answered. “I’ll always give you what you need, Stevie.”

Steve smiled and took Bucky in his mouth again. He used his left hand on what he couldn’t fit in his mouth and kept his right hand on himself.

“Get’cha fingers wet,” Bucky murmured to him softly. “Reach between your legs, babydoll.”

Steve groaned around the weight in his mouth. He relaxed his throat to take Bucky deeper and let go of himself to push his hand between his thighs at the same time. He took a second to play with his balls, then reached further. He swiped up the slick dripping out of his hole, gently probed a few fingers shallowly into himself to gather up more slick, then pulled his hand back and closed it over himself again.

“That’s it,” Bucky praised with a quiet satisfaction. “Be good for Daddy, Stevie.”

Steve let out a sound akin to a whimper, then tugged off and mouthed down the underside of Bucky’s length. “Am I good, Daddy?” he asked against Bucky’s skin, licking over Bucky’s velvet skin. “Do you like me on my knees, Daddy?” he pressed, working both his fists.

“Oh, yeah, I do,” Bucky promised. “I love seein’ you like this, babydoll, you look so happy right now.”

Steve smiled and kissed back up Bucky’s member. He licked and mouthed at certain places, until he reached the tip and lifted his gaze back up to meet Bucky’s.

“Then come for me,” Steve dared. “Keep talkin’ and come for me.”
“You wan’ me to shoot off down your throat?” Bucky asked. “Or you want me to come on your face?”

“My face,” Steve said, pausing to lick at Bucky’s crown again. He didn’t like the taste of ejaculate; pre-cum was fine, but spunk brought back bad memories. “Can you do that for me, Daddy?” he pressed.

“I think I can manage it,” Bucky chuckled, lifting his metal hand off Steve’s shoulder.

Steve slapped his hand away and grabbed Bucky’s length himself, shooting a cross look up at Bucky. “Did I tell you you could do that?” he questioned. “No, so keep ya hands to yourself.”

“If you say so, baby,” Bucky said, laughing fully then. “Hey, you wanna sit up more so I can see you, sweetheart?”

Steve straightened his spine and spread his knees wider. Bucky groaned softly as Steve pressed his thumb into his own tip.

“That’s the shit, babydoll,” Bucky murmured, canting his hips forward. “Can I have your mouth back?”

“Keep talkin’ to me,” Steve said, then opened his mouth and ducked down.

“Fuck, your mouth,” Bucky sighed; Steve heard Bucky’s head thumping against the shower wall and Bucky’s hips pushed into Steve’s mouth a little more. “You drive me insane, sugar. ‘S a miracle I ain’t jumpin’ you 24/7. You stick that pretty ass out and I burst a blood vessel, you got me humpin’ you like a dog, babydoll.”

Steve groaned and swallowed more pre-come, spreading the same substance over himself with his other hand.

“Can I fuck your mouth, sweetheart?” Bucky asked. “Babydoll, ‘s hard not to move, lemme fuck your mouth.”

Steve swallowed around Bucky again and pulled back, instead just closing his lips over the head. He closed his fist and looked up at Bucky, his mouth stretched wide, and he nodded.
Bucky grabbed Steve’s shoulder again with his metal hand and gripped Steve’s hair with his right hand hard. He started thrusting shallowly into Steve’s mouth and fist, gradually picking up speed and depth. Steve shut his eyes, groaning again, and jacked himself harder; the muscles in his right arm were starting to burn, hurting in a good way, as he moved his hand faster.

“Sugar, you’re so good to me,” Bucky was groaning. “You show off for me so good, you suck my cock so right. Stevie, I love you, I love you so much, baby –”

Steve felt Bucky’s knot starting to fill up and pushed Bucky back by the hip; Bucky’s length popped out of his mouth with an obscene sound and Steve quickly grabbed Bucky with both hands instead, working him over hard as Bucky kept thrusting into Steve’s fists.

“Come for me, Daddy,” Steve demanded. “Give it to me, mark me with your cum –”

He couldn’t finish his sentence. Bucky gasped loudly, the noise quickly becoming a moan, and he burst in Steve’s hands. Steve flinched at the splatter on his face, out of surprise more than anything else; he shut his eyes and his mouth quickly and he felt it cover his whole face. The smell wasn’t too strong, but Bucky’s seed had never smelled repulsive to Steve.


Steve dropped his hands from Bucky’s body and pressed them between his legs again. He pushed two fingers on his left hand against his hole and used his right on his sensitive length. He moaned, almost a whimper, and Bucky released the fist in Steve’s hair to pet him instead.

“You’re doin’ so good for me, baby,” Bucky said, his voice a purr. “Givin’ me such a good show, touchin’ your pretty cock so right, sugar. I want you to come, I wan’ you to reward yourself. You sucked my cock so well, babydoll.”

“Daddy,” Steve whispered breathily.

“That’s right,” Bucky answered. “Show Daddy how you come, sugar.”

Steve let out a choked gasp and forced his back to stay straight instead of letting his core curl inward
as he came. He fingered himself as best he could from that angle to prolong his orgasm, working his right hand gently to milk himself at the same time. Bucky wiped Steve’s face clean with his right hand, touched his left to Steve’s cheek and Steve leaned into the touch, his eyes shut as he inhaled with his mouth open.

“Does it feel good, baby?” Bucky asked.

“Yes, Daddy,” Steve mumbled. He shut his mouth and swallowed, then rubbed his cheek against Bucky’s metal palm. “You gonna thank me?” he pushed, teasing.

Bucky pulled Steve up by his arm and wrapped him in a hug; Steve grinned and leaned on Bucky, feeling delightfully useless. Bucky kissed Steve’s scent gland.

“Thank you so much, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured. “You’re so amazing, Stevie.”

Steve grinned and pressed his cheek against Bucky’s wet hair. “Thank you, Buck,” he answered. “I really needed that.”

Bucky laughed softly. He kissed Steve’s neck, then pulled his face up and caught Steve’s cheek with his right hand. He pressed their lips together and Steve grinned against Bucky’s kiss still.

“I think I needed it, too,” Bucky said softly, his thumb brushing against Steve’s cheek. “Definitely loved it.”

Steve continued to grin so hard his cheeks hurt. Bucky dropped a quick kiss on the tip of Steve’s nose and Steve broke into a little giggle. Bucky grinned back and cupped Steve’s cheeks with both hands to press kisses all over his face. Steve squirmed against the assault but Bucky held him in place while he kissed Steve’s cheeks and eyelids and forehead and chin, finally ending by pressing their lips together. Steve looped his arms around Bucky’s neck and leaned against him, still smiling as they traded sweet kisses.

The shower still ran above and around them, well past an hour of being in use, and the water was still just as hot.

“I love you so much,” Steve murmured.
“I love you, too, Omegamine,” Bucky answered with a grin.

Chapter End Notes

i told you, 28% plot. leave a comment if you're excited for the rest of no shame november, and there's a theme, okay, next week's chapter is called "fist me, daddy". there's gonna be daddy kink everywhere from here on out, so this is your warning. lastly, my dear friend chaos, my artist for the Kept Boy, drew me a birthday present this week, and y'all:

are you shook? i'm still shook. chaos is a queen and y'all need to go follow her. not only is this an amazing birthday present, y'all know i'm writing a scene for this art. be prepared for lingerie in depressed-long-bean! steve's future.

bloopers

"Steve found expansive rainfall showers pretentious..." lexi: i ghost wrote this
me: massive showers are pretentious
lexi: They are. Would I still shower in one? Yeah I guess but it's capitalist propaganda!! me: agreed comrade

"there was plenty of room for him and Bucky to waste time..."
lexi: Read, have sex

"He consciously acknowledged that this intimate moment was worth all the pain and trouble it had taken to get him there..."
lexi: Wow Steve what a mature idea
me: steeb-o is being emotionally responsible now

“And I’ve hurt you enough already,” Bucky said..."
lexi: *me, yelling in the corner* BUCKY YOU DIDN'T RAPE HIM AND STEVE WOULD PROBABLY LIKE IT IF YOU KNOTTED IN HIS MOUTH!!! AND IF HE DIDN'T, HE WOULD TELL YOU, AND YOU'D STOP BECAUSE BAD VANILLA. Jesus
me: he meant fighting steve in winter soldier mode
lexi: In that case, BUCKY THAT WASN'T YOU SO SHUT UP AND LET HIM BLOW YOU BITCH
me: basically this is basis for later when they look up kinks for real and bucky says "hard limit on s&m and degradation/humiliation kinks"
lexi: How vanilla
me: w-s!bucko is a gentle dom

“In charge?” Bucky questioned"
lexi: For reasons unknown I just heard SpongeBob singing ~indoors~ instead of in charge and I'm traumatized
me: why would you tell me that now i'm traumatized
lexi: BE TRAUMATIZED WITH ME

“You’re gonna be my CO in the bedroom, too, doll?” Bucky asked"
lexi: *snorts* as if he isn't ALWAYS your CO. sub or not, it's always about Steve so
*shrug* to think Bucky isn't under his command is hilarious
me: I'mo steve is saying he doesn't want to be called captain during sex
lexi: Boooring. Captain Rogers reporting for duty to suck dick. OH MY GOD I WANT TO SEE THE TERRIBLE PORNHUB PORN OF THEM THAT'S COMING OUT
me: there's already one out and it is terrible. or that might be bc i dont like porn...

“I'm fuckin’ craving sucking your dick, Buck,” Steve said soberly."
lexi: if you're a slut and you know it and you really wanna show it

"As Bucky fumbled to find his brain, Steve ducked in"
lexi: YAS STEVE GET THAT DICK

"Steve still remembered resting his nose in a much thicker patch of hair between Bucky's legs..."
lexi: Steve are you into bears?? What is going on here my dude? Are we revealing more kinks??
me: idk i recently read a fic with werewolf!bucky, his human form was super hairy and i was kinda into the aesthetic of that? there's art and everything
lexi: *looking at you emoji* damn okay

“Language, Daddy,” Steve scolded"
"It's like riding a bike"
lexi: One, I don't know how to ride a bike. Two, TEACH ME YOUR WAYS
MIGHTY STEEB
me: how do you not know how to ride a bike you're in your 20s

"Steve felt spacey and loose-limbed"
lexi: Really thought this said spicy?? I was gonna be like OH BIY HE'S FEELING
SPICY HE'S GONNA GET WILD DOWN THERE
me: he got an ass like selena
lexi: *clapclap*

“Oh, did you need something, Daddy?" Steve asked"
lexi: *Skyrim voice* did you need something??
me: *lydia sigh* i am sworn to carry your burdens daddy
lexi: Is the burden his come?
me: uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh yes

“Do you like me on my knees, Daddy?" Steve pressed“
lexi: Bitch you been out here learning from slutty!Steve haven't you?

"'S a miracle I ain't jumpin’ you 24/7," Bucky said"
lexi: God help us if they did. Instead of edges blurred it's just be edging
me: that's the next one

"Bucky grinned back and cupped Steve’s cheeks with both hands"
lexi: Extra strength gay
me: supa gay
lexi: It's like Tylenol extra strength liquid gels but like... Gay
here we are, week two of no shame november. i have no witty comments for you as i've had a headache most of the day. so with no further ado, here we go.

thanks to lexi for her assistance in editing this chapter. i sent lexi the chapter cover and she just said "oof." the cover for this chapter can be found here

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Steve and Bucky had been having a petty and unserious argument about something, Steve was sure JARVIS would remind him if he asked, that caused Bucky to flip Steve off. With both hands. And that triggered the motor in Bucky’s metal middle finger and reminded both of them that it even existed.
“I have an idea,” Steve declared.

Bucky looked up at Steve, his metal finger still vibrating, and he pursed his lips. “I’m listening,” he said.

“You,” Steve began, sidling closer to Bucky, “put that,” he said, pointing to Bucky’s metal hand, “in my ass.”

“I finger you all the time?” Bucky said, frowning.

“The whole thing,” Steve added.

Bucky’s eyes widened. Steve grinned.

“My whole hand?” Bucky said, his voice high-pitched.

“The whole arm,” Steve corrected; he added a shrug, lifting an eyebrow and smirking challengingly at Bucky. “See how much can fit,” he said.

Bucky’s jaw dropped open. Steve continued to grin as a pearl of drool appeared at the corner of Bucky’s mouth.

“You wanna fist me, Daddy?” Steve teased.

“Fuck yeah,” Bucky said with an abrupt and wide grin. “Wait, do you think we need, like, Vaseline?” he questioned, frowning a little.

Steve barely had time to think about it before the ceiling chimed out of nowhere, making both Steve and Bucky jump.

“Vaseline can harm the PH balance of the body,” JARVIS announced. “Almond oil, on the other
hand, happens to be a safe and convenient natural lubricant when other more tailored lubricants are not available. There is a bottle in the pantry.”

“Convenient,” Bucky repeated.

“Ohmygod,” Steve muttered, his face aflame. “I forgot about the AI.”

“Audio from this location is not recorded and saved,” JARVIS offered helpfully.

“Right,” Bucky said, heading for the pantry. “But do us a favor and quit listening period for –”

Bucky paused glancing back at Steve with a contemplative expression. Steve lifted his eyebrows and shrugged, totally confused. Bucky just shrugged back.

“The next three hours,” Bucky declared and Steve’s face and neck went very hot. “Thanks, pal.”


Bucky grabbed the bottle of almond oil and turned back to face Steve, who was rooted to the spot by embarrassment still at having been caught by JARVIS. Bucky just took Steve’s shoulder and spun him around, making Steve stumble and hasten to get his feet moving as Bucky marched him towards the bedroom.

“So, who do you want to be in charge today, doll?” Bucky asked Steve casually.

“Um,” Steve said, his face flaming.

Bucky stopped Steve at the edge of the bed and turned him to face Bucky again. Bucky pursed his lips, speculative, then gave a decisive nod.

“Me, then,” Bucky said. “And I think I know what I want you to do first.”
Bucky tossed the almond oil onto the bed, grabbed Steve’s shoulders, and steered him around to the middle of the room. Steve fidgeted where he stood, picking at a loose thread at the hem of his shirt. Bucky cupped Steve’s face in his hands and gave Steve a light smile and a wink.

“Quit thinkin’ so hard, sweetheart,” Bucky said. “Just do what I tell you, ‘kay?”

Steve let out his breath and nodded. Bucky kissed the tip of Steve’s nose, then his chin; Steve lifted his chin and Bucky ducked into his neck without needing any further prompting. He pressed kisses over Steve’s jaw before going down his neck and Steve let out a soft, satisfied sigh when Bucky kissed his scent gland.

“What I wan’ you to first, babydoll,” Bucky murmured, “I want you to reach down your shorts and play with yourself for a bit.”

Steve shivered. He stopped fidgeting with the loose thread and instead pushed a hand under the hem of his shirt, so he could reach the fastenings of his shorts. He released the button and zipper, then slipped his hand into the waistband of his briefs.

“That’s it,” Bucky whispered against Steve’s neck. “Take yourself out so I can see, baby.”

Steve drew in a sharp breath and glanced down himself; he pushed both his shorts and briefs down his hips, using his other hand to draw himself out into the cold air. He felt goosebumps rising over his stomach and down his legs.

“Good boy,” Bucky said in Steve’s ear. “That’s my pretty angel. Won’t you stroke yourself for me, sugar, show me how good it feels?”

“Okay,” Steve answered breathily.

“Good boy,” Bucky purred again, his arms circling around Steve’s waist as he shifts to stand at Steve’s side. “There you go,” Bucky murmured, “don’t that feel good, doll? Don’t that make your hole clench up?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “It feels – Feels good, Buck.”
“Won’t you call me Daddy?” Bucky asked, his lips brushing Steve’s ear. “Don’t’cha wanna be good for Daddy?”


“Then keep touchin’ yourself,” Bucky said. “Take your clothes off but don’t quit touchin’ yourself.”

Steve nodded and started with his pants. He used his left hand to get them down towards his knees, then kicked them off his ankles, leaving him in just his t-shirt. He dragged the hem of his shirt up with his left hand, all while keeping his right hand busy. Bucky helped Steve get it over his head, but after just pressed in closer to his side and nuzzled at Steve’s neck. Steve got the shirt off his left arm and swapped hands to shake it off his right wrist, then grabbed himself again with his right hand and kept working himself over.

Steve now stood naked and jacking himself off in the middle of the room. Bucky, fully dressed, walked around to press against Steve’s back and his hands touched Steve’s ribs, his chin hooking over Steve’s shoulder. Steve’s breathing was ragged, his face was hot; his whole body was hot, Bucky’s left arm was cool around Steve’s waist, a chill that bit into Steve’s intense blush.

“Bet’chu want me touchin’ you,” Bucky murmured in Steve’s ear. “You want my hand on your cock, right, sugar?”

Steve nodded quickly. Bucky chuckled, then he bit down on Steve’s earlobe and Steve let out a sharp gasp, startled and aroused at the same time.

“Use your words, baby,” Bucky told him. “Do you want my hand on you, sweet Omegamine?”

“Yes,” Steve answered hoarsely.

“Yes, what?” Bucky pressed.

“Daddy,” Steve groaned. He dropped his head back onto Bucky’s shoulder and keened low as the pleasure he was creating in himself started to rise. “Yes, Daddy, I want you t’a touch me.”

“Spread your feet apart, baby,” Bucky said. “Lean back on me.”
Steve, not removing his right hand, shifted his feet apart a few inches.

“More,” Bucky ordered; Steve did. “A bit more,” Bucky continued, his cold metal hand creeping down Steve’s hip. “Tha’s it, pretty,” Bucky murmured in Steve’s ear at last. He wrapped his right arm fully around Steve’s ribs and pulled Steve tightly against his chest, stabilizing Steve. “I’m gonna play with ya for a minute more,” Bucky said softly, “then I’m gonna lay ya down on the bed and put my whole arm up your ass. Does that sound nice, babydoll?”

“Yeah,” Steve mumbled. “Sounds real nice, Daddy.”

“How ‘bout I touch your hole while you jack off?” Bucky asked. “How’s that sound, sugar?”

“Good,” Steve said quickly, understanding why Bucky wanted him to spread his feet apart. “Please, Daddy.”

“Good boy,” Bucky murmured, his cold hand pressing further down Steve’s body. “You’re such a good boy for Daddy, I love you so much, Stevie.”

“I love you, too,” Steve answered, turning his head towards Bucky’s and lifting his chin. “Love you so much, Buck.”

Bucky kissed him, slow and sweet, while his metal hand crept between Steve’s legs and sought out his tender hole. They’d been having a lot of sex since arriving on the island; Bucky was fucking Steve’s ass wet and sloppy at least once a day, and the last time had just been a few hours ago. Steve’s hole wasn’t very tight.

“Feel good, doll?” Bucky asked. “You ready for more?”

“Uh-huh,” Steve mumbled.

Bucky gripped Steve’s wrist and pulled his hand off. Steve tried not to whine, instead just tipped his head up for another kiss. Bucky gave it to him, pressing their lips together sweetly, then shifted his position to get an arm under Steve’s knees. Steve guessed what Bucky was doing a second before it happened and jumped a little as Bucky swept him off his feet. Bucky cradled Steve in his arms and
carried him over to the bed, laying him down gently.

Steve stretched his arms and legs out, then relaxed with his arms draped above his head and his knees dangling off the edge of the bed. Bucky pushed Steve’s knees apart and then climbed onto the bed with Steve, straddling Steve’s right thigh. He picked up the bottle of almond oil, unscrewed the cap, and poured some over his left hand. Steve pressed his chin to his chest to watch Bucky coating his hand in the oil, then gulped and looked up to grab a pillow; he stuck it under his head, then set about watching Bucky again.

“How ont’a this,” Bucky said, handing Steve the still opened bottle of oil. “And don’t spill it.”

Steve stretched his arms above his head and held the bottle of almond oil upright with both hands. Bucky rubbed his right hand over Steve’s ribs, reaching between Steve’s legs with his oil-slick left hand at the same time.

“We wanna see how much can fit,” Bucky said casually as he pressed the tip of one finger into Steve. “S a whole lotta arm, babydoll, so I’m gonna give you a coupl’a rules, alright?”

Steve gave a nod. He could do rules. Rules gave him distinct boundaries and defined everything clearly. He liked rules. (Not that that meant he liked following them, of course.)

“You might get overwhelmed, doll,” Bucky began, rubbing his thumb along Steve’s perineum as he did. “And I don’t wanna hurt you, but I really wanna see my whole hand go up your ass, sweetheart. So if you really gotta stop, I want you to say a specific word. Can you pick one for me?”

“Ummm,” Steve thought aloud, thrown out of place by Bucky’s fingers beginning to prep him. “Fish,” Steve blurted out.

“Fish,” Bucky agreed, grinning down at Steve.

“Ain’t gonna say it by accident,” Steve pointed out.

“Nope,” Bucky chuckled. He leaned in and pecked Steve’s lips, then rubbed his face over Steve’s neck a few times before sitting up and looking back between Steve’s legs. “So you say fish when you really want me to stop, okay?”
Steve gave a nod. Bucky bent forward and dropped a kiss onto Steve’s sternum. He then reached up and cupped Steve’s pec with his right hand and squeezed gently, then hard.

“Look at these pretty tits,” Bucky murmured, a smile curling his lip. “I should fuck ‘em one’a these days.”

Steve blushed down to his roots and bit down on his lip. Bucky grinned wider.

“Bet’chu want me to,” he said. “Bet you’d like it.”


“Yeah, ya do,” Bucky answered with a proud grin. “And you’re gonna like bein’ fisted, too, huh, sugar?”

Bucky fit his pinkie finger in Steve’s body and pushed his hand in to the knuckles. Steve threw his head back and sucked in air, panting hard as his heartbeat doubled in his chest.

“That’s it,” Bucky whispered softly. “That’s my angel. How’s about I play with your dick, baby? Would you like that?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve said quickly, gripping the bottle of almond oil tighter. “Please, Buck.”

Bucky swept his thumb over Steve’s nipple before letting go of his chest and reaching down. Steve groaned a little, then a lot, then keened aloud and his core tensed as Bucky pushed his thumb into Steve’s body as well.

“Yeah, ya like that, don’t’cha, baby?” Bucky purred. “I can’t believe I ain’t done this to you before. You look so damn beautiful like this, I just wanna eat you, Stevie.”

“Ain’t stoppin’ you,” Steve mumbled in answer.
Bucky chuckled, like he found Steve so cute, and gently twisted his hand in Steve’s hole. Steve whined again, breathing hard as the tension in his body rose to a brand new level and a delightful fog in his head began to creep towards the edges of his mind.

“You ready for the whole thing, babydoll?” Bucky asked, pumping his hand in and out subtly.

“Yeah,” Steve said breathlessly. “Put it in me, Daddy.”

“Gimme the oil,” Bucky said; Steve handed it over and Bucky added in a purr: “So helpful, baby, thank you.”

Steve grinned and preened as Bucky poured more oil over his hand and wrist even. Steve’s core strained as he kept his chin tucked against his chest to watch Bucky’s hand disappearing into his body; the sight was almost too much for him and he grabbed himself and squeezed hard to stave off an impending orgasm.

“Doin’ alright there, baby?” Bucky asked, chuckling at Steve. “You need somethin’?”

“’M good,” Steve said quickly, shifting his hand into a more pleasurable touch than just strangling his dick. “’M good,” he promised.

“Then why’re you doin’ somethin’ I didn’t tell ya to?” Bucky asked levelly. “Take this back, doll,” he said, knocking Steve’s hand away and pushing the bottle of almond oil into it instead. “Hands above your head,” Bucky ordered then, “and don’t touch nothin’ I ain’t said you can touch.”

Steve nodded as he lifted his arms above his head, carefully shifting the bottle of almond oil in his hands to keep it upright. The fog in his mind that he associated with simply obeying Bucky’s instructions and doing nothing else grew just a little bit further, making the sounds of bird calls outside more distant, the roar of the waterfall more like static, his own heartbeat pulsed in his ear and drowned out other sounds.

“Lookit’chu,” Bucky murmured. “Look how pretty you are, sweetheart. You look like a ray’a sunshine balled up into a gorgeous Omega and you’re all mine, huh?”
“Uh-huh,” Steve answered immediately. “All yours, Buck.”

“All mine,” Bucky said, his hand pushing into Steve’s body even deeper, filling him so much, “my beautiful angel.”

Steve could feel Bucky’s wrist passing into him and he whined, his body tensing up all over. Bucky shushed him gently, his right hand strokes up Steve’s ribs, petting him, then he reached down and his right hand wrapped around Steve again and Steve cried aloud at the overload of stimulation.

“Is that good, babydoll?” Bucky asked. “Ya like it, huh?”

“I like it,” Steve confessed. “I like it, Buck, I love it, more, please –”

Bucky’s fingers pressed down on Steve’s prostate. Steve keened again and Bucky increased the pressure, then started rocking his hand back and forth in Steve’s body, pressing on his prostate every time. Steve started breathing heavily, moaning on every exhale and whimpering on his exhales, and Bucky grinned down at him.

“There ya go,” Bucky purred. “Good boy, babydoll, so good for me, so sweet, so pretty. I love you so much, Stevie.”

“Love you,” Steve said between gasps. “I love you, I love you, Buck –”

“You feel so tight and wet on my hand,” Bucky said. “Doll, I can’t tell you how gorgeous you look on my hand like this, you got me all the way up to the wrist, sugar –”

Steve was having difficulty listening anymore. He was so close, his mind was a riot of eye-popping sensations. He felt more filled than he’d ever been in his life and he suddenly craved nothing but that.

“More,” he whispered hoarsely. “Buck, more, more –”

“You’re gonna come,” Bucky just told him, “and then I’m gonna fuck this loose hole ‘til I knot you, babydoll.”
Steve lifted his head to look down his body; he whimpered and gripped the bottle of almond oil with iron fingers, his core straining to keep his head up so he could keep looking. Bucky grinned and winked at Steve, his gaze dropping back down to his hand buried up past the wrist in Steve’s body. Steve’s thighs were glistening with slick and oil, there was a puddle on the bed just under him, and Steve was sure he’d soaked through the coverlet to the sheets with his sweat. Steve was fixated on Bucky’s metal arm shining with oil as it moved in and out of his body, the red and puffy rim of his asshole stretched open over Bucky’s forearm, so much thicker than anything else Steve had ever put in his body. Steve’s core gave out and he fell back against this pillow, panting hard, and above him, Bucky chuckled.

“You ready to come, sugar?” Bucky asked. “You look so fucked out, you look like I been knottin’ you all day, for hours.”

“Feel like it,” Steve said between heavy breaths.

“S a good look on ya, babydoll,” Bucky answered with a grin. “Think you can tighten down on my knot after you come on my fist, Stevie? I think your pretty hole might just hang open, I think I might finally tire it out, wha’d’you think, doll?”

“I don’ know,” Steve said. “Maybe? I don’ know, Buck, just – More?”

“More?” Bucky questioned. “Sweetheart, I don’t think I can fit any more in you, I might hit your intestines.”


“Aw, Jesus,” Bucky whispered. “Lookit’chu, sweetheart,” he said under his breath, so quietly Steve barely heard it, “you’re so damn beautiful, Steve, you’re a dream. You’re a dream, I swear.”

“Buck,” Steve murmured, breathless and speechless.

“Y’know why I call you an angel?” Bucky asked and Steve just shook his head. “You’re my angel ‘cause I used to dream about you.”
Steve blinked wearily at the ceiling, his heartbeat kicking hard in his chest. “You’d dream about me?” he mumbled, trying to catch Bucky’s gaze as he lays limp and weak on the bed.

He didn’t need to ask when and Bucky didn’t need to say. Bucky lifted into Steve’s vision and pressed kisses over Steve’s stomach and ribs, tender and loving touches that added sighs into the mix of keening moans and gasps that were coming from Steve’s mouth. Bucky stopped over Steve’s chest, his cheek pressing against Steve’s heart beating.

“I’d always dream about you surrounded by sunshine,” Bucky murmured. “Sunshine like you had a halo. So I thought I was dreaming of an angel, but yanno, Bucky added, laughing softly, “what I got’s way better.”

Steve smiled and tipped his head back down towards Bucky. Bucky pressed a kiss over Steve’s heart, then his hand inside Steve wriggled and, abruptly, Bucky’s metal finger began to vibrate.

Steve’s eyes rolled back in his skull and his mouth stretched in a silent scream as he came suddenly and violently. He could feel Bucky grinning against his chest but that was all he could feel apart from the white out in his mind.

He was aware vaguely of Bucky’s hand pulling slowly from his body but didn’t really realize that Bucky was pulling out his hand until it was gone. Steve whined, upset, but barely a second after Bucky’s fist pulled out of his body, Steve was being filled again.

“Ohh, sweetheart,” Bucky groaned into Steve’s ear. “You’re still tight, babydoll, God, you’re so fuckin’ tight, I just put my fist up your ass and you’re still tight, God –”

Steve rode the wave of bliss all the way through Bucky coming deep inside him and knotting him. He rode the wave of bliss through his own second orgasm. Steve lay boneless and sated as Bucky scooped him up and rolled them both onto their sides.

“My sweet angel,” Bucky murmured to Steve. “I love you so much.”

“Love you, too,” Steve whispered back.

Chapter End Notes
“I finger you all the time?” Bucky said
lexi: this is that moment where bucky wonders if he really did fuck steve stupid

“You wanna fist me, Daddy?” Steve teased.
lexi: you know exactly which meme i'm thinking of right now
me: i actually don't but it might just be my headache
lexi: I had to look this up on Google for you
me: oh ew pewdiepie
lexi: It's still the meme I thought of, I'm not happy about it

“Vaseline can harm the PH balance of the body,” JARVIS announced.
lexi: PSA FROM JARVIS: DON'T USE VASELINE ON YOUR ASSHOLES CHILDREN

“Audio from this location is not recorded and saved,” JARVIS offered
lexi: somewhere slutty steve is saying damn i wish it was recorded
me: *facepalm*
lexi: AM I WRONG

“Enjoy yourselves,” [Jarvis said]“
lexi: is this the ai equivalent of be safe and use condoms.

”Bucky marched [Steve] towards the bedroom.”
lexi: marching into your sex death buddy

“Um,” Steve said, his face flaming.
lexi: can i get a mufuckin uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh daddy bucky pls

“Quit thinkin’ so hard, sweetheart,” Bucky said.”
lexi: im pretty sure this man's job is to think too hard about everything, like me

lexi: it was then he knew he fucked up by calling bucky daddy, only to realize that bucky is daddy and in charge. kinks explored during the sexcation: 1000000

”Bucky was fucking Steve’s ass wet and sloppy at least once a day”
lexi: what a fuckin dream man when do I get a sexcation

"Not that that meant [Steve] liked following [rules], of course."
lexi: i was gonna say, i can remember one man who distinctly never follows the fucking rules.
me: there's wisdom in knowing exactly what rules there are, just so you can break them better
lexi: Steve says to justify himself
“Fish,” Steve blurted out.
lexi: WHY AM I THINKING OF GO FISH FSOSDFOF "you want me to go deeper yet?" "go fish"
me: get out of my house
lexi: YOU WANTED A BETA

“I should fuck 'em one’a these days,” [Bucky said]"
lexi: bucky i really hate to break it to you but your dick is too damn big to properly fuck his tits
me: doesn't mean they're not gonna try
lexi: This is hentai boys, there are rules of physics!
me: doesn't mean they're not gonna try
lexi: Oof

"I thought I was dreaming of an angel," [Bucky said]"
lexi: *thinks of steve sm ar ting off all the time thinks of steve diving without a parachute* yeah an angel, okay
me: let bucky have his romantic hallucinations
lexi: Ooookay

that's all she wrote folks
fill me up, daddy

Chapter Notes

i'm back and i have more no shame november content for you. in case it wasn't already clear, this chapter is rated E and contains no plot.
thanks to lexi as always for giving this chapter a read-through. you can find the cover for this chapter on my tumblr here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Steve and Bucky had done plenty of exploring of the island; they’d climbed the volcano, narrowly avoided coming into close quarters with more than a few venomous snakes and spiders, managed to find a way to see the Komodo dragon. They’d gone swimming in the nearby pond and in the ocean and scared plenty of fish. Steve had had his lunch stolen by a monkey. Bucky had gotten chased off
the yard by a monkey. Bucky had had his lunch stolen by a monkey. The allure of monkeys had worn off.

Today, though, they wanted to laze around. JARVIS found a few classic films for them to watch, Steve dug out some popcorn, Bucky sprawled on the couch and made himself look as invitingly comfortable as possible.

“Oof!” Bucky said when Steve flopped on top of him.

“You asked for it,” Steve mumbled into Bucky’s chest.

Inevitably, they got distracted from whatever movie was playing. Steve was lying on Bucky’s chest, after all.

It started with Bucky’s hands wandering, as they usually did. Steve, relaxed and sleepy, pretended not to notice. Bucky ran his flesh palm down Steve’s back and over his ass to his thigh, then pushed it up the leg of Steve’s shorts. Bucky’s metal hand was warmed by their cuddling when it slid under Steve’s shirt. Steve simply ignored it, focusing on the movie. After a little while, Bucky’s flesh hand pushed farther up Steve’s shorts and his metal hand slid down Steve’s back and under Steve’s shorts. Bucky’s hands got a grip on Steve’s ass and squeezed once.

“What’re you doin’?” Steve asked.

“Nothin’,” Bucky answered, twisting his head to look at Steve.

Bucky’s neck turned into a cute double chin and Steve broke into a smile. Bucky grinned, too.

“What?” he said.

“You’re cute,” Steve murmured.

“You’re cute,” Bucky countered. “C’mon, doll, you’re the cute one.”
“We’re both cute,” Steve said happily.

Bucky snorted. His hands squeezed Steve’s ass again.

“Stahp,” Steve complained, sniggering. “I’m tryna watch the movie!”

“But it’s so soft,” Bucky whined. “And bouncy!”

Bucky tugged one of his hands out and slapped Steve’s ass. Steve jerked, startled, and Bucky laughed. Steve tried to glare, but Bucky squeezed his ass again and Steve broke, ducking to hide his face in Bucky’s neck with a blush.

“Your ass is too pretty not to touch,” Bucky said.

“Your ass is too pretty,” Steve muttered.

“Your ass is the pretty one,” Bucky insisted.


Bucky chuckled. Steve felt his ass getting fondled again and decided to do something about it.

“C’mon,” Steve said, sitting up. “JARVIS, pause the movie and initiate blackout!”

“What’re we doing?” Bucky said.


“Come on,” Steve told Bucky, getting up. “You wanna play with my ass, you’re gonna do it right.”

“Oh, is that how we’re doin’ things?” Bucky asked, chuckling as he stood up as well.
“C’mon, Daddy,” Steve repeated, reaching out for Bucky’s hand.

Steve shut the bedroom door behind them, then gave Bucky a tug and a shove towards the bed.

“Strip,” Steve ordered.

“Is that how we’re doin’ it?” Bucky asked again, a grin spreading across his face even as he tugged his shirt off over his head.

“Hurry up,” Steve added.

Bucky wiggled his eyebrows up and down as he shucked his pants. He tossed his clothes in the general direction of the laundry hamper, then dropped his ass onto the bed and leaned back to grin stupidly at Steve.

“What now?” Bucky asked.

“Get up there,” Steve told him, reaching for the hem of his own shirt. “What am I gonna do with you on the end of the bed like that,” he said, “I’ll fall off, c’mon, Buck.”

Bucky laughed and twisted onto his side to crawl up the bed the rest of the way. Steve removed his clothes and tossed them towards the hamper, then climbed up onto the bed with Bucky. Bucky turned onto his back and Steve propped himself up on his elbows and knees on top of Bucky. Bucky leaned up and Steve met him halfway in a sharp, intense kiss.

“You wan’ned to play with my ass?” Steve said against Bucky’s lips. “G’ahead.”

Bucky chuckled and reached up to grab Steve’s ass. Steve pulled his knees up under himself so he was crouching over Bucky’s body. Bucky’s hands kneaded at Steve’s ass, his fingers going farther and farther in, and Steve pressed his hips down into Bucky’s.

“Get me ready for you,” Steve murmured, breaking the kiss and kissing across Bucky’s cheek to his ear. “Shouldn’t take long,” he continued, sucking Bucky’s earlobe into his mouth, “you’re fuckin’ me every five minutes, feels like, Daddy.”
“Can’t help it,” Bucky answered, his fingers reaching between Steve’s cheeks. “Too pretty, sugar.”

“Addict,” Steve whispered the accusation into Bucky’s ear. “Can’t go too long without buryin’ your cock deep in my ass, huh, Daddy?”

“Fuck, no,” Bucky answered, shuddering under Steve. “You like it.”

“Mhmm,” Steve murmured again. “Love it, Daddy.”

Steve swept his tongue over the shell of Bucky’s ear. Bucky brushed his fingers over Steve’s hole, teasing, and Steve bit down on Bucky’s ear. Bucky drew in a sharp gasp and Steve kissed Bucky’s ear again.

“Don’t keep me waiting, Daddy,” Steve teased right back, purring into Bucky’s ear.

“Fuck,” Bucky hissed.

Bucky’s fingers started to press in and Steve kissed down Bucky’s neck. He pushed up Bucky’s body, dragging their skin together, and bared his throat for Bucky. Bucky kissed Steve’s neck, his tongue pressing against Steve’s skin, and Steve rocked back on Bucky’s fingers. It didn’t take long, and once Bucky started pressing his pinkie against the line of Steve’s ass, Steve sat upright, grabbing Bucky’s hand and yanking his fingers free.

“That’s enough of that,” Steve said.

Bucky grinned and wiggled his fingers together, trying to tug his hand away. Steve pulled it up instead and, holding eye contact, licked Bucky’s fingers clean of slick. Bucky groaned and Steve pulled a few of Bucky’s fingers into his mouth, sucking on them. His eyes fluttered shut as he continued to suck on Bucky’s fingers, swirling his tongue and getting Bucky’s hand twice as sloppy as it had been before Steve grabbed it.

“So pretty, baby,” Bucky murmured.

Steve focused on the taste of Bucky’s fingers, not his own hangups. He pulled Bucky’s fingers out and licked down Bucky’s hand to the scent gland in his wrist, getting Bucky’s taste on his tongue. Then, Steve grabbed Bucky’s other hand and slammed both onto the bed above Bucky’s head.
“Keep those there,” Steve instructed. “I don’t want them in my way.”

“You got it, sugar,” Bucky answered with a grin.

Steve flicked his eyebrows up. He shuffled back on his knees, then reached underneath him and grabbed Bucky’s length. Bucky let out another groan, his eyes falling shut, and Steve teased Bucky’s tip against his hole.

“Is that good, Daddy?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, ‘s good, doll,” Bucky sighed. “C’mon –”

“Shush,” Steve told him, “this ain’t about you.”

Bucky let out a laugh. “When’d you figure I liked that?” he asked.

“Was it ever subtle?” Steve countered. “Wasn’t difficult to tell, Buck.”

Bucky laughed softly again. Steve stuck his tongue out at Bucky, then looked down his body at Bucky’s cock, flushed red and pearling up at the tip.

“I love your cock, Daddy,” Steve said, swirling Bucky’s cock against his hole now. “S gonna feel real good inside me.”

“Hell yeah,” Bucky answered. “Why don’t you go ahead and put it in you, babydoll?”

“Shh,” Steve repeated, but he started to lower his weight onto Bucky’s cock anyway. “I’m enjoying myself here,” he added.

“You look so good doin’ it,” Bucky replied. “Like heaven, baby, ya look so pretty.”
Steve threw his head back, focusing on the stretch of Bucky’s cock entering his body. If Bucky believed that Steve was pretty, then he was, he had to be.

“Is it good, Daddy?” Steve asked. “Am I bein’ good for you?”

“So good,” Bucky promised, “you take my cock so perfectly, sweetheart –”

One of Bucky’s hands moved and Steve jerked forward to shove it back into place.

“Don’t move,” Steve insisted.

Bucky flicked his eyebrows up, grinning. Steve pursed his lips, then sank fully and suddenly onto Bucky’s length.

“Shit!” Bucky gasped, his core jerking under Steve. “Fuck, fuck, baby, oh, God –”

“That’s it,” Steve purred. He began to rock back and forth and Bucky clenched his hands, groaning. “This what you wanted, Daddy?” Steve asked. “You wanted to play with my ass?”

“Fuck yeah,” Bucky mumbled. “Jesus, baby, you’re so fuckin’ tight.”

Steve sat back on Bucky’s dick and pulled his legs out, lying them alongside Bucky’s body and sinking further at the same time. With the new leverage, Steve curled forward and planted his hands on the bed along Bucky’s hips.

“Yannow what I want?” Steve asked.

He started bouncing on Bucky’s cock and Bucky groaned hard, his fists clenching and his legs drawing up behind Steve.

“I want my ass to be dripping with your cum,” Steve answered his own question in a challenging
Bucky groaned loudly.

“Can you do that for me?” Steve asked in a sweet, innocent voice.

“Whatever you want,” Bucky promised, “anything you want, sugar, anything –”

“I wanna be smellin’ like your cum for days,” Steve said filthily.

“You know I love makin’ you happy,” Bucky answered, then stopped to pant for breath, licking his lips and swallowing. “I love makin’ you feel good,” Bucky said, “I love makin’ you come.”

“I want you to come,” Steve insisted. “Again and again and again.”

Bucky made an incoherent sound, his eyes finally squeezing tight as his fists clenching above his head. Steve abandoned chasing his own pleasure and used his body just to stimulate Bucky, worked his hole on Bucky’s cock relentlessly. Bucky moaned repeatedly, thrusting randomly up into Steve. Through their bond and through Bucky’s body language, Steve knew Bucky was close.

“C’mon, Daddy,” Steve goaded, “give it to me, come in me, give it to me –”

Bucky arched up and gasped, then Steve felt Bucky’s orgasm and knot bursting inside him. Steve didn’t stop.

“Oh, God,” Bucky gasped again, grabbing onto the mattress and thrashing his legs, “oh, God, Steve, Steve –”

“Gimme more,” Steve insisted, “c’mon, Daddy, you gotta gimme more.”

“I can’t!” Bucky growled. “Jesus, Stevie, fuck, I –”
“You’re gonna,” Steve answered, purring happily. He continued his merciless rocking back and forth on Bucky’s dick, working it back to full hardness again. “‘Cause you wanna make me happy, don’t you? You wanna give me anything I want, right, Daddy?”

“Yeah,” Bucky gasped, “just – Fuck, I – it’s too much –”

“You wanted this,” Steve told Bucky. “C’mon, come in me one more time, that’ll be enough. I want it to leak out around your knot, Daddy,” he said, beginning a filthy tirade, “don’t you wanna see that, too? See me filled with so much’a your cum it all can’t stay in me?” Steve asked.

“Jesus,” Bucky cursed, “yes – Fuck yes –”

“Then you can come in me one more time,” Steve challenged. “You can gimme what I want, can’t’cha, Daddy?”

“Yeah,” Bucky promised, “fuck, anything you want, babydoll, anything for my pretty angel.”

“C’mon,” Steve dared, lifting one hand off the bed to grab his own dick. “I want it so bad, Daddy, I’m so hard for you.”

“Yeah, ya are,” Bucky sighed, “so pretty, sweetheart, so gorgeous.”

“Do you like seein’ me touching myself, Daddy?” Steve asked, shifting his hips ever so slightly to catch his sweet spot as he continued to bounce on Bucky’s lap. “It’s ‘cause you’re makin’ me feel good, Daddy, you feel so good inside me – Your cum feels so good in me,” he promised.

“You’re so tight, sugar,” Bucky groaned.

“You’re fuckin’ your cum all the way in me,” Steve pointed out. “Do you feel it? Ya feel all your cum up inside me, Daddy?”

“Yeah,” Bucky answered, “I feel it, babydoll – God, you’re so good, so good, sweetheart –”

“I just want you to come again,” Steve told Bucky, and it was true, “I want to be leakin’ your cum
for days. ‘S all I want, Daddy,” he promised.

“Whatever you want,” Bucky answered.

“Gimme,” Steve asked, almost begging with how much he wanted it.

It really didn’t take much longer. Steve worked Bucky’s knot without mercy. He used his hand on himself, letting the feel of the sloppy mess in his ass carry him through his orgasm. As Steve threw his head back and groaned, his hole clenched hard on Bucky’s knot and Bucky came the second time.

“Thank you, Daddy,” Steve whispered breathlessly. “Thank you so much.”

Steve was now boneless, but he shuffled around until his legs were behind him and then he slumped forward on Bucky. Bucky’s knot, which almost felt bigger than Steve was used to, held them together. Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve and kissed his hair twice before nuzzling him. Steve hummed, purring softly.

“Fuckin’ hell, babydoll,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve chuckled. “Yeah?”


Steve snuggled closer, pressing his face into Bucky’s neck with a grin. “Did good, Alpha?” he asked softly.

“So good,” Bucky answered. He kissed Steve’s hair again. “I love you so much, Omegamine.”

“Love you, Alpha,” Steve murmured back.

Chapter End Notes
i couldn't decide if i wanted to write forced orgasms with subby/bucky first or what i have planned for the last no shame november chapter so i asked chaos and she picked for me, so you have her to thank for this week's content. you also have her to thank for that drawing of steve in a dress and this drawing of steve in lingerie, did i show that to you? i should've (chaos drew it for my birthday and it was the best gift i got by far). anyway, i'll see you next week

bloopers

“But it’s so soft,” Bucky whined.”

“Daddy,” Steve added, to be difficult.”
lexi: I love that Bucky chuckling after Steve says Daddy implies that Bucky is no longer affected by it, which means Steve has screamed it that many times during the sexcation.

“What're we doing?” Bucky said.”
lexi: *exasperated tone* Bucky, what ELSE does blackout mean. Y’all gon fucc

“What am I gonna do with you on the end of the bed like that,” Steve said”
lexi: RoMaNcE iS dEaD!!!! I love that he's just like clothes off, none of that slowly taking clothes off nonsense. He's a direct man and I like it
me: he knows what he wants
lexi: We get RESULTS in this household

“you’re fuckin’ me every five minutes, feels like, Daddy,” [Steve said.]”
lexi: My theory is confirmed. All they been doing is fucking. They're like those monkeys that have sex literally ALL the time
me: i mean what else are they going to do
lexi: EXPLORE THIS BEAUTIFUL FUCKING ISLAND, IDK MAYBE TRAIN A MONKEY, TAKE PICTURES FOR INSTAGRAM, S W I M
me: THEY EXPLORED THERE'S ONLY SO MUCH WANDERING IN NATURE YOU CAN DO ALEXIS

lexi: Update: nevermind, Bucky's still a dork
me: when was he not
lexi: ...I mean. Fair.

“That’s enough of that,” Steve said.”
lexi: Fisting is a once a sexcation event. Aren't you aware Bucky, geez.

“Keep those there,” Steve instructed. “I don’t want them in my way.”
lexi: Is it weird if I say I'm a proud mom? Embrace your inner switch honey!!!

“Shush,” Steve told [Bucky], “this ain’t about you.”
lexi: I'M SORRY, WHOMSTDVE?? WHO'S MANS IS THIS?? I DON'T KNOW HIM WHERE DID SNEVE GO!! This is like a new man... Sexy Steve... Stexy? Seeve? Seve with the e pronounced like sexy? I don't know I didn't think this through.
me: he's embracing his inner switch!
“Steve pursed his lips, then sank fully and suddenly onto Bucky’s length.”
lexi: This is a true power bottom move
me: topping from the bottom
lexi: THAT'S THE WAY DICK SLUTS DO IT BABY

“I can’t!” Bucky growled. “Jesus, Stevie, fuck, I –”
lexi: Me, @ Steve: baby IM SO PROUD. YOU GET THAT DICK BABY! YOU RUB HIS COME ALL OVER YOU! SLUTTY!STEVE AND I ARE PROUD
me: so proud

"Bucky's knot, which almost felt bigger than Steve was used to, held them together."
lexi: Lucky little slut. Auntie's proud.

“I love you so much, Omegamine,” [Bucky said.] “Love you, Alpha,” Steve murmured"
lexi: I feel like this is a common ending for the sexcations chapters? Am I right?
me: i'm a slut for a common theme
ya friendly neighborhood angst queen is tired af guys, and so is lexi, so no bloopers this time. bloopers next week. there's plot next week. don't ask me what it is, i haven't written it yet. well, i know what it is, but i'm fucking tired rn, me + my fam had a road trip today and i got up at 3:45 this morning. i didn't even drive, idk why i'm so tired. anyway, lexi didn't have time to read this bc i wrote it and posted it immediately bc thanksgiving got us both f*cked up. how was your thanksgiving? mine was good, i got to hang with my cousins and avoid politics talks which is always fun. i'm gonna thank lexi anyway bc she's a queen and i love her and more people should appreciate that she's awesome. also, i created a new blog, it's capt-in-his-ass-america over on tumblr. if you didn't guess from the url, it's a blog dedicated to sharing/promoting/whatever content focusing on bottom!steve bc have you seen his ass? anyway, bucky possessed me to create that blog, it's on the net, it's all ships (bc all ships deserve recognition) that involve steve getting his ass the worship it deserves. i'm gonna go ahead and quit rambling while i'm ahead. the cover for this chapter is here. read on, children. it's nsfw, obviously
When Steve woke up, Bucky was already up and out of bed. This was, initially, a surprise to Steve, as for almost the entirety of their vacation, Steve had woken up before Bucky or Bucky had waited for Steve to wake up so they could have a quick round of morning sex. But the bed next to Steve was empty and there was no sign of Bucky in the room or the bathroom when Steve sat up.
The bedroom door was ajar, though, and Steve could hear movement in the kitchen. Steve tossed the blankets aside and slipped out of bed, pausing long enough to grab some boxers and a shirt from their suitcase so he could get dressed before he headed out of the bedroom.

“Hey,” Steve said, rubbing at his eyes.

“No, no!” Bucky answered. “Go back in there!”

Steve dropped his hand and frowned. Bucky waved at him frantically. Steve, incredibly confused, turned around and walked back into the bedroom.

“And shut the door!” Bucky called.

“What’s going on?” Steve replied, pulling the door almost to.

“I’m surprising you!” Bucky shouted back. “Shut the door!”

Steve flicked his eyebrows up and pressed closed the door. He put his hands on his hips, huffed, and glanced towards the window. A monkey happened to be dangling from the gutter above the window at that moment and Steve made eye contact with it.

“I don’t suppose you could go spy on him and tell me what he’s doing?” Steve asked the monkey.

The monkey screeched and raised its legs to scratch at the window, trying to get in. Steve sighed heavily.

About ten minutes later, the bedroom door opened again and Steve, who had gotten back in bed, looked up to see Bucky entering with a tray.

“Hi,” Steve said again. “What are you doing?”
“Breakfast in bed,” Bucky explained, walking over to Steve’s side of the bed as he did.

“Oh,” Steve said.

Bucky laid the tray over Steve’s lap. Steve looked down at it, at the pancakes and bacon and eggs off to the side, as Bucky moved around the other side of the bed and got in next to him. Bucky leaned in after that and pressed a kiss to Steve’s cheek.

“Happy anniversary, sweetheart,” Bucky said.

“Oh!” Steve repeated. “Aw, Buck…”

“What, did you think we weren’t gonna do nothin’?” Bucky prompted him with a grin. “Nah, I got a whole day’a things planned, babydoll.”

Steve turned a touched smile on Bucky and leaned in for a proper kiss. Though chaste, the kiss lasted a few seconds and after, Steve rubbed his nose against Bucky’s.

“Thank you,” Steve murmured. “This is really sweet.”

“Only the best for my pretty angel,” Bucky returned.

Steve picked up a fork and cut into the pancake. He scooped up a bite, then held it up for Bucky. Bucky shot Steve a grin and accepted the fork into his mouth. Steve adjusted the tray so it was balanced over both of their laps, then alternated between feeding himself and feeding his Alpha. After the plate was clear, Bucky took the tray and got up with it.

“Stay put,” Bucky said as he left.

Steve raised his eyebrows but lay back on the bed. He looked up and spotted the same monkey still trying to get through the glass window.

“Get’chur own,” Steve told the monkey, waving a hand dismissively.
The monkey bared its teeth, but swung down and ran away across the grass. Steve looked over his shoulder to watch it go, then laughed shortly under his breath and turned back.

“Can I come out now?” Steve called towards the door.

“In a second!” Bucky answered.

Steve flicked his eyebrows up and down and shrugged to himself. He picked up his phone from the nightstand, but he had had no emails or texts since leaving for vacation two weeks ago.

“Alright, come out!” Bucky called then.

Steve set his phone down again and got up. He pulled the bedroom door open and stepped back out into the main living area.

“So, what’s the surprise?” Steve asked, looking around.

Bucky stood up from the living room floor and grinned brightly at Steve. Steve dropped his gaze, then broke into a wide smile mirroring Bucky’s. Bucky stood in the center of a wide, carefully-arranged pile of pillows and blankets.

“I made a nest,” Bucky said.

“Aw,” Steve chuckled, walking over. “Are your plans just us cuddling all day?”

“Well, I figured we’ll probably have sex a lot,” Bucky said cheekily.

Steve rolled his eyes but stepped into the nest and slipped his arms around Bucky’s waist. He pressed their lips together and tasted syrup on Bucky’s tongue.

“Is it special anniversary sex?” Steve murmured.
“Yes, actually,” Bucky replied. “I gotchu somethin’.”

“Is it your dick?” Steve asked with a giggle.

“That, too,” Bucky answered.

Steve laughed properly and dropped his forehead against Bucky’s shoulder. He felt pleased satisfaction emanating in waves from Bucky through the bond and he could smell the pride in Bucky’s scent in addition to that. Steve pressed closer to Bucky and rubbed his cheeks and lips over the scent gland in Bucky’s neck, marking himself with Bucky’s proud scent.

“I got you a real gift,” Bucky added.

Steve straightened up, smiling still. “Well?” he asked.

Bucky bent and fished a small, blue box wrapped in a white ribbon from the nest. Steve accepted it, recognizing the box from when they had packed for their vacation two weeks prior. He’d seen it in the midst of their clothes and despite being curious, he hadn’t opened it.

Steve pulled the ribbon free now and carefully slipped the lid off the box. There was tissue paper inside that Steve pushed aside. He reached in and his fingers found a smooth and cool something.

Steve pulled from the box a necklace. His smile grew as he looked at it, as did the pride in Bucky’s scent.

“Pearls,” Steve murmured. “You bought me pearls.”

“Happy anniversary,” Bucky said again.

Steve tucked the ribbon into the Tiffany box – and there was the Tiffany logo on the inside of the lid – and put the lid back on it. He tossed the box onto the sofa, which was pushed back from the nest, then pressed the string of pearls into Bucky’s hand and turned around.
Bucky reached the necklace around Steve’s head and brought it around his neck. Steve reached up and touched the pearls lying against his collarbones as Bucky fastened the clasp. The pearls dropped against Steve’s neck and Bucky pressed to Steve’s back, his nose tucking into Steve’s neck.

“Only the best for my beautiful angel,” Bucky murmured.

Steve smiled still, picking up a single pearl to roll it between his thumb and forefinger. He wanted to believe Bucky, he really did. He almost did. He could believe Bucky just enough to pretend that there was nothing to doubt.

The pearls meant a lot. Steve’s mother had treasured a pair of pearl earrings that Steve’s father had given her when the two of them wed. Bucky’s mother had had a pearl bracelet. Most of the girls in Steve’s school had talked about borrowing their mother’s pearls for dances and special dates. Nobody Steve knew could afford diamonds, not even the wealthy upper-class girls that went to St. Maria’s, but pearls? Every Omega dreamed about the pearls their Alpha would give them for their wedding.

“Thank you,” Steve whispered. “I love them.”

He turned around and draped his arms over Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky set his hands on Steve’s waist and touched his nose to Steve’s first, then joined their lips.

“I love you,” Bucky murmured when they parted.

“Love you, too,” Steve answered. He leaned back and smiled, then nodded at the nest. “Shall we?”

Bucky grinned and let go of Steve’s waist to kneel and lay back. Steve settled down next to Bucky, easing into the nest comfortably before resting his head on Bucky’s shoulder. He reached up and touched his pears again, smiling.

“JARVIS?” Bucky called. “Could you play the next movie in the queue?”

“As you wish,” JARVIS answered as the TV lit up.
“What about anniversary sex?” Steve asked, chuckling again.


“Shuddup, it’s not my fault you’re so delicious,” Steve retorted.

Bucky snorted again and planted a kiss on the top of Steve’s head. “I s’pose you’re right,” he said. “But let your breakfast digest.”

Steve didn’t mind. He cuddled up to Bucky anyway and set his gaze on the TV as a new classic film began. Steve continued to touch the pearls around his neck as the movie progressed; he really did love them. They meant a lot to him.

The movie wasn’t long. It was done within an hour and a half, and as it ended, Bucky cleared his throat.

“Go ahead and go into blackout mode, Jarvs,” he announced. “For the next four hours.”

“Initiating blackout,” JARVIS replied.

Steve looked up at Bucky and raised his eyebrows, then wiggled them. Bucky rolled his eyes.

“So,” Steve said. “Special anniversary sex?”

“Yeah, I got plans,” Bucky replied. “Y’know, I been doin’ some research.”

“Research?” Steve repeated. “About special anniversary sex?”

“Lil’ bit,” Bucky said.
Steve raised his eyebrows further. “And?”

“Internet has a lot of information about sex,” Bucky said. “A lot.”

Steve snorted. “Yeah, probably,” he answered.

“And some of the stuff we do?” Bucky added. “It’s kinda a thing.”

Steve frowned then. “Like what?”

Bucky began petting over Steve’s stomach with his right hand. “When we pick one’a us to be ‘in charge?’ There’s thing, BDSM. Part of it is dominance and submission.”

“Okay,” Steve said, nodding. “I’ll admit, I haven’t looked up sex things on the Internet, but that sounds a little familiar.”

“I did a lotta readin’,” Bucky explained. “I don’t think you ‘n’ me are really into most of BDSM stuff, but the dominance/submission thing, that’s up our alley.”

“Okay,” Steve said again.

“And the times that I get you outta your head by bein’ sweet on you?” Bucky added. “That’s actually called subspace. It’s sorta this state’a euphoria.”

“Make sense,” Steve answered.

“So,” Bucky continued, “I was thinking. What if I get you to go into subspace and then fuck the hell outta ya?”

Steve considered it. Then he grinned.
“That definitely sounds like euphoria,” he said.

Bucky leaned in and kissed Steve smartly, parting with a loud smack. Steve grinned again, pleased and excited.

“I bought things from the Internet,” Bucky said. “JARVIS delivered them by drone. I didn’t know drones existed. Did you?”

“Yes,” Steve chuckled. “What did you buy?”

Bucky stole another quick kiss and got up, climbing out of the nest. Steve rolled onto his back and watched Bucky walk over to the coat closet by the door that they hadn’t really used so far. Bucky opened one of the doors and drew out a surprisingly large box, then shut the door with his foot as he turned around and headed back. Steve sat up as Bucky climbed back into the nest and knelt down with the box.

“I got a lot,” Bucky admitted. “I don’t know if you wanna use all of it, but I figured, hey, why not go for it?”

“Why not?” Steve repeated, watching Bucky unfold the flaps of the box. “What kinda things did you research?”

“I read a lot,” Bucky said. “BDSM gets into some weird shit, so I skipped most of it and bought the stuff for vanilla people wanting to spice up their sex.”

“Vanilla?” Steve echoed.

“It’s what the Internet calls things that aren’t kinky,” Bucky explained and Steve shrugged.

Bucky started pulling packaged items from the box. Steve lifted his eyebrows further and further with each thing.

First was a set of fuzzy handcuffs. Steve was pretty sure that even if they wanted to use them, they’d get broken easily. The second was a set of “Sensation Play” items; a blindfold, a feather, a
pinwheel, a set of leather tassels on a handle, a silicone ice tray (?), and two candles. There was a massage kit with a few rollers and some warming oil, a bottle of personal lubricant, and a ball gag. Past that, there was a package containing anal beads – which Steve had never even heard of before –, a nicely sized anal plug, a “His Masturbator” that was shaped like a flashlight, a selection of cock rings – those were familiar –, and nipple clamps connected by a chain.

Steve’s face felt quite warm. Bucky looked very pleased with himself.

“So,” Bucky said.

Steve picked up the nipple clamps first. Bucky chuckled.

“Thought you’d go for those,” he said.

Steve blushed worse. “Shuddup,” he grumbled, putting it down and picking up the Sensation Play kit instead.

He tipped his head to the side, considering.

“I like the blindfold,” Steve said.

“Yeah?” Bucky said. “How’s about that, huh?”

Steve picked up the anal beads after that, but put them down after not much thought. He considered the plug and then the cock rings.

“So, what’s for who?” he asked.

“Both of us, I guess,” Bucky said. “Well, I don’t wanna be blindfolded. Or tied up, honestly.”

Steve shrugged, picking up the handcuffs. “I think I’d break these,” he mused. He thought some more about using them, though, and found he wasn’t averse to it. “I could try it,” he added.
“Only if you want to,” Bucky added.

Steve nodded absently, still looking at the different toys. After another minute’s thought, he opened up the Sensation Play kit and took out the blindfold, then looked up at Bucky.

“What do you want to do to me?” Steve asked.

“Pet an’ cuddle you,” Bucky said, a grin forming. “Blindfoldin’ you while I do it sounds great, too.”

Steve glanced back at the stuff, pursing his lips. “No on the messy stuff,” he decided. “I guess the candles and ice are supposed to be used on us, but, messy. Sure on the toys. But warn me.”

“I learned about safewords,” Bucky said then. “A lotta people use stoplights. Green, yellow, red.”

“Sounds good,” Steve agreed. He shuffled back and laid down, pulling the blindfold over his forehead. “Go wash the things you’re gonna use,” he told Bucky.

“Sir, yes, sir,” Bucky said with a laugh.

Steve stuck out his tongue and tugged the blindfold over his eyes. It was fairly good at blocking out light, though he could still see some through it. He took his shirt off, then settled back into the blankets, shutting his eyes, and after he closed them, he was rendered effectively blind.

He could hear Bucky moving around, though. Steve lifted his arms above his head, taking in a deep breath. His pearls rested across his throat, presenting just enough weight to make sure he was aware of them with every breath he took. He heard the kitchen sink running, but didn’t listen with great attention. He focused on how comfortable he was.

He did hear Bucky’s footsteps returning and smell him coming, though he wasn’t paying attention. The nest rustled and Bucky settled down next to Steve again.

“Comfy?” Bucky asked.
“Yep,” Steve said.

“I’m gonna cuff your wrists. Green to go?”

Steve nodded. He felt the handcuffs slipping around his wrists and cinching down, Bucky’s fingers brushing his skin in the process. Steve took another deep breath.

“You need ‘em off, just say red. Or just break ‘em if you really hate it, I guess. They’re not all that durable.”

Steve gave a cautious, testing pull. The cuffs certainly felt like they would snap at the chain if he tugged hard, even if they were metal. Steve nodded again.

“Now, keep your arms up here like that.”

Bucky shifted in the nest, then his right hand touched Steve’s stomach and Steve, startled, sucked in a breath. Bucky chuckled and smoothed his palm over Steve’s abs.

“Relax,” Bucky murmured. “I gotchu, babydoll, Daddy’s gotchu.”

Steve exhaled and nodded a third time. Bucky petted Steve’s stomach for a moment longer, then he reached up and gently Steve’s left nipple. Steve shivered, his tongue pushed at his teeth, and his eyes fluttered under the cloth obscuring his vision. Bucky chuckled again and pinched his nipple harder.

“I’m gonna put those clamps on ya, baby,” Bucky said. “So these pretty tits’ll stay all red the way I like ‘em.”

Steve only nodded. He didn’t feel much like talking. In fact, he didn’t feel much like doing anything at all but lying still and listening for Bucky’s voice. He flexed his fingers, feeling the cuffs brush at his wrists. He lifted his eyelids, but still couldn’t see a thing.

The cuffs and the blindfold were definitely working the way Bucky wanted them, too. Steve already
felt spacey and compliant.

“You’re so gorgeous,” Bucky whispered then. “Got a nice flush to your cheeks, to your neck, you’re blushin’ down to these pretty tits, baby. What’chu thinkin’ ‘bout, sugar?”

“Nothin’,” Steve mumbled. “Just listening.”

“Perfect,” Bucky answered.

Bucky started pinching both of Steve’s nipples then, moving slowly, stroking them, squeezing his pecs, pinching the buds themselves. Steve soon lost track of time. He felt both tense and limp at the same time. His body was responding more and more, but with Bucky only paying attention to Steve’s chest, Steve’s arousal was slow.

“You wan’ the clamps?” Bucky asked eventually.

Steve nodded. Bucky’s weight shifted and abruptly wet heat encased one of Steve’s nipples. Steve sucked in another breath, quickly groaning, as Bucky sucked on his nipple and bit alternatingly.

“Good baby,” Bucky purred against Steve’s nipple. “Ya like this, sugar?”

“Uh-huh,” Steve mumbled, nodding enthusiastically.

Bucky bit Steve’s nipple one more time, then his mouth lifted. Steve whined, but Bucky only chuckled and twisted away. Then something cold touched Steve’s chest and Steve gasped, startled by it.

“Just the chain on the clamps, baby,” Bucky murmured. “Relax now, there ya go…”

Steve’s breathing eased and Bucky laid the chain and clamps down on Steve’s chest. He pinched Steve’s nipples again each, then Steve felt the rubber caps of the clamps touching his hard nipples. Bucky released the clamps and the shock of pleasurable pain went straight to Steve’s dick as he gasped again.
“There,” Bucky said, sounding proud. “Stevie, sweetheart, you look so beautiful, so gorgeous. D’ya like it?”

Steve just nodded. His breath now came hard, punching in and out of his lungs, and with every second, he was aware of both the clamps on his nipples and the pearls resting across his throat. They weighed barely anything, but if Steve let go of his thoughts, he could imagine that the pearls were weighing him down so much he wouldn’t be able to lift his head.

“Good baby, doin’ so good for Daddy,” Bucky murmured. “Let’s see…”

Something soft touched Steve’s upper arm; the leather tassels. Bucky trailed them down Steve’s arm, bringing them over his collarbones, then down his body. Steve drew his breath in hard. Bucky trailed the tassels down Steve’s abdomen towards his groin. Steve swallowed hard, feeling the pearls hanging across his throat.

“You feelin’ outta your head yet, sugar?” Bucky asked.

Steve nodded.

“Good,” Bucky purred. “Tell you what’s gonna happen. I’m gonna play with ya for a while, then I’m gonna fuck you ‘til I knot you and when my knot’s gone down, I’m gonna fuck you again. And then again. And again. How’s that sound, babydoll?”

“Good,” Steve mumbled.

“Great,” Bucky answered. “Now, while Daddy’s playin’ wit’chu and fuckin’ you, you’re gonna just lie here and let me, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed.

“Cause my sweet babydoll don’t gotta lift a finger while I’m takin’ care’a him,” Bucky said, abruptly kissing Steve’s stomach just to the left of his navel. “Anythin’ you want, doll, I’ll do it for ya. Today’s all about you, Stevie.”
Steve nodded faintly. Bucky kissed Steve’s stomach again, then again, then his hands started to pet down Steve’s sides as he continued to lavish Steve’s body in kisses.

Eventually, Bucky slipped Steve’s boxers off. Steve had no clue how long Bucky spent kissing his body, but Bucky kissed every inch of Steve’s skin from his forehead to his ankles and then back.

Steve was in bliss.

“Sweet, pretty Omega,” Bucky cooed. “So beautiful, so perfect. You’re so good for Daddy, sugar.”

Bucky’s kisses gravitate to Steve’s thighs. Steve hardly realized Bucky was moving his legs for him until his legs were spread out to the side and Bucky was pushing his knees up and back.

“My sweet baby,” Bucky said as he pressed kisses up Steve’s thighs. “Yknow how much I love the taste’a ya, babydoll.”

Bucky licked slick from between Steve’s cheeks. Steve let out a soft sigh.

“Taste better ‘n’ better every day,” Bucky murmured, licking Steve again. “I love you so much, Omegamine.”

“Alpha,” Steve exhaled.

“Tha’s good, sweetheart,” Bucky praised. “You’re so good, doin’ so sweet for Daddy, baby.”

Steve’s eyes rolled back in his head as Bucky licked inside him. Steve shuddered and sighed, but never moved as Bucky worked his hole open with his tongue. That blissful state of euphoria that Steve so often craved felt even better with Bucky rimming him and even better when Bucky started pushing his fingers in with his tongue.

“Alpha,” Steve moaned, the only thing his mind could summon to express how good he felt.
“Precious,” Bucky kissed into Steve’s hole. “Perfect, pretty angel,” Bucky murmured as he lifted up and kissed up Steve’s abdomen.

Steve let his lips part and hang open when Bucky’s mouth reached his. Bucky’s tongue tasted sweet but Steve was too far gone to chase the taste. Bucky kissed Steve hard despite his lax response, then kissed back down Steve’s neck and stopped at his scent gland. Bucky always paid special attention to Steve’s scent gland and now was no exception. Bucky licked and sucked at Steve’s scent gland as he worked a third and fourth finger into Steve’s hole.

“‘M gonna fuck you, baby,” Bucky cooed. “‘M gonna fuck you good ‘n’ hard, jus’ the way you like it, sugar. You’re gonna see stars,” he promised.

Steve was already feeling stars. Bucky draped Steve’s legs over his shoulders and held onto Steve’s hip with one hand while the other set next to Steve’s head to hold himself up. Steve could focus on just the sensation of sweet teasing Bucky gave him while he was blinded and blissful like this. Bucky sucked bruises into Steve’s neck and shoulders and chest, while the heavy weight of his length pushed shallowly against Steve’s hole.

“Pretty baby,” Bucky murmured. “Daddy’s good boy.”

“Alpha,” Steve whined.

“Shh,” Bucky cooed, “shh, I gotchu, sugar, Daddy’s gotchu.”

Bucky pushed in. Steve saw those stars; they exploded just under his eyelids as his head fell into a whole new level of happy oblivion. Steve could experience nothing but Bucky, in him, over him, surrounding him. Bucky’s presence was potent, a headrush like no other. Steve felt drunk just on Bucky’s scent.

“There,” Bucky said softly as he began to thrust almost lazily. “There’s Daddy’s angel. You’re doin’ so good, Stevie, doin’ just what I tell you so well. You’re a perfect lil’ listener for Daddy, huh?”


“Gonna give it to ya,” Bucky promised. “Gonna give it to ya all day, babydoll, gonna give ya just what you deserve, just what’chu need. An’ you’re gonna take it jus’ like I tell ya, ‘cause you’re
Daddy’s pretty angel, huh?”

“Uh-huh,” Steve repeated.

Bucky started to speed up the dragging of his hips. “Why don’t’chu say it, baby? Tell me what you are?”

“Daddy’s angel,” Steve echoed.

“Daddy’s pretty angel,” Bucky replied. “Say it, Stevie.”

Steve bit down on his lip, unable to process the conflict his mind tried to bring up while in this headspace let alone with Bucky’s cock thrusting into his ass. He stumbled, confused and a little upset, until Bucky bit down into his scent gland lightly.

“Tell me what you are,” Bucky insisted. “C’mon, sweetheart, you can do it.”

“Your pretty –” Steve started. “Pretty angel.”

“Good boy,” Bucky praised, kissing his neck. “So good, my perfect angel. Say it again.”

“Your pretty angel,” Steve said.

Bucky sped up again and Steve hitched a gasp, moaning on his exhale. Bucky panted against Steve’s neck, still licking and sucking at his scent gland between words.

“Again,” he commanded.

“Your pretty angel,” Steve said. “Daddy’s pretty angel, Alpha, your pretty angel.”

“Good boy,” Bucky praised. “Again.”
“Daddy’s pretty angel,” Steve whined. “Alpha, Alpha, more!”

“All ya had to do was ask,” Bucky assured him, even as his pace picked up again.

Steve whimpered aloud, his muscles starting to strain. Bucky nipped at his scent gland and licked the bite mark, shaking the nest as he plowed into Steve.

“Good, good baby,” he panted. “Say it again.”

“Your pretty, Alpha,” Steve said, feeling desperate. “Your pretty angel, Alpha, Daddy, more, please, more!”

“Good boy,” Bucky answered, “I love you so much, babydoll, you’re so good for Daddy.”

Steve moaned, his voice loud and reedy; his breath came in gasps, his toes curling and his thighs tensing as his legs dangled over Bucky’s shoulders.

“I’m gonna fuck you ‘til you can’t walk,” Bucky promised. “An’ you’re jus’ gonna lemme, huh, baby? You jus’ gonna let Daddy take care’a ya?”

“Uh-huh!” Steve said. “Alpha, more, Alpha, Alpha!”

“Anything,” Bucky swore. “I love you so much, baby.”

“Your angel,” Steve simply babbled on. “Your pretty, Daddy’s angel, Alpha, Daddy –”

“You gonna come, baby?” Bucky asked. “Gonna come for Daddy?”

“Uh-huh!” Steve gasped.
“Gonna beg for Daddy’s knot?” Bucky asked, a delicious growl slipping into his voice. “You wan’ Daddy to knot you, sugar?”

“Knot me,” Steve pleaded obediently, “knot me, Alpha, Daddy, I want it, I want it so bad –”

“That’s my angel,” Bucky growled. “Beg Daddy for his knot, Stevie, go on ‘n’ beg.”

“I need it!” Steve begged. “I need your knot, Alpha, I need it, I want it so much, knot me, knot me –”

Bucky growled against Steve’s throat, his mouth parting over his scent gland and the sound taking vibrations deep into the bundle of nerves in it.

“Alpha!” Steve gasped. “Alpha, I’m – Daddy –”

Steve couldn’t finish the sentence. His mind exploded in pleasure as he came, everything so much all at once; the nipple clamps, the weight of the pearls across his throat, the soft nest around him and Bucky covering him. Everything was exquisite and Steve’s mind whited out with pleasure. His mouth stretched open in a silent scream, overwhelmed.

“So good,” Bucky groaned, then resumed pistoning his hips.

Steve didn’t feel overstimulated. It felt like he was still coming. Bucky’s knot popped and Steve blanked out for another second. Then he simply drifted.

“Sweet angel,” Bucky purred. “So good for Daddy, I love you so much.”

“’M your pretty angel,” Steve mumbled absently.

“Yes, you are,” Bucky promised. “The prettiest angel I ever seen, sugar.”

Steve smiled. It was so easy to believe Bucky’s words like this.
“Thank you for my pearls, Alpha,” Steve said. “I love them.”

Bucky kissed Steve’s cheek. “Of course, baby.”


“You’re the best Omega,” Bucky said, a chuckle entering his voice. “I love you, too.”

Steve wriggled a little. Bucky kissed the hollow of his throat, then lowered his legs from his shoulders and rolled both of them onto their sides. Steve pulled his arms down, his wrists still locked together, and he cuddled into Bucky’s chest. Bucky started running his wrist down Steve’s back, scent-marking him. Steve grinned against Bucky’s chest.

“Happy anniversary,” he mumbled.

“Happy anniversary, Omegamine,” Bucky answered.

Chapter End Notes

the kids done learned and the pearls have come, like the prophet chaosdraws foretold. you know what's next. i'll see you again next sunday with the next chapter! if you read Like Rahab, too, I'll see you tomorrow. if you read These Days, i'll also see you tomorrow bc i'm adding a monday update for that fic bc it's completely written i'm just not posting it all at once. those are things. i'm still tired, lexi is still awesome, captain america is a bottom and you can follow my bottom!steve centric blog here. ily, bye by
november is over. i have plot. prepare yourselves.

lexi is a godsend, as always. she's in the middle of finals and still checking out my shitty content. send her blessings, y'all. you can find this week's cover on my tumblr [here](#) and i'm super proud of my photoshop skills, especially considering i use a free version of a photoshop knockoff. also, you'll need these

**Pestsior** = Little fish
**Ce faci?!** = What are you doing?
**Ei pot ajuta ne!** = They can help us!
**Mănâncă un sac de rahat în iad, nemernicule!** = Eat a bag of shit in hell, asshole!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).
It was past one in the morning when Steve and Bucky touched down on the helipad of Stark Tower, but despite the late hour, the common room was full when Steve and Bucky entered.
“Finally!” Tony shouted, jumping up from the sectional sofa. “The honeymooners return!”

“It wasn’t a honeymoon,” Steve insisted.

“Might as well have been,” Bucky muttered in Steve’s direction, smirking.

Steve shot him a glare. Bucky just chuckled.

“Great,” Sam called, sprawled on the couch with his eyes shut, “now that they’re back, can we go to bed?”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Natasha told him, even as she petted a snoring Clint, slumped in her lap.

“Why did you all stay up?” Steve asked.

“To make sure you got home safe,” Tony said. “Duh.”

Steve gave pause. Then he smiled and ducked his head in Tony’s direction. “Thanks,” he said.

“But go to bed now,” Bucky added. “Seriously, youse look like you’re two seconds from falling asleep.”

“I’m not,” Natasha defended herself.

“You should be,” Bucky countered. “You’re a growing girl, you need your rest.”

Natasha blinked. Sam sat up. Tony gawked, then laughed aloud.

“You heard ‘im!” Steve said then, a smile growing on his lips. “Time for bed, kids!”
Tony kept laughing. “I’m older than you!” he complained.

“It’s past your bedtime!” Bucky insisted.

“I’m gonna listen to our dads and scoot,” Sam declared, getting up. “I advise y’all do the same.”

“You need help getting Clint up?” Steve asked, walking up to Natasha.


Steve gave a nod and turned on Tony, then raised his eyebrows. Tony snorted again.

“I’ll go,” he said. “But only because I want to tell Pepper that this happened.”

“Goodnight!” Steve called pointedly.

Tony waved a hand as he left for the stairs. Steve turned back and watched Natasha helping Clint, who was blinking and yawning, off the couch, then grabbed Bucky’s hand again and pulled him on towards the elevator. Steve summoned it and held the doors open to wait for Clint and Natasha. Clint looked asleep on his feet, still.

“Goodnight,” Steve wished Natasha and Clint as the elevator stopped on their floor.

Natasha glanced back over her shoulder and waved just before the doors shut again. Now alone with Bucky, Steve yawned and turned to lean on Bucky. Bucky hugged Steve around the waist and held up Steve’s weight for him. Steve shut his eyes and rested his cheek on Bucky’s shoulder until the elevator stopped again.

They made quick work of getting ready for bed. They were too tired to do much more than brush their teeth side-by-side and then change into clean underwear before they collapsed into bed. Steve lay on his side and Bucky pressed to his back; Bucky’s right arm lay under Steve’s neck, his metal arm curled over Steve’s stomach, and his leg hooked over Steve’s thighs to pin him down to the bed.
Steve tucked his right hand into Bucky’s, then laid his left over Bucky’s and laced his fingers with Bucky’s metal digits. Bucky pressed a kiss to the back of Steve’s neck.

“Love you, angel,” Bucky mumbled.

“Love you, too, Alpha,” Steve answered softly.

The peace and quiet in the room as they fall asleep was only made better by Bucky’s eventual rumbling snores. Steve never felt safer than when he was wrapped up in his Alpha, and that night was no exception. Steve lay almost on his stomach and Bucky curled over him to nearly lie on top of him. Steve felt grounded and secure. It was easy for him to fall asleep.

And it felt like barely minutes later that the alarm woke him.

“Captain!” JARVIS’s voice blared. “Your presence is required in the lab!”

“Fuck,” Steve said, half-falling out of bed while Bucky panickedly brandished a gun at the corners of the room. “What the fuck, JARVIS?” Steve shouted.

“There is a hostage situation at Lexington Avenue and East 46th street subway station,” JARVIS said. “HYDRA agents have shut down the trains and taken 48 hostages. They have a viral agent that they are threatening to release across Manhattan.”


“Why can’t those assholes just stay dead?” Bucky groaned.

“Lights!” Steve shouted, stumbling towards his wardrobe. “Lights, J!”

The lights flicked on and Steve blinked against momentary blindness as he adjusted to the brightness. He jerked open the wardrobe and grabbed his gear from the back of it. Bucky was right behind him, getting his own suit and go-bag. Steve dressed as fast as he could, yawning several times throughout.
“What time is it?” Bucky asked.

“Three seventeen,” JARVIS replied calmly.

“I hate these guys,” Steve sighed, fastening his boots. “I hate them.”

“You ‘n’ me both, sweetheart,” Bucky grumbled.

Steve stomped his way to the elevator, Bucky on his heels. The elevator stopped two floors down to let Natasha and Clint on, Clint yawning yet again, then again to admit Sam and Bruce. It stopped finally at Tony’s lab and the six of them unloaded to find Tony half into his Iron Man suit.

“What’s the situation?” Steve asked.

“Fuck if I know,” Tony answered. “J, updates?”

A security camera feed appeared a screen behind Tony; the nearest subway station, but instead of the bare-bones crew and nighttime commuters that should have been keeping the subways moving, there was a still train car, at least ten men in masks and carrying guns, and a few dozen hostages; all bound, gagged, and blindfolded.

“The men attacked the station at 2:37 this morning,” JARVIS announced. “Police quickly arrived on site and the hostiles identified themselves as agents of HYDRA. They demanded an audience with the Avengers at 2:58 A.M.”

“Great,” Steve grumbled. “Are we walking or flying?”

“Driving,” Tony said. “The Lexington and East 46th station is only two blocks away.”

“This was deliberate,” Natasha said.

“Obviously,” Steve said. “Tony, hurry up, I don’t want to waste any time.”
“Somebody’s grumpy,” Sam muttered.

“Excuse me for being a little irritated at being woken up at three fuckin’ fifteen in the fuckin’ morning,” Steve snapped.

Bucky reached over and covered Natasha’s ears. “There are children present, Steven Grant!” he said dryly.

“I will break your arms,” Natasha said.

Bucky removed his hands and covered Clint’s ears instead. “Children!” he repeated.

Steve glared at Bucky for a second. Clint started sniggering and Sam soon joined in. Bucky looked unrepentant.

“You can sleep on the couch when we’re done with this,” Steve told him flatly.

“You’re too clingy to follow through with that threat,” Bucky retorted.

“Oooh!” Sam and Clint both gasped.

“Well,” Steve spluttered, “you can spend some quality time with your right hand after this, ‘cause I sure as hell ain’t gonna be puttin’ out anytime soon!”

“Oooh!” Tony, Clint, and Sam gasped again.

Bucky pouted. Steve, victorious, gave a smug nod and turned back for the elevators.

“Move out, troops!” he called over his shoulder. “I want this over with.”
“Should I stay here?” Bruce asked.

“Yeah, you run the place while we’re gone,” Tony told him. “Subway’s too crowded for the big guy, anyway.”

“Good point,” Steve agreed. “Keep JARVIS company.”

Bruce gave a thumb’s up, looking a little bit relieved.

They piled into the elevator and from there, went down to the garage and piled, again, into an SUV. Natasha drove. Steve took shotgun, forcing Tony, Clint, Sam, and Bucky to cram into the back of the vehicle. Bucky did not look pleased about being squashed behind Sam, and Steve focused on the satisfaction of having shown his Alpha who was boss over the lingering clinginess that came with his continual yawning.

“We should’ve gotten coffee,” Tony grumbled.

“Can you move your seat up?” Bucky asked Sam gruffly.

“No,” Sam grumbled.

As they reached the intersection of Lexington and East 46th, a police barricade and FBI mobile units forced Natasha to pull over and park. They got out and Steve shivered immediately in the freezing night air, wishing his suit was a little more insulating. Bucky moved closer and slung an arm around his waist, providing additional heat. Steve accepted it, though he said nothing.

As they approached the police barrier, a familiar face ducked under the yellow tape to approach them.

“Agent,” Steve greeted a little bit stiffly.

“Captain,” Sharon Carter answered. “Aren’t you retired?”
“Not where HYDRA’s concerned,” Steve replied. “What’s going on down there?”

“There are twelve operatives,” Sharon began, lifting the yellow tape for the Avengers to cross into the active crime scene. “As far as we can tell, Rumlow’s in charge.”

“Rumlow is dead,” Bucky cut in. “I killed him.”

“Well, somehow he’s alive,” Sharon said. “He’s down there, and he’s got a homemade viral agent strapped to a bomb big enough to take out 24 square blocks. He says the virus is a special cocktail that’s potent enough to take down a super soldier.”

Steve exchanged a glance with Natasha. Clearly, HYDRA was determined to take them out.

“I shot Rumlow between the eyes,” Bucky insisted. “There’s no way he survived.”

Sharon shrugged, stopping at one of the FBI mobile units. “You can talk to him yourself,” she said, leading them in. “He’s alive and he’s taken at least 50 people captive.”

“I thought it was 48,” Steve said.

“They miscounted,” Sharon told him, her tone grave. “There’s a woman with two toddlers, Rumlow didn’t see the kids because she was hiding them under her coat.”

Steve gritted his teeth, looking at the many camera feeds in the van showing the hostages. “What do they want?”

“You,” Sharon said simply. “They refuse to negotiate with anyone but you.”

“You can’t go down there,” Bucky said immediately.

“I should go,” Tony added. “My suit has a closed air system and it’s bulletproof. They wouldn’t be able to get the virus past it.”
“They’re demanding I talk to them,” Steve insisted.

“So they can zap you with whatever virus they got and take you out!” Bucky snapped. “You can’t go.”

Steve bristled, glancing away. He searched the cameras, looking over the hostages. He found the woman with the toddlers, then a young boy that looked to be barely fifteen, a girl maybe near drinking age, more than one elderly person. So many innocent people that just had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“What’s your plan?” he asked Sharon.

“I’m not in charge,” Sharon answered. “The FBI took over from the NYPD; my boss is in charge of the scene.”

“What’s his plan?” Steve pressed.

“He wants to send in a decoy,” Sharon said.

Steve looked back at the camera feeds. “I’ll go in,” he said.

“Steve,” Bucky said warningly.

Steve jerked around to glare at him, but said nothing. He held Bucky’s gaze, daring him to try to hold him back. Bucky stood still. The tension in the van was palpable.

“Try it,” Steve hissed.

“Don’t go,” Bucky growled commandingly.

Steve clenched his jaw. Sharon audibly drew in a breath. Tony and Clint shared nervous looks.
Natasha was motionless and Sam took a step forward, putting a hand on Bucky’s shoulder.

“Let’s take a step back here,” Sam said carefully.

Bucky simply knocked Sam’s hand off his shoulder, then instead, he grabbed Steve’s arms, tugging him slightly away from the group. Steve found he was unable to resist; Bucky’s eyes were dark and his scent had gotten suddenly sharper, his Alpha characteristics speaking to Steve’s instincts, making him more docile, making him crave Bucky’s approval. Steve would be angry, if it weren’t for the sheer worry feeding across their bond.

“It’s a trap,” Bucky insisted. “If you go in, they’re going to hit you with whatever this virus is. Going in yourself would be stupid!”

“They’re refusing to negotiate with anyone else!” Steve tried to argue.

“Let Tony try,” Bucky said. “C’mon, HYDRA has done nothing but try their damnedest to kill you recently; it’s clearly a trap!”

Steve clenched his jaw. He glanced down, then nodded, briefly baring his throat to Bucky. Bucky touched Steve’s cheek with his gloved right hand and Steve resisted the urge to press against his touch. Instead, he pulled away, a little embarrassed, and addressed Tony.

“You can go in,” he said. “We’ll stay here as backup.”

“Cool,” Tony said. “Uh, now that we’re done with that super uncomfy conversation –”

Bucky continued to glare, aiming it at Tony now. Before anyone could respond, the van shook as someone else climbed in and the group all turned.

“Ah,” the entering FBI agent said. “Y’all are here. Good.”

The agent stepped forward, holding out his hand to Steve. “I’m Agent Kani, this is my scene.”
Steve shook the FBI agent’s hand, ignoring the way Bucky was now glaring at Agent Kani. Steve didn’t bother introducing himself or his team, seeing as it was obvious who they were.

“Agent Carter tells me you’re planning to send in a decoy,” he said. “Who?”

“We’ve got Hazmat suits,” Kani says. “That’ll make it impossible to tell that the person it in ain’t actually you. Now that you’re here, we can hook you up to our comm units and you can use the decoy as your eyes and ears.”

“I’m going in, too,” Tony declared. “My suit has closed ventilation.”

“Fair enough,” Agent Kani agreed.

“Could you just use the Hazmat suit?” Sam suggested, looking at Steve.

Bucky flicked his gaze back to Steve’s, his expression warning. Steve exhaled.

“No,” he said. “It’s obviously a trap. I’d rather just send Tony by himself.”

“I want my man on the scene,” Agent Kani said.

“Who’s to say that they’re not just gonna open fire when the decoy-me walks in?” Steve said. “We send Tony. His suit is impenetrable.”

“Why would they open fire on you?” Kani said. “They want to talk to you, that don’t make sense.”

“They don’t want to talk to Steve,” Bucky said gruffly, “they just want to kill him. They’ve been trying to kill him since 1943.”

Kani exhaled heavily. “Fine,” he agreed. “But I got a SWAT team on standby to go in and sweep the place.”

“Fine,” Steve said.

Tony moved towards the van exit. “What are we waiting for, then?”

Kani moved aside to let Tony pass, then sent a glance towards the Avengers before stepping out after Tony. Steve followed, and his team was quick to copy. Sharon went with them, and the group approached the subway entrance and a series of blast shields with communication equipment set up.

“JARVIS is patching himself into your systems,” Tony told Kani casually. “That’ll put you on our comm systems.”

“Good thinking,” Kani said. “Don’t suppose that’ll give us access to all your tech, too, will it?”

Tony laughed. “No.”

Kani gave a shrug. “Was worth a try.”

Steve activated his comm unit and gave Tony a nod. Tony flipped down his faceplate and the suit let out a hiss of displaced air as it pressurized itself. Tony maneuvered through the set up of blast shields, making his way to the subway entrance. Kani picked up a phone.

“We’re sending our guy in,” he said into it. “Again, I gotta ask, you sure y’all don’t want some pizzas or nothin’? I know a great lil’ joint just three blocks from here that does 24/7 service; I used to bus tables there back in high school, they was great – No? Alright, man, if you’re sure.”

Kani hung up the phone, turning to the computer monitors with a grim expression. Steve neared them.

“Which one is Rumlow?” he asked.

Steve studied the figure. He was masked, just like the rest of the agents, but Rumlow always carried himself in a very distinctive manner. He was arrogant and cocksure, his finger always lingering near the trigger of his weapon. Strangely enough, there was a faint red glow coming from Rumlow’s mask that also set him apart from all the others.

“I killed him,” Bucky repeated again.

“I saw him during the zombie attack,” Steve said quietly. “Before I blacked out. I thought I was imagining things.”

“That girl made zombies,” Clint suggested. “Maybe she brought Rumlow back?”

“How is it possible to raise the dead like that?” Sam asked. “That’s, like, a constant in all magic things; you can’t raise the dead!”

“I don’t know what kind of magic you’re basing that assumption off of,” Natasha replied dryly, “but Rumlow is clearly alive again.”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe I’m basin’ it a lil’ bit off Harry Potter,” he admitted.

Steve shook his head, leaning closer to the screen. “Whatever happened,” he said softly, “I don’t want Rumlow to leave this station alive. He needs to stay dead.”

“Agreed,” Bucky said.

“Uh, we tend to take people alive,” Kani threw in.

“Then consider Rumlow already dead,” Steve told the FBI agent in a dark tone. “Natasha, Clint, I want you two to find the necromancer. Break her spell.”

Natasha gave a nod and turned to leave. Clint saluted before following her.
“What necromancer?” Kani demanded.

Steve pointed to Rumlow’s mask. “See the red glow? Two weeks back, when there was that random zombie outbreak in Manhattan, the cause was an enhanced girl. She was controlling the corpses and the visual signs was that red glow.”

“I thought the zombies were a stunt,” Kani muttered.

“They were real,” Steve assured him. “And that girl was the center of all of it.”

On the screen, Tony appeared in the stairwell leading down to the station. Steve crossed his arms over his chest, watching as Tony hopped the barrier and made his way around to where the hostages were.

The phone rang. Kani picked it up and pressed an additional button, putting the call on speaker.

“We told you to send Captain America,” Rumlow’s voice fed across the phones.

“Cap’s retired, man,” Kani answered. “Iron Man’s the best we got to give you.”

“Cap ain’t retired,” Rumlow said. “Send in Cap or I start testing these syringes.”

Steve moved closer to the screens again; Rumlow clearly wanted the camera feeds active, because he was looking straight into the nearest camera. He held a syringe, filled with a bright blue liquid, and waved it for the camera to see.

“My scientist buddy tells me the first thing this’ll do is cause projectile vomiting,” Rumlow said. “That’ll just release airborne contaminants. We don’t want that, do we?”

“Why don’t we slow down here?” Kani asked. “Iron Man’s already there, you can talk to him.”
“I want to talk to Captain America,” Rumlow snarled. “You got five minutes!”

“Gimme the phone,” Steve said.

Kani glanced at Steve, then, infuriatingly, at Bucky. Steve snatched the phone from Kani’s grip.

“Rumlow,” Steve greeted tersely.

On the screen, Rumlow lowered the syringe. He laughed once.

“Knew you’d be here,” Rumlow said. “But I want to talk to you in person. Why don’t you man up and get down here?”

“I ain’t stupid,” Steve snapped. “I go down there, the first thing you’re gonna do is jam that syringe in my neck. Where’re those enhanced kids, Rumlow? You got the speedster hiding in a corner with his own set’a syringes? Are his orders to prick me the second I go in?”

Rumlow didn’t answer immediately. He clenched the syringe in his hand, then waved it towards the hostages behind him.

“You come talk to me or I prick one of them!” he threatened.

“I need a show of good faith,” Steve answered. “Send out all the kids to show me you won’t just stab me the second I show up.”

“Steve,” Bucky hissed.

Steve waved him off. “Everyone under 18,” he insisted.

Rumlow chuckled again. He hung up the phone.
Steve lowered the phone, setting it back in its cradle. On the camera feed, Rumlow strode towards the mother and the two toddlers.

“Get the kids!” Rumlow’s voice crackled across the cameras. “Send ’em to Iron Man.”

“You sure this is a good idea?” Agent Kani asked quietly.

“Nope,” Steve said.

“You’d better not actually go in there,” Bucky growled.

“Lemme have one of your Hazmat suits,” Steve told Kani. “Or a respirator, something.”

Kani turned and snapped his fingers towards an underling, repeating the order. Steve focused on the cameras again.

Rumlow was gathering up all the children and teenagers. Steve clicked his comm unit on.

“Tony,” he started. “Rumlow is sending out the kids towards you. I want you to bring them all back here.”

“And then what?”

“I’ll go in,” Steve answered. “You stay on standby.”

“Admiral Ackbar has some wise advice for you,” Tony said dryly.

“I know it’s a trap,” Steve said. “Just do it.”

“When did you see Star Wars?!”
Steve ignored the question. Rumlow turned to face the camera again, then lifted his phone. In front of Steve, the phone rang. Steve picked it up.

“The kids are goin’ out,” Rumlow said. “That enough good faith for ya?”

“It’ll do,” Steve said. “I’ll head in once the kids are clear.”

“Nah,” Rumlow argued, “you come down now.”

“When the kids are clear,” Steve snapped, then hung up.

“It’s usually best not to aggravate these guys,” Kani remarked.

Steve ignored him. Another FBI agent approached with Steve’s Hazmat suit and Steve strode away from the command center to get the orange get-up on. Bucky followed, glaring away the FBI agent. Steve started climbing into the suit.

“I don’t like this,” Bucky said.

“I know,” Steve answered. “But I have to do this.”

Steve picked up the helmet. Bucky grabbed his arm just before he could and yanked him in for a short, sharp kiss. Steve gave pause after, getting his breath back, and Bucky rubbed their noses together.

“Be careful, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured.

Steve nodded. He pulled back and tugged the helmet on.

It was stuffy and musty inside the suit and the respirator hissed with Steve’s every breath. He made his way almost clumsily past the blast shield barrier, then just waited. After a minute, Tony appeared
again, carrying a child in his arms and leading a group of more kids and teens, and Steve started to walk again.

“I want you to wait just out of sight,” Steve said to Tony as he passed. “You hear anything start to go down, rush in.”

“Sure thing, Cap,” Tony answered stiffly. “Be careful.”

“Everybody’s tellin’ me to be careful,” Steve grumbled, starting to walk again.

He took the stairs slowly, the Hazmat suit making him feel like he was only just adjusting to his big body again. He cleared the corner at last, coming to a stop several yards away from where the HYDRA agents and the hostages were gathered.

“Really?” Rumlow shouted towards him. “A decoy?”

“It’s me,” Steve promised.

“How do I know for sure?” Rumlow demanded.

“In the elevator,” Steve started, “you told me it wasn’t personal and I kicked the shit outta you.”

Rumlow laughed. “Fine,” he said. “Why don’t you come closer, I feel like it’s been ages! We gotta reacquaint ourselves!”

“No offense,” Steve said, though he closed some of the distance, “but I don’t feel much like acquainting myself with any of you.”

Rumlow laughed yet again. “Aw, buddy, c’mon, it can be just like old times!”

“Yet there’s something that is telling me that this is a trap,” Steve reiterated. “Tony keeps telling me that it’s Admiral Ackbar, but I’m fairly certain it’s Bucky pinging off the walls with how worried he is.”
The comm unit in his ear crackled.

“*I’m not pinging off the walls. There are no walls to ping off of.*”

“Thank you, Bucky,” Steve muttered into the comm unit.

“It’s not a trap,” Rumlow promised, “I just wanna get back on your good side. Here’s the thing, my buddies and I actually need your help, Cap.”

Steve stared Rumlow down, unfazed.

“We’ve got a problem,” Rumlow added. “Remember those kids? From the zombie thing? Yeah, they’ve gotten outta control. They’re the ones who sent us here, that witch is controlling me.”

“If the witch was controlling you,” Steve repeated dryly, “why would she let you tell me any of this?”

Rumlow gave pause. Steve saw a flash of red across the station, barely for a second, and knew Natasha was in place. Clint was no doubt nearby, but he doubted that he’d see him. Natasha only signaled him to warn him.

“Come here,” Rumlow snapped, suddenly sharp and commanding.

Steve felt a faint tug of an urge to obey, but quickly waved it off.

“That doesn’t really work on bonded Omegas,” he said. “Didn't you know that?”

Rumlow jerked up his gun. So did the other 11 HYDRA agents. Steve calmly raised his hands.

“Get on your knees, hands behind your head,” Rumlow snapped. “No funny business!”
“Finally,” Steve grumbled, though he was moving to kneel. “Let’s get the pussy-footin’ over with and get to the real deal, alright? I’m tired and it’s the middle of the night.”

“Get him,” Rumlow ordered.

Three men moved forward, magnetic restraints snapping open. Steve waited until they were right on him, then swung his legs out and knocked the three of them to the floor. He grabbed one of their guns and shot all three in the legs before diving off to the side behind a column, dodging bullets from the other eight men.

“I said no funny business!” Rumlow shouted.

“Oh, my bad!” Steve replied. “I didn’t think shooting people was funny!”

Steve clicked onto his comm then. “Everyone, hold positions,” he hissed.

“You got five minutes before I’m comin’ after you, punk,” Bucky said.

“Fine,” Steve answered. “I should have these clowns dealt with by then.”

Steve aimed his rifle at a metal stripe across the opposite wall. He could see the reflections of half the other men, and that meant they’d be seeing him relatively soon. He fired again and the bullets rebounded to strike four of the remaining HYDRA agents. The hostiles screamed in pain, but some of the hostages started crying loudly at the same time. Steve used the moment of chaos to spring across the station and take cover behind another column.

“Enough!” Rumlow screamed.

“Sorry,” Steve said, “my finger slipped.”

Rumlow let out a long snarl. Steve tucked the rifle against his chest and rolled, falling into the train tracks. He crouched, waiting, but the HYDRA agents didn’t run for the tracks. Carefully, Steve started to creep forward.
“Spread out!” he heard Rumlow yell. “Find him!”

Steve held his gun with a vice grip. Down the tracks, he spotted another flash of red. Natasha signaling. He pointed up towards the men, and the red flashed a second time. Steve kept close to the wall of the tracks, keeping out of sight.

A HYDRA agent peered over the edge and Steve shot him in the hip before taking off. Bullets pinged around him but Steve ducked, sprinting towards the bend in the tracks. He made eye contact with Natasha, who gestured wildly and Steve noticed the tripwire. He jumped it just in time, landing in a roll before propelling himself forwards again. He jumped onto the ledge with Natasha and stopped, panting.

“Three,” Natasha murmured, “two.”

Two HYDRA agents came running down the tracks. They hit Natasha’s tripwire and two targeted mines went off, sending both of them flying backwards.

“That’s all’a ‘em,” Steve rasped. “Just Rumlow left.”

A blur of silver and blue shot in front of them. Steve threw himself over Natasha just in time, shielding her from the needle that sliced through Steve’s Hazmat suit. Natasha flung one of her Widow’s Bites and the blur stopped mid-air, revealing a boy, falling to the ground in a convulsing heap.

Steve grabbed the syringe hanging from his suit and carefully broke off the needle. He jumped back down and grabbed the speedster, who was unconscious, and threw him over his shoulder.

“Where’s Clint?” Steve asked.

Natasha pointed up. Steve looked and saw a ventilation cover misplaced. Steve shrugged, turning back.

“You guys got Rumlow?” he asked.
“Sure,” Natasha answered. “We didn’t find the witch, though, be careful.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve grumbled, then removed his Hazmat helmet and clicked his comm unit again. “Bucky, you’ll be happy, I’m heading back up again.”

“I am happy,” Bucky answered flatly.

Steve rolled his eyes. He tucked the boy a little higher up his shoulder, starting the trek towards the next subway station with the unconscious speedster.

“Tony, you can move in now,” Steve added into the comm. “Everybody make sure you’re careful with the hostages.”

There was silence.

“Tony?” Steve repeated.

He turned back around, looking back down the subway tunnel. Red light flooded the tunnel from the other end.

“Shit,” Steve sighed.

Steve broke into a run, with the unconscious boy still slung across his shoulder. He dropped the boy onto the ledge just before the bend, then climbed up and peered around the corner. Clint and Natasha were suspended in the air by tendrils of red light and Rumlow was holding his gun against the back of the girl from the cemetery.

Last time they’d confronted each other, Steve had shot Rumlow repeatedly and it had had no effect, so he didn’t bother trying to shoot Rumlow in the back. Worse yet, Steve could see the bomb with the virus right next to Rumlow.

No, what Steve focused on was that Rumlow seemed to be holding the girl captive just as much as
the other hostages. Steve glanced at the boy next to him, then back at the girl.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!” Rumlow called in a sing-song voice. “I got your little buddies, Cap!”

“Fuck,” Steve grumbled.

The speedster gave a groan. Steve dropped to his knees and pressed his hand over the boy’s mouth just as the boy’s eyes shot open. Steve pinned the boy to the wall, then touched a finger to his lips. The boy blinked.

“Where’s your brother?” Rumlow snapped in the distance.

The boy’s eyes flicked towards the other end of the subway tunnel. Steve glanced in the same direction, then raised his eyebrows at the boy.

“I can help you guys,” Steve whispered. “Can I trust you?”

Clearly, the speedster and the witch were not willing agents of HYDRA. The boy looked terrified.

Slowly, the boy nodded. Steve lowered his hand from his mouth.

“My name’s Steve,” Steve hissed. “You?”

“Pietro,” the boy whispered.

“That girl’s your sister?” Steve asked.

Pietro nodded.

Steve glanced back towards the subway station, then lifted his weight off Pietro and beckoned him
up. Pietro lifted off the wall, looking at Steve warily, then peeked over the edge of the wall.


“Here’s the plan,” Steve hissed.

There was a blur in the corner of his eye and Pietro was gone. Steve sighed in disappointment, until Rumlow fell to the ground in front of him.

“Pestsior!” Wanda gasped. “Ce faci?!”

“Ei pot ajuta ne!” Pietro told her, physically holding Rumlow down.

Steve pushed up and made his way back across the station towards where Wanda and Pietro stood, holding his gun at the ready, but not aiming it. Wanda turned to look at him, and her face was frightened.

“I can help you,” Steve said. “I don’t know a lot of – Russian or –”

“Romanian,” Wanda corrected. “We speak English.”

“He said he’ll help us,” Pietro told her. “We don’t have to serve them anymore!”

“Just end the spell keeping Rumlow alive,” Steve said. “This whole situation can be resolved.”

“The rest of the men are dead,” Pietro insisted. “He killed them!”

“Well, no,” Steve said quickly, “I shot them in non-fatal places. Like, the knees.”

As if to prove it, one of the HYDRA thugs groaned.
Wanda snatched up both of her fists and the red light holding up Clint and Natasha cut out, dropping both of them. Instead, she thrust out her hands towards Rumlow.

“What’re you doing!” Rumlow screamed. “Stop!”

Pietro scrambled up and away. Rumlow pushed up, but collapsed as red light started to seep from his body.

“No!” Rumlow yelled.

Steve walked closer, heading for the bomb. The timer was inactive, so Steve simply disconnects the blocks of C4 and the glass cylinder with the blue liquid of the virus. He kicked aside the components of the bomb, standing up again.

“Dammit,” Rumlow hissed, before his body turned to dust.

Steve simply gathered up the syringes left behind and broke off the needles.

“He’s gonna stay dead this time, right?” Steve asked.

Pietro jumped up and started kicking the dust. “Mănâncă un sac de rahat în iad, nemernicule!” he shouted.

“I think so,” Wanda sighed.

Steve neared the pile of dust. Pietro paused, looking contritely up at Steve.

“He deserves it,” Pietro said.

Steve gave a small mountain of dust a savage kick, sending it flying. “Who’s the toughest Alpha on the block now, shithead!” he said triumphantly. "Damn cockroach,” he finished with a grumble.
Wanda jumped out of the way of the dust. “That’s human remains!” she complained, brushing frantically at her clothes.

“So sorry,” Steve said. “He started it.”

Pietro gave Steve a *What the hell, man?* look. Steve shrugged.

“STEVEN GRANT!” Bucky’s voice roared from the distance.


Bucky came running in from the subway entrance, followed by Iron Man, Sam, and half the FBI force. Natasha and Clint pushed up from the ground, both of them rubbing their heads. Somebody tugged on the leg of Steve’s Hazmat suit and Steve glanced down to see many of the hostages had managed to remove their blindfolds and gags. A twenty-something girl had a hand on his suit.

“Captain America’s middle name is Grant?” she asked disbelievingly.

“What?” Steve said, affronted. “My ma had Scottish in ‘er.”

The young woman blinked. Steve made his way across the station, holding up the containers with the virus. Bucky strode towards him, looking pissed.

“What’d I say about your right hand?” Steve said just as Bucky opened his mouth.

Bucky snapped it shut again, turning red. Iron Man sniggered.

“Shuddup,” Bucky snapped. “Listen ‘ere, punk –”

“Can somebody dispose of these?” Steve asked, cutting Bucky off to step towards Agent Kani. “And be careful with them?”
“Yeah,” Kani said, taking the needle-less syringes and the glass container that had been strapped to the bomb. “Uh, did you leave anybody for my guys to deal with?”

“Well, Rumlow’s back to being dead,” Steve said, turning to look, “but his goons are all mostly alive.”

Steve pointed to one of the woebegone HYDRA agents, collapsed and oozing blood. “In a lotta pain, though,” he said. “I shot all ‘am in critical but non-fatal spots.”

“Yeesh,” Kani muttered. “Let’s get some medics down here!”

“Are we clear to go?” Iron Man asked.

Steve turned back to look at Wanda and Pietro. “Yeah,” he said, then waved them towards him. “These kids are with us now.”

Natasha strode near. “Are you sure –”

“Yes,” Steve cut her off. “They’re just kids.”

Natasha thinned her lips. Wanda and Pietro slunk closer, looking wary.

“Well,” Clint said, “I don’t know about you guys, but I could go for some pizza. How about that joint Agent Kani was talkin’ about?”

Steve looked at the kids, raising his eyebrows. “You two like pizza?”

“Yeah,” Pietro said, breaking into a smile. “I’ll eat anything that isn’t protein mush.”

Wanda still looked suspicious. Steve offered her a smile.
“Steve!” Bucky barked abruptly. “Your suit’s cut open, you’re bleeding!”

Steve glanced over his shoulder, but Bucky was holding him still.

“I’m fine –”

“You’re seein’ a medic before we go anywhere,” Bucky snapped.

Steve glanced back at Pietro, his smile gone. Pietro’s eyes widened.

“I’m fine,” Steve promised. “It’s just a scratch.”

“I –” Pietro started.

“It’s fine,” Steve repeated. He turned, holding out a hand to Bucky. “I’ll see a medic, but it’s just a scratch, it’ll heal in an hour or so.”

Natasha caught Steve’s eye, her eyebrows furrowed, but with no other expression to betray what she was thinking. As the FBI agents moved off and EMTs rushed down the stairs to the subway, Steve waved his group on and out of the subway. Back on the street, Steve headed for one of the ambulances, where there were still EMTs lingering.

“He needs to be checked out,” Bucky said before Steve could even open his mouth. “Now.”

“Bucky,” Steve hissed, “calm down. I’m fine.”

Bucky just crossed his arms over his chest. Steve flicked his eyebrows up, setting his jaw, and moved on to where the EMT was calling for him.

Fifteen minutes later, the EMT released him. Steve, now out of the Hazmat suit, pushed past Bucky and towards the rest of the Avengers.
“All good?” Sam asked.

“There was nothing to worry about,” Steve insisted.

There really was. When Steve had taken the syringe that Pietro had scratched him with, it was still filled to the same level as all the others. There was no way any part of the virus got into his system, and even if there had been a trace in the little prick Pietro managed to land, Steve’s body would have fought it off already. He was fine.

At any rate, Rumlow had said that the virus would immediately cause intense vomiting. Steve wasn’t even remotely nauseous.

“We should head back to the Tower,” Bucky said.

“We should,” Steve agreed.

“Aw, but pizza,” Clint whined.

Natasha smacked him across the back of his head. Clint winced and rubbed his hair, looking bummed out.

“There’s food at the Tower,” Steve told Clint. “C’mon.”

“Yes, Mom,” Clint sighed.

“Kids,” Steve said to Wanda and Pietro, ignoring Clint completely. “How are you feeling? Are you hurt at all?”

“We’re alright,” Pietro said. “Wanda’s pretty good at healing me and they never hurt her.”

“Whoa, whoa, say what now?” Bucky cut in, pushing forward. “What’d they do to you?”

“Nothing,” Wanda said, grabbing her brother’s arm. “We’re fine.”
“Bruce can check ’em out,” Tony said. “We should get them out of the cold.”

Steve turned and grabbed a shock blanket from one of the nearby ambulances, then wrapped it around Pietro and Wanda.

“C’mon,” he said, much more gently this time, “you guys gotta be hungry.”

“Very!” Pietro answered willingly.

Wanda simply nodded.

Steve lead the way back to the SUV, his arm still around Pietro and Wanda. He glanced over his shoulder a few times, worried that the cops might get curious why he and his team were taking the two kids with them, but no one stopped them. At the SUV, Natasha unlocked the doors and simply got into the driver’s seat without a word.

“Shotgun!” Sam said.

“Tony, Clint, Bucky, you’re in the backseat,” Steve said.

“Aw, c’mon!” Tony and Clint both burst out.

“Steve,” Bucky said, whining a little.

“Go on!” Steve ordered.

“I call the window seat,” Tony said, climbing in.

Bucky gave Clint a good-natured shove towards the van. “I ain’t gettin’ in the middle, princess,” he said.
“Lucky I like cuddling,” Clint grumbled.

“What!” Tony shouted.

Once the three of them were crammed in the back, Steve held out a hand to help the kids get in. Pietro took it, climbing in to the middle row of benches, but Wanda hesitated.

“It’s alright,” Steve promised. “We really are going to help you.”

Wanda thinned her lips. But she took his hand, climbed up into the SUV and settled into the middle seat. Steve followed and shut the door behind him.

“JARVIS made pizza, by the way,” Tony announced.

“Yes!” Clint hissed victoriously.

“How did a computer make pizza?” Sam questioned.

“Robots,” Tony answered simply.

“I’m vegetarian,” Wanda said softly.

“I got cheese?” Tony offered, leaning forward.

Wanda glanced over her shoulder, then nodded and looked back. Steve might’ve imagined it, but he could swear she almost smiled.

Chapter End Notes

rumlow drank too much dumb bitch juice this morning, i guess. if you liked this, you’re
welcome, there's more avengers family shit happening in the future. leave me a comment, too, i guess. y'all, lexi was the awesome person she always is and left some gold star comments, so we got bloopers.

“You should be,” Bucky countered. “You’re a growing girl, you need your rest.”
lexi: Nat: I'm sorry what did you just say????
me: nat becomes the blinking man gif

“Goodnight,” Steve wished Natasha and Clint
lexi: When mom wishes you goodnight sleep tight don't let the bedbugs bite even though you're in your 30s
me: nat's cold dead heart is warming. she's so confused.

“Why can’t those assholes just stay dead?” Bucky groaned.
lexi: Big mood
me: i feel like that should just be the title. "WHY WON'T YOU FUCKIGN DIE ALREADY"
lexi: "die already damn"
me: *has a thought*
me: for the title consider
me: cockroaches
lexi: Oh boy

“Three seventeen,” JARVIS replied calmly. “I hate these guys,” Steve sighed
lexi: Steve: *calls Hydra* hi uhm can y'all like do this later please??? Just hang out at home and come back at a decent fucking time???
me: it's a membership requirement to be the kind of asshole that you'd wake everybody up at unholy hours of the mornign to do hydra's evil work
lexi: Steve: now I know y'all are tired. Go to bed. Try again tomorrow.
me: rumlow: AVENGERS COME FIGHT ME steve: the avengers can't come to the phone right now, please leave a message

Bucky reached over and covered Natasha’s ears.
lexi: I'm CRYING BUCKY IS TAKING HIS ROLE AS DAD SO WELL *cry-laughing emoji* *cry-laughing emoji* *cry-laughing emoji*
me: bucky: oh steve is the team mom? oh okay guess that makes me dad nat: i'm so sick of this bucky: hi so sick of this i'm dad nat: GOD KILL ME ALREADY
lexi: Nat is ready to dive into the ocean without a parachute
me: she took lessons from steve

Bruce gave a thumb’s up, looking a little bit relieved.
lexi: Bruce being like hey Mom can I just stay home and watch the house is so wholesome
me: brucey-bear works with jarvis more than the hulk these days

Steve focused on the satisfaction of having shown his Alpha who was boss
lexi: Fuckin savage
me: steve: oh you think i'm clingy? okay guess you can just sit somewhere else bucky: BABY NO WHAT IS U DOING

“Can you move your seat up?” Bucky asked
lexi: **Steve:** KIDS SO HELP ME I WILL TELL NATASHA TO STOP THE CAR AND YOU CAN WALK!
me: **sam:** HE POKEd ME **bucky:** HE STARTED IT
lexi: **Natasha:** here's a hot take. We leave them in Siberia together for a few weeks. Either they die or get less annoying. Win-win.
me: a whole mood
me: **natasha:** big YEET

“Cool,” Tony said. “Uh, now that we’re done with that super uncomfortable conversation –”
lexi: **Clint, under his breath:** I hate it when mom and dad fight
me: **steve:** oh no sweetie mama and daddy aren't fighting we're just discussing things very loudly it's okay **bucky:** ...
lexi: **Tony:** don't lie to him, they fightin
me: **tony:** i know firsthand what it looks like when mom and dad fight, they fighting **steve:** *gASP* no bby we'll stop fighting we're not mad at each other i promise!

*Kani gave a shrug.* “Was worth a try.”
lexi: Lmao it was worth a shot buddy but you'd have to buy that
me: you miss 100% of the shots you don't take
lexi: Exactly!!!

“Again, I gotta ask, you sure y'all don’t want some pizzas?” [Kani asked]
lexi: Y’all are dumb I'd take the pizza
me: that's hydra's secret, they hate pizza
lexi: They're not human then I guess
me: that's their secret

“Admiral Ackbar has some wise advice for you,” Tony said.
lexi: I don't understand this reference
me: YOU HAVEN'T SEEN STAR WARS
lexi: Oh lmao cool cool cool c-c-c-cool
me: ah fuck i can't believe you've done this

"Steve might've imagined it, but he could swear she almost smiled."
lexi: Honestly I was too busy giggling to have comments. Kicking Rumlow's dust brings me joy. ALSO WOW MOM JUST ADOPTED TWO MORE KIDS WHOOPS
me: **steve:** my finger slipped **bucky:** .... **steve:** hugs the maximoff twins say hi to your new children **bucky:** ... **wanda:** ... **nat:** ... **pietro:** cool are both of you dad or what?
**tony:** steve is mom. just accept it. **pietro:** that sounds fake but okay
Chapter Notes

i have had a cold for two weeks and it's not going away. in the midst of my misery, i present to you, pizza.

lexi's comments are, as usual, invaluable. you can find the cover for this chapter on my tumblr here, until tumblr kills itself i'll be riding out the wave of the adult content purge 'pocalypse like

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Steve hopped out of the SUV and turned back to offer his hand to Wanda. She took it without much hesitation this time, jumping out of the SUV and pulling away from Steve in a fluid movement. Steve stayed where he was and helped Pietro get down, then moved the seats so that Tony, Clint, and Bucky could get out of the back seat. Bucky grabbed Steve’s shoulder to get out and then didn’t let
go, so Steve stepped out of the way for Tony and Clint.

“Pizza should be done soon,” Tony announced. “Pizza party in the common room?”

“Pizza debrief in the common room,” Steve said, looking at Pietro and Wanda. “You guys can tell us what happened to you.”

“It’s a long story,” Wanda said.

“You can start at the beginning,” Steve offered, pulling away from Bucky to set a hand on Wanda’s shoulder. “The sooner we can get you guys back to your family, the better.”

Wanda dropped her gaze. “We don’t have any,” she said quietly.

Steve paused. He glanced up and around, then looked back down and squeezed Wanda’s shoulder.

“We’ll be your family,” he offered. “As much as we can.”

“We’re all a big, happy family!” Tony said happily, throwing his arms over Bucky and Natasha’s shoulders.

Natasha and Bucky picked Tony up together and tossed him away from them, looking displeased. Clint laughed and Steve rolled his eyes.

“C’mere,” Steve said, throwing his arm over Bucky’s shoulders instead and tugging him closer. “What the hell was that earlier, huh?”

“I reserve the right to stop you from doin’ stupid things,” Bucky said firmly.

“Then I guess you really are gonna get to know your right hand,” Steve answered, cuffing him across the back of his head. “You stupid Alpha.”
Tony and Clint laughed together while Bucky spluttered and turned red. Pietro giggled and Wanda quirked her lips up at the corner briefly.

“C’mon,” Steve said again, heading for the elevators.

With eight people, the elevators were rather cramped. It didn’t help that Bucky promptly plastered himself to Steve’s back like a grumpy and particularly possessive koala. He was definitely some kind of bear, seeing as how Tony seemed eager to resume poking him. Once they piled out into the common room, Sam headed straight for the sofas, collapsed onto one, and started snoring. Clint followed and collapsed on top of him. Sam didn’t seem to notice.

“Is this normal?” Wanda questioned.

“Probably,” Steve said with a shrug.

“Bruce is on his way down,” Tony said, then produced a vial from his suit. “We’re gonna science this!”

“So don’t tell me you stole a sample of Rumlow’s virus,” Steve said, pushing over to him.

“I did not steal a sample of Rumlow’s virus,” Tony answered promptly.

Steve glared at him. Tony leaned sideways, covered his mouth with his hand, and hissed to Pietro: “Who made this virus, kid?”

“Dr. List,” Pietro responded.

“I stole a sample of Dr. List’s virus,” Tony told Steve happily.

Steve covered his eyes with a hand and sighed. “God help us,” he grumbled.

“I thought List was dead,” Natasha cut in, sliding onto a kitchen stool. “He died in a lab accident a year ago.”
They all looked at Wanda. She raised her hands defensively.

“I didn’t bring him back,” she said. “Rumlow was the only one I managed to bring back and it took a lot.”

“Other than the zombies,” Tony said.

“Yes, but I didn’t restore them to full life,” Wanda said, “I just turned them into puppets.”

“You could be super creepy if you tried,” Tony told her, “and I’m very glad that you’re now one of Steve’s children like the rest of us.”

“Oh, my God,” Steve said softly, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “When I said I was upset about not having kids, this isn’t what I was hoping for,” he grumbled under his breath.

Bucky threw his arm over Steve’s shoulders. “You make a great ma, sweetheart.”


“You make a great Daddy,” he said.

Bucky turned pink and glared.

“Something just happened there!” Tony said loudly. “I don’t know what, but something!”

“Barnes, apparently, has some sort of daddy kink,” Natasha announced.

Just then, Bruce walked in, looking highly confused. Tony opened his mouth.
“Nobody kink shame my Alpha,” Steve said quickly, “what we do in the privacy of our bedroom is nobody’s business.”

“You just confirmed it!” Bucky hissed. “Steve!”

Steve waved a hand in Bucky’s direction. “Tony, you’re going to give that sample to Bruce and then you’re not going to touch it again. Clear?”

Tony saluted. “Yes, mom!”

Steve rolled his eyes. Bruce took the vial from Tony, holding it up to the light.

“What virus is it?” he asked.

“Rumlow said it was a cocktail,” Steve answered. “And he claimed it was strong enough to take out me or Bucky.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows. “Is this all of it?”

“The FBI has the rest,” Steve said.

“You let the FBI take samples of a virus HYDRA made specifically to be strong enough to kill you?” Bruce questioned.

Steve thought back. He deflated.

“That was probably really stupid,” he muttered.

“Good thing I took all the other samples, then,” Natasha said, lifting a bag onto the counter.

“Nat!” Steve gasped.
“What?” Natasha said defensively. “You clearly weren’t thinking about it, now the government doesn’t have it. Nobody turns on us and kills us in our sleep.”

Off in the sitting area, Sam and Clint snored in unison.


Natasha simply nodded. Bruce, grimacing somewhat, took the bag from her and looked inside.

“I’m gonna take these to my lab,” he said, “and do my best to destroy ninety percent of it, then study the rest until I can come up with a cure. Just in case.”

“Good thinking,” Steve said. “I think it might be airborne, so take all precautions.”

“I will,” Bruce promised, turning for the stairs.

“Pizza?” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed, suddenly very fatigued. He rubbed at the bridge of his nose, heading for one of the kitchen stools. “Sit down, kids,” he added. “You can start your story while you eat.”

Pietro and Wanda took seats at the end of the island counter while Tony moved around to check the ovens. Bucky walked up behind Steve, predictably, and hugged him from the back, resting his chin on Steve’s head. Steve leaned into him, letting himself enjoy Bucky’s touch now that they were no longer in danger.

Wanda sat with her hands in her lap, looking almost wary, but Pietro peered around curiously.

“This place is really nice,” he said.

“It’s Stark Tower,” Wanda remarked. “Of course it is.”
Pietro shrugged, still looking around.

“So,” Natasha said. “Where are you from?”

“Sokovia,” Wanda said.

“What happened to your parents?” Steve asked.

“They were killed seven years ago,” Wanda said grimly. “By a Stark Industries bomb.”

Steve sat up and Bucky lifted his chin off his head. Steve looked towards Tony, concerned. Tony turned around slowly.

“We don’t blame you,” Pietro said. “Not anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony answered anyway.

He looked lost all of a sudden. Steve reached out to the side and touched his shoulder briefly before turning to face the kids again.

“It was really the Turks and Romania’s fault,” Wanda said. “And our own government. Sokovia has been fighting to maintain its independence for decades now, but Turkey and Romania and Bulgaria and a dozen other countries in Europe have all been fighting to take back territory the whole time.”

“How’d you end up with HYDRA?” Steve asked them softly.

Wanda let out a soft, dry laugh. “We volunteered,” she said, looking down at her lap. “Dr. List approached us at a protest. Offered to let us help make a difference. We thought that we could be heroes for our country…”

“Like you,” Pietro muttered, glancing up at Steve. “But better.”
“List took us to Germany,” Wanda said, straightening up in her seat. “Another scientist, Dr. Strucker, performed experiments on us and several other people, using Loki’s scepter; he took it from SHIELD in 2012. Everyone else died. Then Dr. Strucker sent us here to kill you.”

“So why didn’t you?” Natasha asked.

“HYDRA was awful to us,” Pietro said. “I mean, really awful. We tried so many times to escape, to back out, but Strucker and List and the others; they never let us go. We blamed Stark Industries for the weapons of war, but really, it was HYDRA pushing for violence on all sides from the shadows. HYDRA turned our country into a battleground.”

“I stopped selling weapons four years ago,” Tony spoke up. “I should’ve done it so much sooner. I’m sorry.”

Wanda shook her head, then looked up, smiling despite the tears in her eyes. “If you had not made it,” she said, “someone else would have. The war happened either way. Our parents still would have died.”

Tony looked down, his expression tight. Behind him, the oven beeped, and Tony turned around quickly to grab potholders and take pizzas out of the oven.

While Tony started cutting up the pizzas, Natasha looked at Steve.

“Hydra has Loki’s scepter,” she stated.

“Yep,” Steve sighed.

“We gonna get it back?” Natasha asked.

“Yep,” Steve exhaled.

Natasha slapped the counter twice and turned to look at Wanda. “Kid,” she said, “you and me are
gonna spend a lot of time getting to know one another. We’ll track down Strucker and the scepter and you two can get revenge. Sound good?”

Wanda brushed at her eyes, then inhaled deeply, and she nodded. She looked at Natasha with a level gaze and a determined expression.

“HYDRA will pay for what it did to my country,” she said in a soft voice. “One way or another.”

“That’s the spirit,” Bucky spoke up.

“In the meantime,” Tony said, noisily setting plates onto the counter in front of Wanda and Pietro, “you two are underweight. Eat up.”

“How do you know?” Wanda asked, frowning at Tony.

“Who cares?” Pietro laughed, digging in.

“JARVIS,” Tony said, stepping back. “My AI. He scanned you when you came in and alerted me.”

“Why?” Wanda asked.

“It’s a thing I set up,” Tony answered with a shrug. “There’s a teen outreach center sorta thing downstairs and a bunch of those kids are homeless, so JARVIS keeps track of the kids that need to catch up on meals.”

“I didn’t know that,” Steve said, frowning as well.

Tony shrugged again. “You didn’t ask,” he said simply.

“How do you keep security up?” Bucky asked.
“Kids sign in at the front desk and go straight to their floor,” Tony said. “Easy.”

Bucky huffed, slumping a little more onto Steve’s back. “We should go to bed,” he mumbled.

Steve reached across the counter, pulling one of Tony’s plates towards him. “After food,” he said.

Bucky huffed again. Steve folded his slice of pizza in half and started stuffing his face, though not quite as quickly as Pietro was doing.

“This is really good,” Pietro mumbled around a mouthful of food.

“Anything is better than protein mush,” Wanda said.

“Amen, kid,” Bucky muttered.

Steve swallowed. “Don’t talk with your mouth full,” he told Pietro.

Pietro squawked, clearly offended.

“But, Mom!” Tony whined.

“No buts!” Steve insisted.

“You accept that you’re our mother, then!” Tony said hastily.

Steve shrugged. “Clearly, I can’t stop you,” he said.

“Ha!” Tony said.
“Captain America’s our mother now,” Pietro said to Wanda, elbowing her.

“Miracles can be terrifying,” Wanda muttered.

Pietro snorted while Wanda rolled her eyes. “Strucker used to say that all the time,” she said.

“You said he took you to Germany?” Natasha asked, bringing up the old topic again. “Do you know where?”

Wanda shook her head. “It was a remote base in the mountains,” she said. “Other than that, we didn’t know.”

“We’ll find it,” Natasha said.

“Hey, speaking of finding things,” Tony said, sitting down and poking Natasha in the shoulder. “Have you found Steve’s mom’s records and stuff?”

“Actually,” Natasha said, sitting up. “I have.”

Steve swallowed another mouthful of pizza and leaned forward. “Yeah?” he said, suddenly very excited.

“And I found something else, very interesting,” Natasha announced, turning on her stool to face Steve. “Your birth certificate.”

Steve frowned. “But I thought I didn’t have one?”

“No, you do,” Natasha assured him, smiling widely. “We were all just looking in the wrong place.”

Steve frowned more. “What does that mean?” he asked, highly confused as well as excited now.
“Your birth certificate,” Natasha said grandly, “is filed in Ireland.”

Steve blinked. Bucky lifted his chin off of the top of Steve’s head. Tony glanced between Natasha and Steve.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“You’re kidding,” Steve said.

“Nope,” Natasha answered.

“But –” Steve spluttered. “I met Bucky before I was a year old!”

“You were born in Ireland,” Natasha said firmly. “Your mother immigrated to America just a few months after you were born.”

“But –” Steve said.

“You were born in Ireland!” Tony shouted.

“Wha –?” Clint burst out from the sofas abruptly. “What?”

“Captain America was born in Ireland!” Tony yelled. “Captain America’s not even American!”

“I was raised in Brooklyn, fool,” Steve snapped.

“You’re an Irishman!” Tony cackled. “Captain Ireland!”

Bucky burst into laughter and collapsed onto Steve’s back. Natasha looked very pleased with herself. Tony joined Bucky in his laughter and slumped over the counter, wheezing out: “Ireland!” every few seconds. Steve blinked at nothing.
“It is quite funny,” Natasha said.

“My ma never said anything,” Steve muttered. “But – But what about my dad?”

“He was an American soldier,” Natasha told him. “He died in Ireland of typhoid shortly before you were born. Your mother was a nurse at his hospital unit.”

“I thought they were married,” Steve said. “They were, weren’t they?”

Natasha shook her head. “Your mother’s parents paid for her to travel to America likely because of the shame,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Bucky stopped laughing. Tony hiccuped a few times, stopping as well. Steve continued to blink.

“It’s nice to know you guys aren’t all gods,” Wanda said abruptly. “Are you going to change your call sign, Captain?”

“No,” Steve said. “America’s got enough reason to hate me.”

“The Irish aren’t hated anymore,” Tony said cajolingly. “People love the Irish!”

Steve shook his head. “If it got out that on top of being an Omega, I was actually born out of the country?” he started, then shook his head. “It’s bad enough the way it is.”

“It’s up to you,” Natasha said.

Bucky ducked his head into Steve’s neck and nuzzled him briefly, then just rested his chin on Steve’s shoulder. Steve put down his slice of pizza, no longer hungry.

“I think I’m going to go to bed,” he said, pushing up. “Goodnight, guys.”
“We, you mean,” Bucky said quickly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve said.

“Wait, but you said he had to sleep on the couch!” Tony threw in. He pointed at Sam and Clint, sprawled on the long sectional sofa. “He could join the pile!”

“I never mean it when I say he’s sleeping on the couch,” Steve laughed. “I only ever followed through with that threat once and that was in 1944. I didn’t make it through the night before I made him get in my tent.”

“I don’t remember that,” Bucky muttered.

“It was over something dumb,” Steve promised. “We weren’t really fighting.”

“What was it?” Tony asked, bouncing in his seat.

“It was dumb,” Steve insisted.

“Tell us!” Tony begged.

“I kinda want to know?” Bucky said, shrugging.

Steve rolled his eyes. “You made a comment about me and the girls’ from the USO tour,” he said. “I told you that you were bein’ a moron ‘cause I hardly ever even kissed a woman in my whole lifetime and the only one I ever really liked was that Alpha girl from our school, so you made another dumb comment about her and me, and I told you, you could sleep in Dum Dum’s tent. Happy?”

“Miserable,” Bucky promised. “I’m very sorry, dollface.”

Steve rolled his eyes again. “I want a shower,” he grumbled, turning and heading for the elevator.
“You mean we,” Bucky said, following.

“Use protection!” Tony called after them. “You got enough kids!”

Steve showed Tony his middle finger as the elevator doors closed. Bucky sidled up to Steve and wiggled his eyebrows up and down. Steve looked at him flatly.

“If the next word outta your mouth is sugar –” Steve started.

“C’mon, sugar,” Bucky said, grinning.

Steve rolled his eyes and gave Bucky a shove. Bucky stumbled a step or two, then promptly pressed up against Steve’s side again and nuzzled the side of his head. Steve rolled his eyes a fourth time and shook his head.

“You’re awful,” he said, but he was laughing. “I’m too tired for you to fuck me.”

“Okay,” Bucky answered, but remained plastered to Steve’s side. “Can I pet you, angel?”

“Shuddup,” Steve grumbled. “I’m not too tired to blow you.”

Bucky grinned again. “Can I watch you play with yourself while you do it?”

Steve chuckled under his breath, turning to give Bucky a quick kiss as the elevator doors opened again. They exited into their apartment and Steve headed for their bedroom, Bucky on his heels.

They stripped off their uniforms and left their gear in the hallway. Steve climbed into the shower and Bucky, predictably, followed. They didn’t actually do much more than shower; Bucky washed Steve’s hair and body for him, and after, Steve leaned against Bucky while he scrubbed himself and tried not to fall asleep.
“C’mon, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured after he turned the water off.

Steve was dead on his feet at that point. He let Bucky help him out of the shower, he let Bucky dry him off, and being pampered left him a little bit floaty like always. Steve and Bucky got into bed and Steve curled up into Bucky’s side facing him this time, all adrenaline and drama from the night forgotten.

Bucky wrapped Steve in his arms and, as usual, hooked his leg over Steve’s hips. Steve tucked his head into Bucky’s neck, enjoying the way Bucky enveloped and covered him fully. He was exhausted and being surrounded by his Alpha let him feel safe enough to start falling asleep.

Bucky kissed the top of his head. “Love you, Omegamine,” he murmured.

“Love you, too, Buck,” Steve mumbled back.

It wasn’t long before either of them were asleep. Bucky snored softly, as always, and Steve clung to him in his sleep.

Nothing else disturbed them as they slept. Steve woke up several hours later to the smell of cooking bacon and stirring nausea in his gut.

* 

[november 14th, location undisclosed]

“We’re doomed,” Rollins muttered. “Let’s just face it.”

“We have got to keep trying!” Lukin’s voice spat across the video call.

“We are out of options!” Rollins shouted. “Asia has fallen, Africa has fallen, South America, Australia, I have four men left in the States and you only have fifty between you and Strucker! HYDRA is defeated!”
“HYDRA has been growing for thousands of years!” Strucker said. “We have always recovered!”

“We can’t recover this time,” Rollins said.

“There’s one more choice,” Ward said abruptly.

All eyes turned on him.

“The real witch,” Ward said simply.

“What do you mean?” Lukin asked, tone wary.


“But the witch has been dead for thousands of years,” Strucker argued. “My attempt to recreate it has failed.”

“But she isn’t dead,” Ward insisted. “I did the research. We could summon her. She’s ten times more powerful than Scarlet Witch, if not fifty!”

“We are grasping for fairy tales,” Lukin said pitifully. “Look at us.”

“I know we could summon her,” Ward said. “She could rid the world of the Avengers and what’s left of SHIELD and its allies in a snap of her fingers!”

The four of them were silent for a moment.

“What more do we have to lose?” Strucker asked.

Chapter End Notes
oh yeah that. anyway, toodle-loo, i'll see you next week!

Bucky promptly plastered himself to Steve’s back like a grumpy and particularly possessive koala.

lexi: Wholesome

me: **bucky:** my new call sign is white wolf **steve:** ... **bucky:** no **steve:** white koala

lexi: **Bucky:** n O

Sam headed straight for the sofas, collapsed onto one, and started snoring. Clint followed and collapsed on top of him. Sam didn’t seem to notice.

lexi: Mood

me: this is my superpwer. napping.

lexi: ME


lexi: This is true family

me: mood

“I did not steal a sample of Rumlow’s virus,” Tony answered promptly.

lexi: This is way better than Thanksgiving fight aka civil war. This is hilarious

me: everything works out better when steve accepts that he's now tony's parent, it just be like that

lexi: I'm imagining this chaos of a Thanksgiving now and it's a nightmare

me: thanksgiving is coming up in the timeline

me: avengers + the barnes-procter family

lexi: PLEASE A HUGE THANKSGIVING!!! everyone goes all out decorating and people make traditional foods from the homes (old or far away)

lexi: **Barnes, apparently, has a some sort of daddy kink,** Natasha announced.

lexi: MOM AND DAD ARE FLIRTING MAKE IT STOP!!!

“What?” Natasha said defensively. “You clearly weren’t thinking about it, now the government doesn’t have it. Nobody turns on us and kills us in our sleep.”

lexi: God bless Auntie Nat who has it the fuck together

me: auntie nat saves the day

*Off in the sitting area, Sam and Clint snored in unison.*

lexi: Meanwhile, ME

me: sam and clint are the most relatable avengers

“I stopped selling weapons four years ago,” Tony spoke up. “I should’ve done it so much sooner. I’m sorry.”

lexi: Where's the gif of the woman saying growth and making a flower blooming motion with her hand? Because that.

me: yess

“Hydra has Loki’s scepter,” she stated. “Yep,” Steve sighed.

lexi: When mom and auntie Nat sigh because they're Old and Tired

me: the realest mood. steve is so done with hydra

“Miracles can be terrifying,” Wanda muttered.

lexi: I LOVE WANDA THIS SASSY LITTLE CHILD
“We can’t recover this time,” Rollins said.
lexi: If only Nazis went away so easily.
me: if only

lexi: DUN DUN DUN!!! now we get into the REAL plot
me: IT'S THE HOME STRETCH
miracles unwanted

Chapter Notes

whoops i'm late ignore that just carry on

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“I’m in the kitchen!” Bucky called.

Steve couldn’t answer. He pressed his hand over his mouth, dazed and confused by sleep, then jolted out of bed and ran for the bathroom. His knees hit the floor just in time for him to start heaving into the toilet bowl.

Distantly, he heard Bucky’s footsteps. Steve was overcome by his vomiting. He struggled to breathe as his stomach forced its contents back out his mouth, his nose filled with mucus, his eyes swam with tears. He felt Bucky’s hands on the back of his neck, on his shoulders, but Steve couldn’t do much more than cling to the toilet bowl.

After a minute, the vomiting stopped. Steve fell back onto his rump on the bathroom floor, trembling. Bucky handed Steve a wad of toilet paper and Steve took it, blinked and did nothing for a second, then pressed it to his nose and blew into it hard. He threw it into the toilet after, but his nose still felt stuffed.

“Steve?” Bucky asked warily.

Steve blinked.


Steve wiped his face with a hand, then grabbed Bucky’s arm and pulled himself up. “Bruce,” Steve mumbled. “I need – The virus –”

“Oh, fuck,” Bucky gasped, grabbing Steve’s hands. “Fuck. Okay. Take it slow, sweetheart –”

Steve pushed past Bucky out of the bathroom, stumbling a little as his head spun. He was only wearing shorts, so he grabbed the first shirt out of their laundry hamper and tugged it on. Bucky followed hastily behind him, as Steve made his way to the elevator.
“JARVIS?” Steve called the second the elevator doors parted. “I need Bruce, medbay, now!”

“Paging Brucey-bear,” JARVIS answered calmly. “Your heartbeat is elevated above your normal levels, Captain Barnes. You seem to be in distress.”

“No shit,” Steve nearly gasped.

Bucky’s face was white; Steve expected he looked similar. The elevator stopped a second later, and Steve stumbled out, Bucky right behind him.

“Where’s Bruce?” Steve demanded.

“Right here,” Bruce called. “Whoa, Cap –”

“I got nicked by one of the needles with the virus,” Steve interrupted. “Rumlow said it would cause vomiting.”

“And you –” Bruce started.

“Yeah,” Steve said, feeling weak.

“Okay, this way,” Bruce said, waving Steve on. “JARVIS, lead him to quarantine!”

Steve pushed through the double doors leading into the medical suites. Bucky was still behind him.

“You can’t go with him!” Bruce called. “If he’s contagious –”

“Then I’ve already got it!” Bucky snarled, cutting Bruce off. “I ain’t leavin’ him!”

Steve felt too relieved to argue; out of his mind with panic as he was, he couldn’t bear the thought of being away from Bucky. Lights activated on the ceiling, guiding them back, and Steve grabbed Bucky’s hand as they walked. Bucky wrapped his arm around Steve’s shoulders.
The quarantine suite was near the very back of the medbay. There was a glass wall on one side of the room and the doors were heavily insulated. JARVIS let them in and Steve dropped onto the single bed in the room. Behind them, the door hissed as it shut.

Bruce appeared on the other side of the glass wall.

“I’ve called the rest of the team,” he said, his voice carried by an intercom. “And I’ve sent for some doctors from the clinic downstairs. This is definitely beyond me, Steve.”

Steve just nodded.

A panel next to the glass popped open.

“Bucky, do me a favor and take a blood sample for me?” Bruce asked. “All you gotta do is press the hypospray against his arm, it’ll do the rest. Just put it back in the tray when you’re done.”

Bucky crossed to the open panel and took the hypospray from it. Steve held out his arm automatically, but didn’t even feel the needle pricking his body. The vial at the end filled with his blood and Bucky stepped away again, replacing the hypospray. He returned to Steve’s side and sat down, wrapping his arm around him.

“I’ll need your blood, too,” Bruce said a minute later, the panel opening a second time.

Bucky got up again and did the same with the hypospray, filling it with a sample of his own blood. He gave it back and moved back to join Steve on the bed, providing a solid, comforting weight. Steve leaned into him.

“The virus is an enhanced form of Marburg,” Bruce said over the intercom. “That’s a little bit lucky, because there’s already plenty of research into it and we know there’s some kind of treatment.”

“Does the treatment work?” Steve asked.
Bruce glanced up. He looked worried.

“Not very often,” he admitted.

Bucky turned his head towards Steve and pressed his forehead into Steve’s neck. Steve didn’t move.

“Your body is probably fighting it off as we speak,” Bruce said. “I’m testing both of your blood, just in case this is a fluke.”

“I don’t get nauseous,” Steve said quietly. “I don’t even get motion sickness.”

Bruce said nothing. Steve reached up and gripped Bucky’s knee with a hand.

“Bucky,” Bruce called ten minutes later, “you don’t have the virus.”

“You should get out,” Steve said immediately.

“No,” Bucky said, tightening his arms around Steve. “No, I’m not leaving you.”

“Go,” Steve insisted, pushing at Bucky. “Get out, get out while you still can.”

“No,” Bucky repeated, jerking back. “I won’t go.”

“Guys?” Bruce interrupted.

Steve and Bucky looked up. Bruce frowned.

“Neither of you are infected,” Bruce said.

“But –” Steve said.
“It should be showing up after twelve hours, but it’s not,” Bruce insisted. “You’re fine.”

“But I threw up?” Steve questioned.

Bruce shrugged, leaning off to the side and hitting a button; the doors to the quarantine bay opened. Steve didn’t yet move, too startled and too confused.

“A bug?” Bruce suggested. “But it’s not the virus.”

“What’s wrong?” Steve demanded, not moving.

“Your white blood cell count is elevated,” Bruce said. “I’m running some more tests, but you’re not dying. I canceled the alarm.”

Steve faltered. The rush of adrenaline now left him trembling again. He felt pretty embarrassed.

“Sorry,” he said, getting up. “I overreacted.”

“No, it’s fine,” Bruce said, “something weird happened and you took immediate steps to make sure it wasn’t a disaster. Don’t worry about it.”

Bucky stood, too, pressing against Steve’s side. “Let’s go back to our place,” he said softly. “You're just shaken up from last night.”

Steve nodded, looking at his feet. He’d run out here barefoot; he felt freezing. He shivered, hugging himself, and Bucky pushed his arm around Steve’s shoulders again. They made their way out and passed an open doorway into the lab attached to quarantine, where Bruce was frowning at a computer.

A minute later, Bruce’s voice came back down the hallway.
“Guys?” he called.

Steve stopped, turning back. “What?”

“Come look at this!”

Steve glanced at Bucky, shrugged, and headed back down. Bucky caught his hand, holding onto it as they rejoined Bruce. Bruce glanced over his shoulder at Steve, then pointed at the computer in front of them.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about,” Bruce said, his tone relieved, “see, that’s your hCG levels.”

Steve raised his eyebrows, still confused.

“It’s nothing more than morning sickness,” Bruce told them. “You’re pregnant.”

“I’m sorry?” Steve said, sure he’d heard Bruce wrong. “What?”

“You’re pregnant,” Bruce repeated.

Steve heard him right.

“That’s not —” Steve started; he was baffled, shaken, and most of all, disbelieving. “No, that’s not possible,” he stammered, “Erskine told me that it wouldn’t be possible, my system would be too retroactive, no Alpha could ever successfully impregnate me —”

Bruce shrugged. “Did Erskine consider the possibility of a super soldier Alpha?” he suggested.

Steve’s mouth hung open. He blinked uselessly.

“Well,” Bruce said, an awkward tension to his voice, “you’ve got a clean bill of health. But you
probably will be facing a lot of nausea for the next few months. Try ginger tea?”

Steve, feeling lost, glanced at Bucky. Bucky was staring at the computer screen, his face blank.

Steve’s stomach filled with dread. He touched Bucky’s arm and Bucky jerked, glancing at him and then away.

“I can’t help you with this, guys,” Bruce said. “I have nine PhDs, but none of them are in gynecology.”

“Thanks,” Steve said numbly. “We’ll – We’ll figure something out.”

Steve wrapped his arm around Bucky’s elbow. He tugged gently and Bucky turned to walk out with him. Steve felt nothing from the bond. He only felt the squirming mix of emotions in his own gut, coupled with latent nausea.

Morning sickness.

Steve still wasn’t sure he believed it.

They returned to the elevators and without even asking, JARVIS took them to their apartment. The kitchen still smelled like bacon and Steve’s gut churned once again. He covered his mouth with a hand, but it was too late. He ran for the bathroom again.

Bucky was still on Steve’s heels. As Steve bent over the toilet again, once more throwing up bile, Bucky wet a washcloth and pressed it to the back of Steve’s neck.

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” Bucky said softly, but his voice was distant to Steve’s ears. “It’s gonna be alright.”

Steve dry-heaved for a minute. Finally, his stomach gave up trying to expel itself and he fell back again, shaking all over. Bucky wiped his face with the damp cloth, cooling his skin. Steve closed his eyes, feeling dizzy.
“Sweetheart?” Bucky asked gently.

“I need a cigarette,” Steve mumbled.

“I don’t got any, doll,” Bucky told him. “I can go get some?”

Steve shook his head. “No,” he muttered. “It’s not good to smoke when –”

He couldn’t believe it.

“Huh,” Bucky said. “Funny. I thought cigarettes were fine?”

“No,” Steve repeated quietly. He opened his eyes. “They’re actually really bad for you. Cause cancer.”

“Well,” Bucky said, “none’a those for you then.”

Steve pressed a hand over his mouth, nodding. Bucky sat back.

“Are you –?”

Steve shook his head. “’M fine,” he mumbled. He pushed up. “I need – I need to brush my teeth.”

Bucky stood and held out his hands. Steve took them and let Bucky help him up. Then, Steve moved to the sink, and on autopilot, he brushed his teeth.

Bucky stood just past his shoulder as he did, watching. Steve turned the water on warm and let it run into his hands, then splashed it over his face a few times. It got on his shirt. He didn’t care. His skin felt like it was crawling, and Steve washed his hands to get rid of the sensation.
“We should talk,” Bucky said quietly.

Steve shut off the water. He nodded.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asked.

Steve looked down at the sink for a long moment. Eventually, he shook his head.

Bucky pushed his arm around Steve’s waist. Steve let himself be lead away, back into their bedroom where Bucky guided him onto the bed. Steve sat down heavily, and a hand went to cup his stomach.

He couldn’t feel anything. He kept hearing Bruce’s words in his head. He didn’t feel like he should believe it.

Bucky knelt down in front of Steve, taking the hand not pressed to his stomach. Steve stared sightlessly at his hand cupped between Bucky’s mismatched ones.

“Stevie,” Bucky said softly. “You know I love you more than anything.”

Steve jerked, blinking.

“And even though we’ve only known about it for a minute,” Bucky said, “I love our baby more than anything.”

Steve clenched his jaw, his hand pressing tightly to his stomach. He could not believe –

Bucky squeezed Steve’s hand, his eyes suddenly glistening.

“But,” Bucky said, his voice cracking.

“No,” Steve cut in, panicked again. He grabbed on tightly to Bucky’s metal hand, digging his fingers
in. “No, you’re not going to finish that sentence,” he said angrily. “You’re not!”

“I’m not safe!” Bucky whispered brokenly.

Steve slipped off the bed, holding tightly to Bucky’s hand. “No,” he hissed. “You’re fine, you’ll be fine, you can’t –”

“Baby,” Bucky broke in, his flesh hand jerking away from Steve’s to instead cup Steve’s face, “I ain’t safe and you know it. What if –”

“No,” Steve repeated, his voice shaking, “no, you can’t –”

“What if I hurt it?” Bucky asked; his lower lip and chin trembled as he blinked and tears shed from his eyes. “I couldn’t –” he rasped, voice cracking still, “I couldn’t live with myself if I hurt our baby, Steve!”

“You won’t,” Steve insisted, shaking his head. “We’ll figure it out. You’ll be fine. You’ll be fine!”

“Sweetheart,” Bucky croaked.

“No!” Steve said yet again. “You’re not leaving me, Buck. You can’t, you can’t –”

Steve’s voice choked off into a sob. Bucky drew in a sharp breath and tugged Steve against his chest, his arms circling Steve’s shoulders and locking. Steve broke down, overwhelmed completely, and Bucky held him up.

“Okay,” Bucky whispered. “We’ll figure it out. It’s okay, sweetheart. It’s alright.”

It was all too much. Steve couldn’t face the truth, but it faced him nonetheless. He felt utterly stupid for not realizing it before. What Erskine had promised was that no ordinary Alpha could impregnate him, but Bucky had been given another version of the serum and was anything but ordinary. Steve had never felt like more of an idiot.
“We’ll figure it out,” Bucky promised, and at least Steve wasn’t alone in blubbing; Bucky was crying, too.

Bucky didn’t say anything else. He didn’t tell Steve that this was a good thing or that they should be happy, and some twisted part of Steve was relieved for that. He didn’t know how he could be happy just then, not about this, not now.

It was stupid; he should feel happy, this was a miracle! Steve had been regularly wracked with guilt over his barrenness since he got Bucky back the first time, and now he was pregnant, he could give Bucky a child. He could fulfill his duty.

Steve didn’t feel like a miracle was growing in him. He’d never wanted for a miracle.

Bucky eventually scooped Steve up and set him back on the bed. He lay down next to him and pulled Steve into his chest. Steve curled up, still feeling a little sick, and hid his face in Bucky’s neck. Bucky pressed kisses into his hair, his wrist rubbing up and down his spine.

“I love you,” Bucky murmured. “So, so much, sweetheart. I’ve always loved you and I always will.”

“I know,” Steve answered weakly.

“I love our baby,” Bucky promised. “Our little baby. We’re havin’ a baby, sweetheart!” he whispered, sounding like he was trying to be excited.

Trying, but perhaps Steve’s shock made it hard. Another thing that made Steve internally wince with guilt. He couldn’t even let his Alpha be happy about the promise of a child.

“A baby,” Bucky murmured.

Steve shifted onto his back, looking down his body towards his stomach. Bucky curled his hand over Steve’s stomach, too, as though trying to feel for movement already.

“How far along do you think you are?” Bucky asked.
Steve shrugged. “No clue,” he said. “Probably no more’n a month. A few weeks?”

Bucky nodded, pressing his face into Steve’s hair. “‘S probably what’s got you smellin’ like sugar lately,” he said. “Your scent’s goin’ away.”

Steve nodded absently. He set his hands on his stomach.

Bucky bumped his nose against Steve’s head. “What’s goin’ through your head, doll?” he asked softly. “An’ don’t gimme bullshit. I know you feel like shit right now.”

Steve rolled over again, turning back into Bucky’s chest. Bucky kissed his hair.

“‘S shitty timing,” Steve mumbled. “‘S not just you that don’t feel like parent-material, Buck.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Bucky promised. “Ain’t nothin’ too tough to stop Steve Rogers, sweetheart. You’ll be the best damn ma the world seen since your own.”

Steve laughed weakly, but it didn’t last long.

“I’m gonna take care’a ya,” Bucky added then, his voice soft. “Okay? You ain’t gonna want for nothin’ no more. You ain’t gonna lift a finger, neither.”

Steve squeezed his eyes shut. It would be selfish of him to agree.

“Okay,” he mumbled anyway.

Bucky kissed Steve’s hair again. Steve felt guilt eating away at him, just the same as before.

Why didn’t he feel happy?
[november 15th, the black forest in germany]

A fog rolled in just before dawn. Heavy and all-encompassing. It shrouded the trees in a thick mist that could hardly be penetrated by light. The treetops emerged from it like a flock of ghostly hoods, slowly marching across the land towards some unseen goal.

The fog hung low to the ground as well, so low, that Ward’s vision was halted barely feet from him. The trees were too densely packed for cars, so he and his team traveled on foot. In Ward’s hand, a GPS pinged softly, leading him through the fog and the trees towards his goal.

Behind him, his men were uneasy. Not even Ward felt comfortable with how little he could see. Most of his team were natives of Germany, and apparently, all of them had heard the old tales surrounding the Black Forest.

The trees were haunted. Or alive. Or there was something in the trees that disliked visitors. The unease among them was not aided by the way pinpricks of light showed in the distance as owls watched them.

Ward didn’t think owls were even that curious. But the chimes of their hooting was the only sound in the forest but for their movements. Not even he liked the way the owls watched them.

The GPS blipped in his hand. The arrow marking his location shifted, then a warning popped up, recalculating. The warning vanished, then reappeared again. Ward stopped, watching the GPS recalculate, then put it away.

“We’re close,” he announced.

His team said nothing. Ward lifted his rifle and started to walk again.

A path had opened up in the trees some time ago. Ward followed it now, stepping lightly, carefully. Around them, the owls continued to observe. As he walked, his digital wristwatch display malfunctioned, then died. He carried a compass, a manual one, and abruptly, the needle swiveled and began to spin in many directions. The tension in the group grew.
An owl’s hoot came from close by, startlingly loud, then the owl itself swooped out of the fog, screeching and holding its talons out menacingly. Ward shot it without hesitation. Its screech cut off and it fell, hitting the ground with a thud.

The bird calls in the forest changed abruptly. The owls stopped hooting. Ward paused, the tension putting him on-guard. His team stopped walking. The forest was silent.

Then a raven cried nearby. One of Ward’s men whispered a frightened curse in German.

“Keep moving,” Ward snapped. “Are you a bunch of girl-boys or are you men?”

They resumed walking. Ward’s compass continued to spin. Ward didn’t know what they were looking for, only that they would know it when they found it.

Abruptly, his compass stopped spinning. The needle swung and pointed firmly in one direction; south-west. Ward signaled to his team and followed the compass’s point.

Out of the fog, a stone structure began looming. Hard angles and deliberate craftsmanship. Ward paused for a second to just look up at the abrupt face of the structure, then he took a step forward.

The building, according to the texts Ward dug up, predated Christianity. It quite possibly predated the Black Forest, too. The old records also said that the building was carved from a single block of stone and as Ward neared, he had to crane his neck to look up the structure, to where it disappeared, shrouded in more fog.

“Come on,” he said without looking behind him.

There was no door. Ward and his team simply entered the structure, all of them stepping lightly. Inside, there were stairs carved out of the stone, leading up. Ward, without a word, took to the first step and began to climb.

The stone was seamless going up. After fifteen minutes, Ward was still climbing and there wasn’t an end in sight. There were windows cut into the stone, laden with fog, though occasionally, a tree branch was visible through the mist. The stairs went on, it seemed, for miles.
Finally, the stairs ended in a ceiling with a hole cut through to allow passage. Ward moved through it, stepping out into a square room.

In the center, a vast, black obelisk seemed to pulse with a dim light. Ward’s lips stretched in a smile.

Chapter End Notes

yes, yes, we been knew. but also spooky things? leave me a comment if you liked this and pls forgive me being late i’m blaming christmas shopping being a nightmare. people are assholes and capitalism is the real nightmare

bloopers

“Get out, get out while you still can,” [Steve said]
lexi: It's cute he thinks Bucky would ever leave with his hormones losing it like that.
me: some might say steve has a bad case of self-sacrificing hero complex, others would call it moral fiber

Bucky was staring at the computer screen, his face blank.
lexi:

“ I can’t help you with this, guys,” Bruce said. “I have nine PhDs, but none of them are in gynecology.”
lexi: Damn can you fund mine??? AND ARE ANY EVEN IN MEDICINE
me: we like to headcanon that bruce is really bad at actually accomplishing career goals BUT he is super good at winning grants so instead of going into the field he got his first
degree in, he just kept getting more degrees
me: also, i think biochem or something like that

Steve still wasn’t sure he believed it.
lexi: You better get started believing it honey!!!
me: **steve:** *shOoKEth*
casting stones

Chapter Notes

bc it's christmas my family is traveling and today was super duper chaotic and that's why this is late. it's also why i have no bloopers for you, bc me and lexi didn't banter a whole lot in beta'ing this. i'm also not using tumblr rn so the cover for this chapter isn't cross-posted anywhere, so fyi i don't own the images but the edit is mine i photoshopped and tweaked colors and shadows and shit, so swiper no swiping. (also yes the top right image should be familiar, check the cover for the prelude to intertwined.) without further ado, i hope your holidays were/will be great, enjoy the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Bucky nuzzled at Steve’s hair. Steve turned over, instinctively drawing into himself, trying to become as small as possible, to take up as little room. He pressed against his Alpha, seeking the comfort that Bucky’s scent would bring. Emotions grappled in his chest and Steve, overwhelmed, let out a quiet, keening whine.
Bucky softly shushed him and drew him in tighter. Steve folded his arms between their chests and pressed his face against Bucky’s scent gland. He whined again, the rush of emotions all crashing over one another, like an angry tide coming in to crash at an already beaten shoreline. He wasn’t crying, but he was very, very close to it.

“Shh,” Bucky murmured, “I’ve got you, baby, it’s alright, I gotchu.”

“’M sorry,” Steve hissed, because he had no clue what else to say. “I’m sorry –”

“What’re you sorry for, sweetheart?” Bucky asked gently. “Huh?”

Steve took in a shuddering breath. He shook his head.

“No,” Bucky whispered. “I need you to tell me. What’re you sorry for?”

“I –” Steve started, then flailed. “I don’ know. I’m just – I’m sorry. I’m not – I’m not –”

He couldn’t finish. He shuddered and struggled to bury himself in Bucky’s embrace, to hide, to find cover in Bucky’s arms to protect him from – from whatever, from anything, from everything.

Bucky shushed him again and pushed his right hand under Steve’s shirt, dragging his wrist and scent gland over his skin. “It’s alright,” Bucky murmured. “What’s got you upset like this, baby? Can you tell me?”

Steve shook his head, feeling useless.

“C’mon,” Bucky prompted gently. “I need you to tell me, sweetheart. Tell me and I’ll make it better.”

Steve almost gasped. Of course, of course – His Alpha would fix it. His Alpha would protect him. Of course.

“Bucky,” Steve whimpered, pleading, submissive and needy. “Alpha,” he begged, desperate for
comfort, for safety. “Please?”

Steve keened and Bucky responded immediately; his leg lifted to curl over Steve’s and his metal hand moved up to cup the back of his neck, squeezing gently and pressing Steve into him. Steve squeezed his eyes shut, whimpering low in his throat still; crying out for his Alpha’s comfort.

“My sweet Omega,” Bucky crooned. “You gotta tell me. You gotta tell me wha’s goin’ through your head now, what’s got you scared?”

Steve hesitated. His knee-jerk impulse was, simply, to lie. To hold onto his insecurities and pretend that they didn’t exist.

“Tell me, sweetheart,” Bucky pressed kindly.

“I didn’t want this,” Steve confessed shamefully.

Guilt and shame warred inside him. Shame because he should want this. His whole life he had felt mortified over his infertility. Had ducked his head in embarrassment every time it was brought up. It had been a disgusting secret when he was young and his poor health was what kept him from carrying children to term. His body had been too fragile to bear a pregnancy, he’d known that fact with vicious certainty.

After the serum, his health improved but his fertility never changed. The secret had grown bitter and malicious inside him, reminding him constantly that no matter how hard he tried to serve others and his country, he would always be a failure at his most natural duty.

And now guilt. Because he did not want this. The prospect of a child was terrifying. He could barely take care of himself; how was he meant to care for something so helpless?

“You didn’t…?” Bucky repeated quietly. “You don’t want children?”

Steve shook his head, eyes still squeezed shut.

“But I thought you did?” Bucky said. “I thought you were upset ‘cause we couldn’t have any?”
“I couldn’t!” Steve hissed, because the distinction mattered. “I couldn’t have children! But you could and I failed –”

“Failed?” Bucky cut him off, his voice abruptly startled.

The concern and confusion in Bucky’s voice made Steve feel even more pathetic and he whined again softly, rubbing his cheek against Bucky’s scent gland. Bucky shushed him again and kissed his hair.

“Failed?” Bucky said once again. “What about not havin’ kids meant that you failed, sweetheart?”

Steve, for a second, just said nothing. He tried to find a way to explain it in words.

“Did I make you feel like you were a failure?” Bucky asked.

“No!” Steve said hastily. “No, it was –”

He stopped, getting confused himself.

“What was it?” Bucky prompted.

Steve blinked open his eyes. “The nuns,” he whispered pathetically.

“Nuns?” Bucky repeated.

Saint Maria’s Finishing School for Underprivileged Omegas was a Catholic School and run by nuns. The Headmistress had been a particularly unforgiving woman by the name of Mother Thomas Acquis. Mother Acquis gave weekly lectures to the whole school on the virtues of womanhood and the role of Omegas in society. Every week, she reminded them that an Omega’s only goal in life was to serve the Lord by obeying his first commandment. To be fruitful. To multiply. In serving the Lord, they were to serve their Alphas. By giving them offspring.
And she had used Steve’s poor health to remind the girls why the sins of a mother would ruin the life of a child. It had been very simple. Steve’s mother wasn’t married and he was sickly. So in her eyes, he had no hope.

“The nuns,” Steve whispered, a distinct sense of hopelessness settling over him.

“What’d they say?” Bucky asked.

“It’s our duty,” Steve said numbly. “To bear children. It’s our only duty.”

There was a beat of silence.

“That’s the biggest load’a bullshit I ever heard,” Bucky said.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed faintly.

“Bullshit,” Bucky insisted. “That’s – That’s ridiculous, sweetheart!”

“I know,” Steve agreed.

He did know. Steve knew perfectly well that those ideas were harmful and untrue. That being barren hadn’t made him hopeless or worthless like so many people had screamed in his face he was. He knew it. But it was hard to break out of believing it when it was all he’d thought for the majority of his life.

“You’re tellin’ me that this whole time you’ve been thinkin’ not havin’ kids was a failure?” Bucky demanded.

Steve shrank away, hiding his face. He felt even more ashamed now for admitting it. He felt stupid, pathetic, as worthless as the nuns promised him he was –

“Sweetheart,” Bucky murmured softly. “Sweetheart, will you look at me? Please?”
Steve hesitated. He wanted to cling to the relative safety that hiding his face in Bucky’s neck gave him. But at the same time, he wanted to please his Alpha by obeying. So he withdrew his head and let his cheek rest on the meat of Bucky’s upper arm, turning his face up towards Bucky’s.

Bucky caressed Steve’s cheek with his left hand. “You gotta know that I don’t think that,” he said softly.

Steve nodded.

“And you don’t wanna think that?” Bucky asked.

“No,” Steve mumbled.

“Then le’s try somethin’,” Bucky offered. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” Steve said immediately, anxiously, “of course –”

“Shh,” Bucky murmured, pressing a quick kiss to Steve’s forehead and Steve calmed, relaxing a little. “I know you do, baby, it’s alright, it’s alright.”

Steve relaxed further, his eyes slipping shut. Bucky kissed his forehead again, then nuzzled against his hair. His hand cupped and squeezed the back of his neck and Steve exhaled slowly.

“Focus on me, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured. “Only what I say matters, okay? I’m your Alpha and you should only be listenin’ to me.”

Steve let his breath come in again, processing Bucky’s words.

“You submit to me,” Bucky reminded him gently. “I’m the head of this household, so what I say’s your law. Right?”
“Yes,” Steve whispered. That made so much sense; it was a relief. “Yes, Alpha.”

“Good boy,” Bucky responded. He kissed Steve’s hair. “My sweet Omega. What I say is law, okay?”

“Yes, Alpha,” Steve murmured.

“So if I tell you to quit thinkin’ somethin’, you’ll quit, right?” Bucky asked.

It made sense. It was what the nuns had taught at St. Maria’s. Omegas were to obey their Alphas.

“Yes, Alpha,” Steve answered obediently.

Bucky squeezed the back of Steve’s neck again, calming Steve’s instincts. Steve felt suddenly exhausted.

“I want you to tell me any other bullshit rattlin’ ‘round your pretty head,” Bucky said. “Okay, baby?”


“What else has got you upset?” Bucky asked.

Steve shrugged a little. Bucky kissed his hair.

“You ain’t a failure ‘cause you couldn’t have kids before now,” Bucky told him, murmuring the new law into his hair. “An’ I won’t have you makin’ yourself feel guilty ‘cause you’re conflicted about havin’ a baby now. It’s okay if you’re scared or confused. We’re gonna work this out together. You don’t gotta do nothin’ on your own now.”

Steve nodded, pressing closer. He rubbed his face over Bucky’s arm, wanting to again press into Bucky’s neck and rub against his scent gland.
“I’m here, I’m gonna take care’a ya,” Bucky promised. “I ain’t gonna let my Omega suffer on his own.”

“Alpha,” Steve whimpered.

Bucky knew exactly what Steve needed. He squeezed the back of Steve’s neck and pulled him in, pressing him into his neck. Steve nuzzled his nose and cheek against Bucky’s scent gland, marking himself with his Alpha’s scent. He relaxed again.

“You obey me,” Bucky said softly. “And I’ll keep you safe and happy. Would you like that, sweetheart?”

Steve nodded.

“We’re gonna talk about the baby,” Bucky told him. “But not now. Not today. Tomorrow you got your first appointment with the therapist. We can talk about the baby after that. Alright?”

“Okay,” Steve agreed.

“I wanna take care’a you today,” Bucky said. “The way you need.”

“Please,” Steve said, immediately sensing Bucky’s meaning.

He pressed closer, finally circling his arms around Bucky’s thick torso. Bucky petted down Steve’s spine with his right hand, his left still closed around the back of Steve’s neck.

“Here’s what’s gonna happen, doll,” Bucky started. “You gotta get some food in you.”

“No bacon,” Steve muttered.

“No bacon,” Bucky agreed. “We’ll go kosher for a while, how ‘bout that?”
Steve finally cracked a smile and he nodded.

“Baby’s Jewish,” he mumbled. “Just ‘cause his Daddy don’t practice it don’t mean he can’t be kosher.”

Bucky’s hand tightened a little on the back of Steve’s neck and his leg over Steve’s knees curled tighter. Steve realized what he said and, a little hysterical, he giggled.

“Babydoll,” Bucky growled softly, “you call me that one more time and it ain’t gonna be eggs I’m feedin’ you.”

Steve shook his head. “Don’t wanna suck cock,” he mumbled. Feeling pathetic and guilty as he did, the idea of a cockhead pushing into the back of his throat made his skin crawl and feel dirty. He didn’t like the feeling.

“Fine,” Bucky agreed. “But your mouth ain’t the only hole that’s hungry.”

Bucky’s right hand dipped under the waistband of Steve’s shorts, grabbing a handful of his ass and squeezing. Steve shivered.

“But it ain’t time for that,” Bucky said quietly. “So don’t be callin’ me Daddy now, doll.”

Steve gave a nod. Bucky’s hand slipped back out of his shorts and cupped the small of his back instead.

“What do you wanna eat, sweetheart?” Bucky asked then.


“How ’bout some toast?” Bucky prompted. “And some eggs?”

Steve shrugged. “I don’ know if I can do eggs,” he admitted, and one of his hands slipped from Bucky’s waist to cup his stomach. His abdomen was flat, hard still. It was difficult to imagine it
softening anytime soon.

“Your stomach still queasy?” Bucky asked.

Steve nodded.

“Okay,” Bucky agreed. “How ‘bout jus’ some toast now and you can try to eat a lil’ bit more later. Okay, dollface?”

Steve nodded again and made to roll away. Bucky followed him, and as Steve sat up, Bucky got up from the bed. Steve had to pause as he went lightheaded and his stomach clenched uncomfortably. He reached out and Bucky stepped back up to the bed, wrapping his arms around Steve’s shoulders. Steve shivered again, but this time, from the cold.

“You chilly, babydoll?” Bucky asked. “You wanna wrap up in somethin’?”

Steve just nodded into Bucky’s chest. Bucky pulled the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around Steve’s shoulders. He pulled the blanket snug and Steve pressed forward again, shutting his eyes.

“C’mon,” Bucky said softly, slipping his arms under Steve’s. “Legs around my waist, babydoll.”

Steve unfolded his legs and obeyed his Alpha, rewarded by Bucky lifting him off the bed and into his arms. Bucky cradled him and Steve hugged Bucky’s neck, keeping his face pressed against his scent gland. He shut his eyes again, letting himself slip into a calmer headspace. Bucky would take care of him. Bucky would always take care of him.

Bucky carried him from the bedroom and put him down on the sofa. Steve lay back and curled up under the blanket, still driven to try and make himself appear as small as possible. Bucky smoothed his hair back, then pressed a kiss to his forehead.

“I’ll be right back, baby,” he promised.

Steve gave a nod, then watched as Bucky went back into the bedroom. When he came out, he was shirtless and his arms were laden with all the pillows from their bed. He dumped them on the living
room floor, then pushed the coffee table out of the way, towards the two unused guest bedrooms before going into the first guest room. Steve pushed up a little as Bucky exited again, again, arms laden with pillows and this time, the blankets.

Bucky dropped these onto the living room floor as well. Steve quickly figured out that Bucky was gathering things for a nest. He felt touched.

Bucky brought out the pillows and blankets from the second guest bedroom and dumped them, too. Then he moved to stand next to Steve and combed his fingers through his hair.

“Will you build a nest for me, sweetheart?” he asked softly.

Steve just slipped off the sofa on his knees and started to move things around.

“Good Omega,” Bucky said softly. “Good boy.”

Steve couldn’t help but smile, pausing for a moment to lean against Bucky’s legs and nuzzle his thigh. Bucky brushed back his hair again.

“Do you want the couch cushions, too?”

Steve looked up, then nodded. Bucky stepped up to him and bent to cup the back of his head and Steve shut his eyes as Bucky pressed a kiss to his forehead. After he pulled away, Bucky removed the cushions from the sofas and Steve took them, laying them out on the floor.

He had to stand eventually so he could start building a proper nest. Bucky sat down in his armchair to watch and Steve focused on his task.

The firm sofa cushions made the bottom layer of the outside walls. Steve lay out the bed pillows as the floor of the nest, then built up the sides with more bed pillows. He grabbed one of the thick duvets and lay it out over the whole thing, then tucked the edges under the sofa cushions. He lay some more pillows along the back and the sides, then layered blankets on the inside. In the end, it was a few feet tall and wide enough in both directions to comfortably fit both him and Bucky.
Steve climbed into the nest, then came to rest on his knees and looked up at Bucky, waiting. Bucky smiled and pushed up from the armchair, stepping over the back walls of the nest to kneel next to Steve. His hand cupped his cheek and Steve pressed into his touch, shutting his eyes again.

“Good boy,” Bucky murmured gently. “This is a very good nest, babydoll.”

Steve slipped his arms around Bucky’s neck and hugged him tightly. “Thank you,” he mumbled quietly.

Bucky kissed his neck. “You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

Then Bucky pulled back and pressed on Steve’s shoulder. Steve let Bucky push him down, lying back in the piles of pillows. Bucky picked up a blanket and draped it over him and Steve curled up, his gaze fixed on Bucky. The current center of his world.

“I’m gonna bring you something to eat,” Bucky told him softly. “And some water to drink. Okay?”

Steve nodded. Bucky bent and kissed his cheek, then pushed up and walked away.

Steve closed his eyes again, simply waiting. He waited until he heard Bucky stepping into the nest again to open his eyes and look up. Bucky smiled and Steve felt like that was an incentive on its own to be obedient. Bucky didn’t smile nearly as much as he used to; he wanted to see Bucky smiling more these days.

“There’s my pretty Omega,” Bucky said softly as he knelt down.

Steve blushed and tugged the blanket up over his flushed cheeks. Bucky chuckled and a hand pushed through Steve’s hair.

“Don’t hide, babydoll,” Bucky said.

Steve tugged the blanket down a little, only just enough to uncover his eyes. Bucky combed his hair again, smiling once more.
“Didn’t I tell you to do somethin’, doll?” he asked, amused. “You gonna listen to your Alpha?”

Steve felt his cheeks heating even further, but he pulled the blanket down away from his face. Bucky brushed his knuckles over his cheek, smiling more now.

“Good boy,” he murmured. “You keep that up, now, make sure you listen to me.”

“Yes, Alpha,” Steve answered quietly, his voice a little rough.

Bucky settled in the nest, sitting up with his legs stretched out in front of him. He leaned to the side and picked up a plate, waiting on the cushionless sofa. He looked back at Steve, now holding the plate up. He patted his thigh.

“C’mere, doll,” he said. “Come sit in your Alpha’s lap.”

Steve pushed up, his eyes downcast, and he moved as gracefully as he could to kneel between Bucky’s thighs. He felt clumsy while doing it, though, awkwardly large.

Bucky tapped the underside of his chin. Steve lifted his eyes immediately.

“You’re gorgeous,” Bucky told him simply.

Steve dropped his gaze again, embarrassed to have been caught. He didn’t know if Bucky had discerned the dysphoric thoughts in his head through the bond or his body language, but it didn’t much matter.

Bucky tapped his chin again. “Don’t be shy, sweetheart,” he said even as Steve looked up again. Bucky offered him a smile and Steve leaned in for a quick kiss, pressing their lips together chastely for a brief second. Then Bucky caught the back of his neck and pulled him back in, holding the kiss for longer this time. Steve was beginning to melt.

Bucky let their lips part and Steve sat back on his heels. Bucky squeezed the back of his neck briefly.
“Make yourself comfortable, sweetheart,” he said. “Are you hungry?”

Steve shrugged, shifting to sit on his ass instead of his heels. Bucky pulled the plate between them, holding it aloft. There were four pieces of toast on it, buttered and spread with jam.

“Did you eat?” Steve asked impulsively.

“Earlier,” Bucky answered. He cracked a smile. “I’ll go kosher later, I ate all the bacon.”

Steve snorted, shaking his head. Bucky chuckled and brushed at his bangs.

“I’m gonna feed you, baby,” he said. “That okay?”

Steve nodded, his ears heating up. He was embarrassed to admit even to himself that he liked Bucky doing even simple things for him, things Steve was perfectly capable of doing. Bucky picked up the first piece of toast, then tore off a corner and held it up. Steve opened his mouth.

Bucky placed the bread on his tongue and Steve closed his lips over Bucky’s fingers, shutting his eyes as he sucked the jam from his fingers. Bucky plucked them from his lips and Steve chewed lightly. He swallowed, then opened his mouth again.

“Good boy,” Bucky murmured, tearing off another piece of toast.

Bucky fed Steve the toast bit by bit, and through it all, Steve felt the chaos in his head go quiet. He simply waited for Bucky to hold another bite to his lips, opened his mouth, chewed, swallowed, occasionally licked the jam off Bucky’s fingers. Some things were easy to forget.

Others weren’t. As Bucky fed him, Steve drifted from his worries, but the fact that he was pregnant kept coming back. It kept jolting him, making him jittery and emotional again. Bucky had said that they wouldn’t talk about the baby today, but Steve couldn’t forget about it.

He was pregnant. There was a tiny life growing in him. A tiny life that would turn into a tiny baby
that would be completely helpless, totally dependent on Steve. And there Steve was, being handfed like a child himself.

“Hey,” Bucky murmured, stopping feeding him for a moment, “look at me, doll.”

Steve blinked, unaware that he’d dropped his gaze. Bucky reached up with his metal hand and cupped his cheek.

“What’re you thinkin’?” Bucky asked softly. “What’s got you riled up again?”

Steve dropped his gaze, ashamed again. Bucky slipped his fingers under his chin, lifting his face.

“I been tryin’ so hard to get you all easy,” he said quietly. “What’s messin’ up my hard work, huh, baby?”

Steve shook his head, not wanting to let the truth out.

“C’mon,” Bucky pressed, his voice going firm. “I told you to tell me. You gonna disobey your Alpha, sweetheart?”

Steve hesitated. He was positive that if he said yes, he’d rather disobey than answer, Bucky would let it go. Would let him keep the shame inside and let him stew in it.

Steve could easily take that. But he didn’t want to. He wanted to let Bucky take it away, tell him that he was being dumb, that his head was tricking him. That, and he wanted to obey. He wanted to submit to Bucky. His hands went to his stomach, disbelieving the life inside him.

“How ‘m I gonna be a good parent?” Steve mumbled. “I’m… this.”

He gestured to himself, to the plate of torn up toast. Bucky cupped his cheek again.

“So what?” he asked. “You’re submissive, you need to be taken care of now ‘n’ then. I know that’s what it is ‘cause you ain’t the only one like this, I looked it up, remember?”
Steve glanced up, then nodded, his gaze lowering again. Bucky brushed at his cheek with a thumb.

“You know why I know you’re gonna be a fantastic ma?” Bucky asked gently.

Steve shook his head.

“Last night,” Bucky said, stroking Steve’s cheek, “you took a coupl’a kids that’d done nothin’ but try ‘n’ hurt you and you took ‘em in. You made sure they ate. If that ain’t the mark of a good ma, I don’ know what is.”

“But –” Steve started.

“But what?” Bucky cut him off. “But you need to be fed an’ pampered by your Alpha?”

Steve lowered his gaze, weighed down by shame and guilt.

“If your phone went off,” Bucky started, his tone stern, “sayin’ there was another zombie attack or another hostage situation in the subway right now –” he paused, cupping Steve’s cheek.

His thumb swept across the crest of his face. Bucky tapped his chin and Steve took a breath.

“I know you’d be up in an instant and you’d be mission-ready,” Bucky said gently. “‘Cause you’re a good soldier, a good man.”

Steve took in a deep breath, then nodded once. Bucky slipped his hand around to the back of his neck, then squeezed.

“You can be a good soldier when you need to be,” he continued in that same, soft tone. “And I know you’ll be a good ma when you need to be. But, see, right now, you don’t gotta be those things.” He squeezed the back of Steve’s neck a second time. “You gotta be my good Omega,” Bucky concluded.

Steve leaned in almost unconsciously. Bucky pulled him in responsively and Steve pressed their lips
together, then ducked and nuzzled Bucky’s scent gland. Bucky petted the back of his neck.

“You get to be my good Omega,” Bucky added. “‘Cause you been a good soldier. And you held yourself up on your own to finish the mission. Now you get to have a reward for all that,” he insisted. “You can let go.”

Steve nodded into Bucky’s neck. He took another deep breath, steadying the quiver to his lungs and lower lip, then sat up again. Bucky kissed his forehead as Steve pulled back and he held onto the back of his neck.

“Okay?” Bucky asked, sounding just a little bit uncertain.

“Okay,” Steve answered softly.

Bucky picked up another bite of toast. Steve opened his mouth and accepted it onto his tongue.

Anxiety over his pregnancy still prickled at the back of his mind. But Steve tried his best to squash those thoughts. His Alpha said he would make a good mother, and his Alpha’s word was law. His Alpha’s word was his law.

It made it so much easier. Bucky’s orders easily overpowered Steve’s insecurities, and as long as Steve remained obedient and submissive, he didn’t have to worry about his failures. Bucky’s word was law. Bucky said he was good.

“All done,” Bucky said quietly once the plate was cleared. “Good boy, sweetheart, you did good.”

There was still jam on his fingers, however, so Steve grasped his wrist and pulled it closer. He sucked Bucky’s fingers into his mouth, licking them clean. Bucky reached up with his other hand and brushed at his hair.

“Good Omega,” he said softly. “Very good, babydoll.”

The traces of jam were gone, but Steve still held onto Bucky’s wrist. He kept Bucky’s fingers in his mouth, the tips of them just barely hitting the back of his tongue, and sucked aimlessly on them.
Bucky brushed at his hair again.

“You wan’ to keep suckin’ on those, sweetheart?” he asked. “You can if you need to. You know I’ll give you anythin’ you need.”

Sucking on Bucky’s fingers prompted a content rush to his mind. Steve nodded, wanting to hold onto the feeling.

“Alright,” Bucky answered, “lay down, babydoll.”

Steve plucked Bucky’s fingers from his mouth just long enough to climb out of his lap and lie down again. Bucky shifted to get behind him and Steve lifted up enough to let Bucky settle down behind him, bracketing him with his legs. Steve lay down again, pillowing his head on Bucky’s thigh. Bucky set his fingers on Steve’s lips and Steve opened his mouth, suckling on his fingers again.

“Good boy,” Bucky murmured. “You’re a good Omega, so sweet and so pretty for me.”

His praise felt like a drug. Steve wanted nothing but to soak in it. His Alpha’s word was law, so he was good. He liked being good, being *enough*, just this once.

Steve rubbed his cheek over Bucky’s pant leg, then slipped the fingers from his mouth and looked up. Bucky smiled at him, soft and tender.

“Could I have the pearls you gave me?” Steve asked quietly.

“A’course you can,” Bucky answered. He bent and brushed his lips over Steve’s forehead. “I’ll go get them. I’ll be right back.”

Steve pulled a blanket over him while Bucky pushed up and climbed out of the nest. He tucked a pillow under his head and tried to settle, but he felt overheated. Throwing off the blanket made him feel cold and unsecured. He could still hear Bucky digging around in their bedroom, and Steve figured, what the hell. He twisted onto his back and lifted his hips, then wriggled off the shorts he’d been sleeping in and kicked them away. Then he sat up and tugged off his shirt, leaving him just in briefs.
His cheeks warmed but Steve lay down again, pulling a sheet over his body, rather than a blanket. The material was cool and smooth on his bare skin and as he nuzzled his head into the pillow, settling, the feeling of overheating left him.

Bucky’s footsteps exited their bedroom and Steve peeked out, looking up from the midst of the nest. Bucky held Steve’s string pearls in his left hand; the gleaming white stones clicked as they swung and struck the metal plates that formed his arm.

“Were you hot?” Bucky asked in a chuckle as he stepped over Steve’s clothes puddled on the floor outside the nest.

“Uh-huh,” Steve mumbled. He held out his hand. “Gimme.”

Bucky knelt down and Steve pushed up onto his elbow. Bucky slipped the necklace over Steve’s clavicle, his hands reaching beyond his neck.

“There,” Bucky said softly, linking the two ends behind Steve’s neck. “Your pearls, angel.”

Steve reached up and lifted a single pearl between two fingers. He smiled, then settled back down and rested his head back amongst the pillows, pulling the sheet up over his neck. Bucky set his right hand on his shoulder, squeezing it gently. Steve took his hand and pressed it to his cheek instead. Bucky shifted onto his hip, smiling tenderly. Steve rubbed Bucky’s hand against his cheek, then kissed his fingers.

“You’re alright,” Bucky murmured, lying down behind Steve’s head. “I’ve got you, angel.”

Steve turned onto his side and tucked Bucky’s hand under his cheek.

“Rest your sweet head,” Bucky said, his left hand coming up to pet over Steve’s hair. “Ain’t a thing you need t’a be worryin’ over now. I’m here. You’re safe here.”

His Alpha’s word was law. Steve shut his eyes and slept.
New Roads’ Omega and Beta Women’s Shelter was in Harlem; a fat and squat, unassuming brick building that had a clinic and a counseling shelter with boarding rooms for those in need. Steve thought maybe it had been a hotel once upon a time, maybe when he’d been a child.

As Dr. Madini instructed, they took the employee’s entrance. Steve drove, using the action to ground himself. Maybe he and Bucky ought to go on a road trip. Maybe they ought to move out to the country. Buy a house in the middle of nowhere, with lots of space for a kid to run and play.

He was nervous. Hell, was he nervous. He was about to bare his soul to an almost total stranger. Who wouldn’t be nervous?

Bucky knocked on the door to the employee’s entrance. It opened after barely a minute, pushed open by a mixed racial woman with wildly curly hair, square glasses, and a warm smile.

“Hiya!” she greeted. “Captain Rogers and BF?”

Bucky cast a glance at Steve, his eyebrows furrowed at the center. He mouthed BF?

“Boyfriend,” the woman added.

“Uh, actually, we’re married,” Steve said.

“Oh, cool!” the woman answered. “C’mon in, I’m Larah.”

“Dr. Madini?” Steve added, though he entered the building behind her, Bucky on his heel.

“Yep,” Larah said. “But that’s, like, super formal and I’ve always said that a therapist should be her patient’s best friend, so no formalities. I call you Steve, you call me Larah. Good deal?”
“Sure,” Steve said, a little numb.

Larah lead them down a bland, beige hallway and stopped at an open doorway. “Do you want Hubby to sit with us first?” she asked, gesturing them in.

“Yes,” Steve said, feeling a little relieved. “If that’s okay.”

“Sure,” Larah said, “sure, sure. You can have him stay for the whole session if you want.”

Steve glanced at Bucky, stepping through the doorway. He hesitated.

“I think I should just stay for the first bit,” Bucky said gently. “You need to do this yourself, sweetheart.”

Steve nodded, looking down. Larah shut the door, then moved past them and dropped into a wide, cushy armchair.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” Larah offered, gesturing to an equally squasy couch behind them. “Hell, kick off your shoes, I don’t mind.”

Steve lowered himself onto the sofa, his hands sweeping around to clasp in his lap. Bucky dropped down a little bit more ungracefully, immediately throwing his arm over Steve’s shoulders. Steve leaned into him a little.

“Cuddle if you want, go ahead,” Larah told them. “So, shall we start?”

“Sure,” Steve said, exhaling heavily.

Larah held out her hands, her thin eyebrows rising. “How about a basic background?” she asked. “Childhood to now? Gimme the honest version,” she added, “not the one that’s in the museums.”

Steve bit the inside of his cheek. “Well,” he started, “you must’a heard the – the news from a few weeks ago.”
“Plenty of news in the past few weeks,” Larah said gently. “But I guess you mean your speech at the Project Insight inquiry?”

“That,” Steve mumbled.

“That was inspired, I gotta say,” Larah said then. “Truly, you brought tears to eyes. Like, that’s gonna go down in history more than anything else that happened, I bet, that speech.”

Steve opened his mouth, taken aback, then lifted his eyebrows and shrugged. “I guess,” he said. “But, uh, I meant… My confession.”

“Oh, sure, sure,” Larah said, nodding. “You were a sex worker.”

Steve nodded, his jaw tensing, and he looked down.

“But that’s not everything about you, right?” Larah asked. “Why don’t you start at the beginning.”

Bucky squeezed Steve’s shoulder. Steve took a deep breath.

“Well,” he said. “I was actually born in Ireland.”

“No shit?” Larah said, then grinned. “Fantastic, I love it. Have you ever been there? Well, since you left for America. Obviously, you’ve been there once.”

Steve laughed softly and shook his head. “No,” he admitted. “I didn’t even know that until the night before last. My ma never told me. Natasha – The Black Widow, she dug up my birth certificate when she was looking for information on my ma.”

“When did you and your mother come here?” Larah asked.

Steve shrugged, leaning a little more into Bucky. “Sometime before I was a year old. By May of 1919, ’cause that’s when the Barneses moved in in the brownstone next to my ma’s.”
“And you met Hubby then?” Larah said, a grin forming on her face. “The Romance of the Century started before you could walk?”

Steve shrugged again, smiling now. He glanced at Bucky and his Alpha smiled back at him, squeezing his shoulders.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “That’s when we met.”

“And you two grew up together?” Larah said. “Until 1933?”

Steve nodded, the smile fading. “You heard, right?”

“Why don’t you tell me in your own words?” Larah prompted gently.

Steve exhaled. He shifted and Bucky tugged on his shoulders gently. Steve shifted again, but this time, to put his weight more firmly on Bucky’s shoulder.

“It was the tenth of January,” Steve said softly. “We were – we were baking cookies for a church dinner. Gingerbread.”

Larah leaned back in her chair, lifting her legs to fold them under herself. Steve found himself staring at the carpet. It was an unassuming color, much like the place, perhaps designed to be nonthreatening. It was green, or maybe red. If he unfocused his eyes, it was gray. He liked it better gray.

“Nobody’d ever told me Omegas could really be boys,” he said to the carpet. “Boys were Alphas unless they were unlucky, then they was Betas. Like, they’d joke about it –” he started, shifting in his seat. “They’d joke about it, but it was like we were unicorns. Leprechauns. Weren’t real, just something to use as an insult. I hit fourteen and hadn’t presented –”

He shrugged. “Everybody figured I was unlucky.”
“Was that how they said it?” Larah asked.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “That’s puttin’ it nicely,” he sighed.

“Put it rudely,” Larah offered with a smile.

Steve pushed his lips together and shook his head at the carpet. “Then they had Negro in ‘em,” he said sadly.

Larah nodded slowly, pursing her lips similarly. “Figured,” she said.

“Was the 30s,” Steve mumbled. “Wasn’t right, but it was what they said.”

“Hey, carry on,” Larah said, “ain’t nothin’ I ain’t heard before. Gingerbread cookies?”

“Gingerbread cookies,” Steve repeated.

“Smells like ‘im,” Bucky spoke up.


Steve ducked his head and blushed a little, shrugging. “Yeah,” he said. “Gingerbread fuckin’ cookies, no shit.”

He liked Larah. She was a hoot. Nowhere near the stuffy librarian sort of dame he’d been expecting to be a doctor of psychology or whatever her degree was in.

“So,” Larah said, leaning forward, “so, what happened? You were making cookies and what happened?”

“Uh,” Steve said, sighing, “well, I – I smelled like the cookies and I didn’t know what was
“You started heat,” Larah said for him.

Steve nodded, looking at the carpet. If he let his eyes unfocus a little more, he thought the carpet was more brown than anything else. He definitely liked it better gray.

“And you didn’t know?” Larah prompted. “Until it was already happening?”

Steve shrugged. “Bucky knew,” he said. “He – He was, uh, fifteen. Almost sixteen. I started getting dizzy and – and shook up and he figured out what was happening.”

“And…?” Larah prompted.

“Locked me in the bathroom,” Steve said softly. He looked over at Bucky. “Do you remember?”

Bucky glanced over at him, then shrugged. “Bits ‘n’ pieces,” he mumbled. “Not a lot.”

Steve nodded and looked back down at the green-red-gray-brown carpet. God, there were bits of blue in the fibers, too.

“My ma locked us in different rooms,” he said. “She put Bucky in my room, ‘cause he was rutting and mad an’ –”

He broke off, exhaling. Larah was looking at him with a soft expression, her eyes were kind behind her glasses. Steve clenched his jaw and reached up to scratch his nose, pushing a little more into Bucky’s side. Bucky reached across his lap to touch Steve’s knee, squeezing it.

“When I woke up from it,” Steve continued, “Bucky’s parents had moved the whole family to Queens. To keep us apart. I didn’t know that then, didn’t ‘til I met ‘im again in the war. I thought –”

Bucky leaned in and pressed his lips to Steve’s temple, hard and stubborn and sweet. Steve let out his breath and leaned into it; he reached up again, sticking his hand under his collar, and he gripped
the strand of pearls around his neck.

They were warm against his skin from how long he’d been wearing them. He’d only taken them off to sleep last night, left them on the nightstand, and put them back on after his shower this morning. Big fat pearls, better than anything any of the other girls at St. Maria’s could’ve hoped for during the Great Depression and he had them. He had them.

“Doesn’t matter what I thought,” Steve said quietly, "it wasn't the truth."

“No, it does,” Larah replied. She sat up, shuffling in her chair without unfolding her legs, and leaning forward. “What did you think?”

Steve clenched his jaw, looking down. He hesitated.

“Do you want me to go?” Bucky asked softly.

Steve let out his breath, holding onto his pearls.

“I think so,” he whispered. “If – Is that okay?”

“Sure, it's fine,” Larah said, but he wasn’t asking her.

Bucky nodded and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Steve leaned into him, breathing in a clarifying breath full of his Alpha’s scent, and Bucky stood up from the couch.

“I can just wait outside?” Bucky asked, looking towards Larah.

“Sure,” she said. “Do you want a chair?”

“Nah,” Bucky said, stepping back. “Floor’s good enough for me.”
Steve reached up at the last second to grab his hand and squeeze it. Bucky lifted it and pressed a kiss to his palm and Steve forced a smile. Bucky gave him a similar smile, then turned and opened the door.

“Gimme a kiss when I come out,” Steve called after him.

Bucky saluted. He pulled the door shut behind him and Steve dropped his gaze back onto the carpet, feeling cold and wishing the carpet would make up its mind about what color it wanted to be. He couldn't tell if the muddled anxiety in his chest was his or Bucky's, relayed through the bond. This was good for him, Steve reminded himself. It was just the anaesthetic before the bandage.

“So,” Larah began. “What did you think?”

Steve shrugged. “I thought I was unlucky,” he said quietly.

“Is that the nice way to put it?” Larah asked.

“No,” Steve said softly. “That’s – It’s the –” He stopped, then shook his head. “Yeah, it’s the nice way to put it.”

“You wanna know why I got into therapy?” Larah asked.

Steve just shrugged.

“My dad once told me that it was best to put things nicely,” Larah said, leaning onto one of the armrests. “To be polite before you were honest and if you couldn’t say what you needed to without being polite, then you could just infer to what you meant.”

Steve shrugged again.

“So,” Larah continued, “I told him that there was no way you could explain to a court of law the details of a rape while just inferring to the nice way of saying things.”
Steve leaned onto the armrest, too, rolling a pearl between his fingers. “Was it your rape you were talking about?”

“Yeah,” Larah said, nodding sadly. “Yeah, it was.”

Steve nodded to the ground, biting on the inside of his cheek. “I don’t know what counts as rape these days,” he admitted. “‘Cause when I was growin’ up, it didn’t exist.”

“Anybody mess with you when you were a kid?” Larah asked. “And I mean, at all, tell you you looked pretty while touching yourselves, ask you to keep a secret from grownups while they patted your ass, even just said somethin’ sexual to you? Anything?”

Steve shook his head. “Not when I was a kid,” he said.

“How old were you?” Larah asked.

It was sad, Steve thought. Horrible that people didn’t need to ask if an Omega had ever been touched in a way that hurt, that they didn't ask for and never wanted. Just how old they were the first time it happened. It was sad.

Steve leaned to the side, thinking back. “Guy groped me on the bus,” he said, then looked down at himself, rolling the pearls between his fingers. “I was fifteen, I think. Didn’t realize I was a boy, just saw my school uniform and smelled the gingerbread and –”

He stopped. He shrugged.

“Fifteen’s a child, honey,” Larah told him gently.

Steve looked down again. “Is that rape?” he asked. “Just – just touching?”

“Legally, it’s called molestation,” Larah said.

Steve cracked a humorless smile. “That the nice way’a puttin’ it?”
Larah shrugged. “What did it do to you?” she asked. “To your heart?”

Steve looked at the carpet. He shrugged. Hopeless.

“I didn’t feel like a kid,” he said. “Went out and got a new job the next week.”

“Did you tell your mother?”

Steve shook his head.

“What did you think when Bucky left?” Larah asked. “When he didn’t come back for you?”

Steve pulled the pearls out fully then, gripping them in his fist. He clenched his jaw and blinked, looking at the carpet.

“What did it do to you?” Larah asked.

“It hurt,” Steve said softly. “Hurt like shit. Hurt more than – than anything. I got Last Rites four times before I presented, didja know? Is that in the books?”

“It is,” Larah said.

“That hurt worse than dying,” Steve told her. “It felt like – Like everything people said was true.”

“What did people say?”

“To put it rudely,” Steve sighed. “Would’a been better for my ma if I’d died as a baby. Good thing nobody’d ever want me ‘cause I didn’t need to go cursin’ kids with my bad genes.”
He looked down, his empty hand moving to cover his stomach.

“Stuff like that,” he said quietly.

“How long did it take you to stop believing it?”

Steve laughed softly, shaking his head. “You’re that good, huh?” he asked dryly. “You don’t gotta ask if I believed it.”

Larah shrugged. “You tell a kid somethin’ like that all his life —…”

“Well,” Steve muttered. “Sometimes… I do still believe it.”

“Wouldn’t blame you,” Larah replied. “Not with the way you’ve been treated. I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to move back to Ireland and tell America to mind it’s own fucking business.”

“Might not be a bad idea,” Steve said quietly. “Plenty’a green grass, huh?”

Larah tipped her head to the side. “You’re touching your stomach,” she remarked.

Steve smiled, again, without mirth. “I am,” he said.

“Bun in the oven?”

Steve stared at the carpet for a moment, then he just nodded.

“When’d you find out?”

“Yesterday,” Steve murmured.

“You excited?”
He took in a deep breath. He shrugged.

“Scared?”

“Oh, yeah,” Steve said, laughing dryly. “Scared outta my fuckin’ mind.”

“What’s Hubby say?” Larah asked, tipping her head to the side.

“We haven’t really –” Steve started, his hand curling into a fist in front of him. He sighed. “We haven’t talked a whole lot about it.”

“Why not?”

Steve blinked slowly, looking at the carpet again. He shrugged. He lapsed into a silence, his hands both curled into fists.

“Are you happy about it?” Larah prompted gently.

“I don’t know,” Steve admitted. “I don’t – I don’t know.”

He just took a breath. Larah tipped her head to the side, looking at him like she was waiting for him to keep talking. Steve stared at the carpet.

“You don’t have to keep it if you don’t want to,” Larah said. “You could abort the pregnancy.”

“I know,” Steve answered. “Believe it or not, that was around in the 40s, too.”

“It’s an option,” Larah assured him.
Steve dropped his hand from the pearls around his neck, to splay it across his stomach. Eventually, he shook his head.

“I don’t know how I feel right now,” he said quietly. “But... I think that if I give it some time, I’ll be okay.”

“So let’s focus on right now,” Larah offered. “And maybe the past?”

“The past is…” Steve started. “Actually better than right now. Right now. It makes more sense.”

“Then make sense of things,” Larah said.

Steve just shrugged.

“What pushed you into sex work?” Larah asked softly.

Steve took a minute to gather his thoughts. He reached up and touched his pearls again, then tucked them back under his collar, hiding them. Men didn’t really wear jewelry these days.

“It was mostly an accident,” he said.

Larah leaned into her armrest, waiting.

“I was walking home late one night,” Steve started. “Lost another job, my ma was dead, I’d had to move across town to a cheaper neighborhood ‘cause I couldn’t afford our house. I – There was this guy, he was drunk. He thought I was –…”

He broke off, taking a breath.

“What?” Larah prompted gently.

“He thought I was a prostitute,” Steve said to the floor. “Shoved me into an alley, pushed five bucks at me and took his dick out.”
He stopped again, feeling sorry for himself. He didn’t like thinking about these things.

“He pinned me against the wall, but I could’a gotten out,” he said. “I didn’t. I just – I acted without thinking. Five bucks was a lotta money back then, five bucks meant I could eat the next few days.”

He put his hands in his lap and shrugged, clasping them and wringing them. Larah said nothing.

“When that guy left, somebody’d noticed,” Steve continued. “Wanted their own turn. I got home a coupl’a hours later with twenty bucks or so and the worst feeling of guilt. But then I went back and did it the next day. And the next. And after a while, that was just how I paid my bills. Fishing for drunk guys behind bars.”

He stopped, this time finished. Larah didn’t say anything, so Steve just stared at the dozen-color carpet.

“What happened when you told Hubby?” Larah asked.

Steve smiled, and it finally had something sweet in it. “He apologized,” he said quietly. “Back when his parents moved him out, his ma told ‘im that it’d been too late to lock us in different rooms and he got at me. So he figured I wouldn’t wanna see him again and stayed away.”

“What else?” Larah prompted.

“He doesn’t hold it against me,” Steve said, but left it there.

“Why do you hold it against yourself still?” Larah asked then.

Steve thought about it. She was right to ask. He did hold it against himself. Eventually, he shrugged.

“It was really hard,” he said. “I – I hated every minute of it. I remember thinking that one night… One night I’d stop. And I’d just let myself go. But I never did.”
He wrung his hands together, feeling his skin beginning to crawl. Larah just waited.

“There’s a priest in Brooklyn,” Steve said quietly. “He’s a hundred and fifteen years old this year. His church was a Negro church – black, I mean,” he corrected, wincing at his insensitivity. "It was a black church when I was a kid. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Larah told him gently. "Go on."

Steve pressed his lips into a firm line again, then exhaled and continued. "After I started turning tricks, I went to confession there. No one would know me and I was afraid – I was afraid to tell the priest I grew up with."

And he stopped again, his mouth dry and aching. He didn’t have the words.

“I’ve read about that guy,” Larah said softly when Steve didn’t continue. “He’s said he’s waiting for someone to come receive absolution.”

Steve glanced up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Larah answered. “What did he say when you confessed?”

“He told me that my time to get absolution would come,” Steve said. “But it wasn’t then.”

Larah tipped her head to the side, her glasses flashing a reflection of light briefly. “Have you gone back to get it?”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t... I don’t know if I believe in God anymore.”

“That’s okay,” Larah said. “But maybe it isn’t God’s forgiveness you need right now.”

Steve looked up, frowning. “What do you mean?”
Larah gave a shrug. “My parents didn’t raise me very religious,” she said, “but my gran was and she used to take me and my little brother to Sunday school in the summer. I never liked it much and I’m still not very religious, but there was one thing that stuck out to me in the whole of going to church ever.”

She sat up, pressing her hands together. “There was a story about Jesus,” she told him, “and a woman who’d been found sinning; something like sex work. The big shots brought her to Jesus and told him that the law said she ought to be stoned to death. But Jesus told them that the guy who had no sin could throw the first rock.”

“I remember that story,” Steve said softly.

“So they let her go,” Larah continued. “And she asked Jesus what to do and he told her to go on with her life and don’t do it again and she was forgiven —” She snapped her fingers. “Easy as that.”

“Sure,” Steve replied, a little confused. “But… nobody’s throwing stones at me?”

Larah pointed at him. “Are you?” she asked.

Steve’s lips slipped apart. He blinked, frowned, and sat up.

“Guilt like you got, buddy,” Larah told him, “that doesn’t go away overnight. It doesn’t go away because you get one person’s forgiveness. Like, whatever the reason that it is that you feel guilty, you feel guilty, that’s valid. But your husband isn’t mad, he forgave you. Do your friends judge you?”

Steve shook his head.

“Does it feel like God’s judging you?” Larah prompted.

Steve shrugged. ”Not really,” he mumbled.

“Who’s the only person judging you?” Larah asked.
Slowly, Steve slumped in his seat.

“Me,” he realized.

Larah lifted a shoulder. “So, quit throwin’ stones at yourself,” she said simply. “Go see that priest and get your absolution. You can close that chapter of your life and move on. Hell,” she added, smiling, “you can start a whole new book.”

“Is it that easy?” Steve said hesitantly.

“Yes and no,” Larah answered. “Doing it is tough, but once you’ve done it, it’s done. It’s like taking off the training wheels on a bike.”

Steve dropped his gaze, then sat up some. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I – I can do that.”

“And you’re already doing it!” Larah said excitedly.

Steve broke into a nervous smile, shaking his head at himself. Forgive himself. He could do that.

“I kept thinking that – that this whole mental health thing,” he said, shrugging as he swept a hand through his hair, “it was supposed to be hard? It had to be a struggle? Yannow?”

“A lotta people think that,” Larah answered.

“But it’s – it’s not,” Steve said, his voice dropping into a softer octave. “It’s not.”

“On that victorious note,” Larah said, “we’re about outta time. So, I’m gonna give you homework.”

Steve sat up, nodding. “I can do that,” he replied.
“Go get your absolution,” Larah told him. “You’ve done, what, penance? Is that what it’s called?”

“Yeah, penance.”

“You’ve done plenty of penance,” Larah assured him. “More than plenty, with everything you’ve done to serve the Army and fighting HYDRA, all that. Get your absolution, you deserve it.”

Steve nodded, looking down. He hadn’t thought of his service as penance. But it made sense.

“Any other can of worms you’d like to open before I let you go?” Larah asked. “We got, maybe five or ten more minutes?”

Steve bit down on the inside of his lip. “Actually,” he mumbled, his ears going warm, “yeah. Um. There’s this thing.”

“Things are good,” Larah encouraged. “What sorta thing?”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck, nervous. “It’s, uh, something me and Bucky… We do… Sometimes.”

“Is it a sexy thing?” Larah asked.

Steve flushed. “Not – not all the time?” he mumbled. “Um. He’ll, uh, he’ll… take care of – of me.”

“Okay,” Larah answered.

Steve shrugged, embarrassed.

“What kind of care?” Larah prompted.

“He says it’s a submission thing,” Steve said, his gaze on the carpet. “He looked it up, I – I steer clear of Internet… sex… things.”
“So, like, dom/sub?” Larah said.

Steve nodded.

“Okay,” Larah continued. “Sounds simple. Why are you uncomfortable talking about it?”

“I don’ know,” Steve muttered. “I guess – I mean, when we do this, I get – I let him do everything for me, he’ll – he’ll feed me an’ bathe me an’ I – I let him.”

“So Hubby is a gentle dom,” Larah said. “That’s really sweet, Steve.”

Steve frowned.

“Is it not sweet?” Larah prompted again.

“No, it – it is,” Steve said. “I just – It’s stupid, I ain’t helpless, I ain’t a baby, but… But I let ‘im treat me like one.”

“Do you not like it?”

“I love it,” he said quickly. He ducked his head, even more embarrassed. “It’s stupid how much I love it.”

“Why is it stupid?”

Steve just shrugged.

“Is it hurting anyone?” Larah asked.
Steve frowned. “No?”

“Does it help you?”

Steve nodded, frowning still.

“Does Hubby like to do it?”

“Yeah,” Steve said.

“So what’s the big deal?” Larah asked with a shrug. “You have a loving, trusting relationship with your Alpha. Whatever you two do to chillax is your business, enjoy it.”

Steve blinked, hesitant again.

“Don’t kinkshame yourself,” Larah told him. “As long as you and your man are happy and nobody’s getting hurt, you do you.”

“Okay,” Steve said.

“Okay,” Larah answered. “Second piece of homework,” she added, “you up for it?”

“Sure,” Steve replied. “Hit me.”

“Check out dom/sub stuff on the Internet yourself.”

Steve blinked again. Oh.

“Only if you’re up for it,” Larah added.

“I can do it,” Steve muttered.
“Alright,” Larah replied. She pushed up out of her chair. “I guess we’re good then.”

Steve stood up and offered his hand. Larah shook it, patting the back of his hand briefly, then gestured to the door.

“I’ll set up another appointment for you,” she offered. “How’s about one week from now?”

“Same time?” Steve asked.

“Sure,” Larah said, then pulled a card from her pocket and handed it over. “I’ll give you a call to confirm, this is my work cell.”

“Great,” Steve said as he took it, nodding his head before tucking it into his pocket. “Thank you.”

Larah opened the door. Bucky stood just outside, hands rigid at his sides and his gaze on the ground. Steve stepped out of the office, pushing his hands into his pockets as he walked up to Bucky.

“Hey,” Steve mumbled.

Bucky didn’t move.

“Y’all good?” Larah asked.

“Bucky?” Steve said.

Bucky moved abruptly, jerkily. He grabbed Steve’s upper arm, gripping almost too tightly, and stepped in to press his lips against Steve’s cheek. Clumsily. Unsure, confused. Immediately after, Bucky released him and stepped back, his gaze straight ahead and glazed.

Steve swallowed a lump in his throat and tried to tamp down the sudden thundering of his heart.
“What’s your status, soldier?” Steve asked in almost a whisper.

“Funktsional’ney,” Bucky said in a rough, low voice. “Gotovy soblyudat.”

Steve let out a long breath and did his best to school his emotions. He reached up and rubbed at his eyes, thinking out what the hell he was going to do now.

“Everything okay?” Larah asked again.

Steve cast a glance over his shoulder and smiled tightly at her. “Yeah,” he said. “He’s fine. He’s just…”

Bucky didn’t react at all. He stared straight ahead, his arms held at attention at his sides.

“He’s fine,” Steve repeated.

Larah raised her eyebrows.

“I swear,” Steve added quickly. “We’re just gonna go home. I’ll see you in a week.”

“Alright,” Larah said carefully. “Gimme a call if you need to talk sooner.”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, nodding. “Sure.”

He glanced back at Bucky, then touched his shoulder.

“Follow me,” he said quietly.

Bucky went from stiff to prowling in a flash. He fell into step beside Steve, hands twitching as though itching for a gun to grip, eyes darting around. Steve shoved his hands into his pockets and walked with his gaze on the ground. He followed the hallway back to the employee exit, then
opened the door and waved Bucky through. Bucky waited for Steve to exit before falling into step again.

“Passenger seat,” Steve told Bucky, unlocking the truck with his key fob. “We’re going home.”

Chapter End Notes

plot! plot! plot everywhere! okay real talk guys stuff is going to happen fast from now on and i'm pretty sure we're close to the end of edges blurred. for real. so i'm gonna go ahead and tell you that there's another sequel that's going to move on from the dark vibes of this part of the fic to more happy family stuff. i'm excited, partly bc part three has our favorite friendly neighborhood underoos. okay i can't say anymore bc spoilers. merry christmas and happy christmas eve eve, i'll see you next week!

Funktsional’ney/Функционал’ней = Functional
Gotovy soblyudat/Готовы соблюдать = Ready to comply
There is less than 36 hours left in 2018 and how are we going to spend it? Immersed in fanfiction. Happy new year, everyone!
Bucky got into the truck and sat, his spine ramrod straight. Steve got into the driver’s seat and put on his seat belt, inserted the key into the ignition, then glanced at Bucky.
“Seat belt,” he said.

Bucky didn’t move.

“Put on your seat belt,” Steve tried again.

Bucky looked around, then grabbed the seat belt and put it on, hesitantly as though he was, again, unsure of why he was doing it. Steve turned the ignition and put the truck in gear.

“At ease,” Steve added when, after leaving the parking lot, Bucky still hadn’t leaned back into the seat.

Bucky put his hands in his lap and dropped his shoulders back, but didn’t relax at all. Steve let it go.

“We live in Manhattan,” Steve said. “At Stark Tower. We have a floor to ourselves.”

“Domoy?” Bucky said suddenly.

Steve shot him a glance, though he had to look back at the road right away. “I don’t speak Russian,” he said uselessly.

“Soldatu ne razreshayut govorit po-angliyski,” Bucky replied. Then, softer, “Prosti.”

Steve glanced at him again. He exhaled heavily and gripped the steering wheel harder, his jaw tensing.

He was trying not to feel like an asshole about this. This wasn’t Bucky’s fault. But this really wasn’t what Steve needed right after his first therapy session. He really fucking hated HYDRA.

A cold metal hand touched his shoulder and Steve jolted, not expecting Bucky to touch him of his own volition like this. Bucky gripped his shoulder and gave it a light shake and when Steve glanced at him, he was frowning.
“Vy v poryadke?”

Steve floundered for a second, glancing between Bucky and the road. “I don’t –” he stammered, “I don’t know what you mean. I can’t understand you.”

“Vy ne,” Bucky said, almost a murmur. “Eto ya?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said, looking between Bucky and the road still. “I don’t understand you.”

Bucky pushed his hand behind Steve’s neck, gripping the tense columns of muscle. Steve grimaced a little as he held back an emotional whimper, but he leaned his head back into Bucky’s touch.

“Vy v poryadke,” Bucky repeated, but without the questioning inflection; more of a reassurance. “Ya budu zashchishchit toboy.”

Steve put the brakes on for a red light, and once they were stopped, he reached up and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. The therapy session alone had been stressful. Hell, when he’d gotten up to leave, he’d been thinking that he was probably going to ask Bucky to take over for him in whatever their dom/sub thing was. This was a lot. This was getting to be too much.

But then Bucky squeezed the back of his neck, making him break and suck in a deep breath that he didn’t have to think about. Steve swallowed the lump in his throat and took his foot off the brake as the light ahead of them turned green.

“Chto u toboy bolit?” Bucky asked, and his voice, though it was unfamiliarly void of accent, was gentle. “Mogu li ya pomoch?”

Steve shrugged. “I can’t answer you,” he said, glancing Bucky’s way. “I really – I can’t understand what you’re saying, I can’t answer you.”

Bucky looked apologetic. Steve reached over and put a hand on his knee, squeezed it, and went to pull away. Bucky caught it before he could, though, holding onto it.
“Vy moy,” Bucky said.

That felt like a little weight off Steve’s shoulders. He broke into a tired smile and he nodded.

“I know that one,” he replied softly. “I’m yours.”

Bucky squeezed his hand. “Ya zashchishchayu toboy,” he said. “Vy moya chtoby zashchishchat.”


They drove the rest of the way in silence. Steve had to slip his hand away to take the steering wheel here and there, but Bucky left his metal hand on the back of Steve’s neck and it was a grounding weight. Steve parked the truck in the private garage, cut the engine and released his seat belt, then just looked at Bucky.

“You wanna get out first and look around?” he offered.

Bucky nodded, his jaw tight. Steve unlocked the doors.

“Go ahead,” he said. “I’ll wait here.”

Bucky got out of the truck, shutting the door quietly. Steve watched him patrol up and down the rows of Tony’s cars, examine Natasha’s SUV, pause at Steve’s bike parked next to the truck. After a minute or two, Bucky returned to the driver’s side of the truck. Steve opened his door and slipped out, shutting it again a little louder than Bucky had.

“Elevator,” Steve said, pointing towards it. “We’re on the top floor.”

Bucky nodded stiffly. Steve walked past him, his hands going into his pockets, and headed for the elevator. He pressed the button to call it, then let Bucky go in first. When Bucky turned back around and stood at attention, Steve entered.

“The tower is controlled by AI,” Steve told Bucky quickly. “JARVIS, could you take us to our
“Certainly,” JARVIS answered. “Is Mr. Barnes alright, Captain?”

Steve cast him a glance. Bucky looked at him, stiff as before, then shuffled closer, frowning, and bumped their shoulders together.

“Yeah,” Steve said, picking up Bucky’s hand and lacing their fingers together. “He’ll be alright.”

Bucky squeezed his hand. Steve gave in and turned, pushed his arms around Bucky’s waist and leaned on him. Bucky lifted his arms to wrap them clumsily around Steve’s back, his cheek pressing against Steve’s hair.

“Vy moy,” Bucky murmured, like a reassurance.

Bucky wasn’t the Asset. Not an attack dog that was aggressive and hostile towards anyone and everyone. He was, as the Russians made him, an Alpha stripped of his thoughts and left with only his instincts.

“Yours,” Steve mumbled.

The elevator rose smoothly and opened onto their floor. Steve disentangled himself from Bucky’s arms and stepped off the elevator, then just stopped. Bucky looked around anxiously, his jaw tense.

“Go ahead and check it out,” Steve told him. “I’ll wait here.”

Bucky touched Steve’s shoulder briefly and then prowled forward, starting with the laundry room and going from there. Steve waited by the elevator, looking at the floor.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he had a sudden idea. He remembered yesterday and Bucky’s fears for the baby and Steve lifted his hands to cover his stomach while he thought. Then he took out his phone and texted JARVIS, telling the AI to enable itself in his and Bucky’s quarters. After that, he sent a text to Natasha and Sam each, asking them to come see them. He gave them the world’s briefest explanation of what the hell happened; namely, just that Bucky had turned into the Soldier.
They needed to know how the Soldier dealt with others and they needed to start finding a way to help Bucky keep the Soldier out of his head. They needed surveillance.

Bucky returned just as Steve was putting his phone back in his pocket. He said something in Russian, probably assuring Steve that the area was clear. Steve stepped forward and took Bucky’s hands, holding them.

“I asked Sam and Natasha to come up here,” he said gently. “Do you know that you’re not… normal right now?”

Bucky stared blankly at Steve. Steve sighed.

“Your name is James Buchanan Barnes,” Steve told him. “Do you remember that?”

Bucky shook his head. Steve gave a nod.

“Sam is a counselor,” he said. “And Natasha is a defected agent of the Red Room.”

Bucky stiffened at the name; Steve squeezed his hands.

“The Red Room is no longer active,” he said firmly. “You are free of HYDRA. You owe allegiance to no one.”


Steve hesitated, then nodded; he could guess the meaning of that sentence. “Sure,” he said. “But I’m not your – your handler or anything. You have free will.”

Bucky blinked. Steve exhaled.

“You aren’t normally like this,” he murmured. “It’s been a couple of weeks since you slipped back
into the Soldier. Does that make sense?"

Bucky blinked again, but then he nodded. Steve let go of Bucky’s left hand and instead touched his face.

“Do you remember yesterday?” Steve asked quietly.

Bucky seemed to think, then he shook his head. Steve lowered his hand and took Bucky’s metal one, then pressed it against his stomach.

“I’m pregnant, Buck,” Steve whispered.

Bucky’s face showed no emotion, but his right hand grabbed Steve’s waist, pulling him closer. Steve let out a sharp breath, almost relieved to be grabbed. He dropped his forehead onto Bucky’s shoulder and squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

“We have to know you’re not a danger,” Steve whispered again. “Okay?”

“Ya zashchishchayu to chto moye,” Bucky answered. “Tekushchaya missiya, zashchitit pryanik.”

“Natasha speaks Russian,” Steve said quietly. “She and Sam are going to help us.”

The elevator behind them dinged. Steve turned and pressed the button to accept it, Bucky staying where he was in the hallway. The doors slid open, revealing Natasha and Sam’s grim faces, but also, surprisingly, Wanda’s.

“Guess who’s also a telepath?” Natasha announced simply.

“What?” Steve said, startled and still definitely shaken up from the combination of therapy and this.

Natasha jerked her thumb at Wanda. “She’s offered to go spelunking in Barnes’s mind to figure out what HYDRA did to it,” she said, quite calmly. “We did a trial run on me earlier. She can do all the deprogramming SHIELD spent three years doing for me in the space of a few weeks, couple of
months, tops.”

Steve looked at Wanda, who smiled nervously, and very suddenly, he didn’t doubt that there was a God anymore.

“Really?” he exhaled.

“Hopefully,” Wanda said.

Steve turned to face Bucky, then he let out an almost hysterical laugh of relief and threw his arms around Bucky’s neck. Bucky patted his shoulder in a clumsy consoling gesture. Steve released him, then turned back and grabbed Wanda in a hug, too. Wanda let out a tiny squeak, clearly startled, and she patted Steve’s shoulder much like Bucky had done. Steve pulled back from her and, for good measure, hugged Natasha, too.

“You alright, Rogers?” Natasha asked.

“Way better than I was two seconds ago,” Steve replied, letting her go.

Sam held up his arms, giving Steve a hopeful look. Steve laughed again and hugged, him, too.

“Here, come in,” Steve told them. “I’m making something to eat, I’m starving.”

“We was thinkin’ of doin’ another Avengers movie night,” Sam spoke up. “If you guys would feel up to it?”

“We should stay up here,” Steve admitted. “But –”

He glanced at Bucky. “They could come up here?” he said questioningly.

Bucky’s face was still blank. Steve touched his arm.
“Would it be okay if our friends joined us?” he asked.

“Da,” Bucky replied.

“You sure?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Steve said; his back was to them, and maybe that was good, as his hand dropped to his stomach. “Isolation doesn’t help.”

He put the kettle on, taking a teapot down from the cabinets and a box of tea bags. “Sit down, guys,” he said over his shoulder, moving to the fridge; he was actually really hungry. He could probably blame the baby, though he still didn’t know how far along he was.

Even Bucky sat down, taking the stools at the breakfast bar. Steve got out a yogurt cup, grabbed a spoon and joined them.

“So, how do you do this?” he asked Wanda.

Wanda gave a shrug. “Eye contact, mostly,” she said. “Or touch, or both.”

Steve cast a glance at Bucky, who just sat there.

“You good?” Sam asked Bucky.

“Funktsional’ney,” Bucky answered.

“Okay,” Sam said, shifting in his chair. “So, this is our teammate, Wanda, she’s gonna look around in your mind.”

Bucky blinked, then frowned.
“Tsel?” he said.

Steve and Sam both looked at Natasha.

“Purpose,” Natasha translated. “He wants to know why.”

“She’s gonna help you remember,” Steve said, reaching out and touching Bucky’s arm. “Who you are, who we are.”

“Vy moy,” Bucky said immediately, looking at Steve. “Vy oba.”

“You’re mine,” Natasha translated, “you both.”

Steve flushed. Sam, Natasha, and Wanda all looked at him. Bucky simply stared at Steve blankly.

“Both?” Sam questioned.

Steve glanced down, flustered, but he steeled himself. He nodded. Sam gasped.

“Both who?” Wanda asked.

“Y’all did it!” Sam cried out. “Goddamn, Rogers!”

“I have something for you later,” Natasha said immediately. “Congratulations.”

“What?” Wanda said, frowning around. “I don’t understand?”

Steve pressed a hand to his stomach yet again. “I’m expecting,” he said quietly.
“Oh!” Wanda said sharply. “Oh, that makes sense.”

Steve shrugged, but he smiled. The shock had faded. He didn’t really want to share his insecurities with his team, but he could see himself being excited soon. Especially after talking with Dr. Madini. It wasn’t so scary anymore.

It would help if Bucky remembered his name, however.

“Let’s focus on right now,” he said. “Wanda?”

“Oh, right,” she answered. “Erm, Mr. Barnes?”

Bucky didn’t move, continued staring blankly at Steve, like he was waiting for orders.

“Soldier,” Steve announced.

“Gotovy soblyudat,” Bucky answered.

“Ready to comply,” Natasha translated, her voice soft.

“Does he only answer to Soldier?” Wanda asked.

Steve flicked his eyebrows up, trying for a smile and only managing a very weak one. “Well, he’ll answer to Alpha,” he admitted, “but I think that’s just from me.”

Wanda broke into a little smile and nodded, looking back at Bucky. “Soldier?” she questioned. “May I access your thoughts?”

Bucky looked at Steve, his face still blank. Steve gave him a nod. Bucky seemed to take that as permission or encouragement, either way, he faced Wanda again and said: “Da.”
“Keep eye contact,” Wanda said, reaching her hand forward. “And if you could touch my hand?”

Bucky lifted his left hand.

“With the other one,” Wanda corrected.

Bucky put his metal hand on the counter and instead pushed his right hand towards Wanda’s. Their fingertips touched. Wanda pressed her lips into a thin line, her brow tightening.

Natasha put a hand on Wanda’s shoulder, though she was watching Bucky. Steve put his hand on Bucky’s arm, touching over his sleeve. The kettle bubbled gently behind them, the water slowly coming to a boil. Wanda narrowed her eyes softly.

“Oof,” Bucky said abruptly, voice full of Brooklyn and scratchy and low.

Steve sat upright, watching him, but Bucky’s expression didn’t change and he didn’t say anything else. He glanced at Wanda and she smiled briefly.

“He’s resurfacing,” she said. “Hold on.”

Steve looked back at Bucky, biting on the inside of his cheek. He couldn’t feel anything through the bond, only a muted sense of unsettled displacement. It was all he’d felt since leaving Larah’s office.

“Touch his hand,” Wanda said then.

Steve shifted his hand down to touch Bucky’s skin.

“Fuck,” Bucky announced, then he blinked abruptly, squeezing his eyes shut. “Oh, fuck, fuck, shit.”

“Bucky?” Steve questioned.
“Gotovy soblyudat,” Bucky said, but his voice was still full of Brooklyn and the Russian sounded garbled. “Huh?” he continued, blinking his eyes open.

“Don’t look away from me,” Wanda said quickly.

“What?” Bucky said, but didn’t move his gaze. “What’re you doin’?”

“I’m in your mind,” Wanda told him. “I’m helping you put the Soldier’s mindset away. You don’t need it anymore.”

“What?” Bucky repeated, voice rising in pitch.

“You dissociate,” Wanda answered. “They taught you how. The Baba Yagas, they taught you to do it and then they trained you to be a perfect soldier. But you don’t need to be the Soldier anymore. You’re safe here.”

“Baba Yagas,” Bucky mumbled.

“Can you get rid of the Soldier?” Steve asked.

“No,” Wanda answered. “No, it’s part of him. But I can help him overcome it.”


“I’m right here,” Steve cut him off, grabbing Bucky’s hand with both of his now. “I’m right here, it’s alright. You’re home, Buck.”

“I see something else,” Wanda said softly.

Steve glanced at her. “What?”
“There’s the Soldier,” Wanda said. “That’s plain. The Baba Yagas created him. But there’s something else, it’s not a cover the way the Soldier is. It’s deeper, more… I don’t know? I see words?”

“Don’t speak them,” Natasha said abruptly.

“Okay,” Wanda replied. “Okay. Bucky, you need to remember where you are, alright? I can’t break the connection until you’re calmer.”

“What did you eat for breakfast this morning?” Sam asked.

Bucky was breathing heavily. He shook his head.

“We had eggs and toast,” Steve spoke up. “Plain fried eggs and dry toast, ‘cause I threw up this morning, remember?”

“Toast,” Bucky mumbled.

“Steve’s getting morning sickness, remember?” Sam said. “Two’a you are havin’ a baby?”

Steve squeezed Bucky’s hand. “A little James or Jane?”

“Fuck, you ain’t callin’ our kid James!” Bucky burst out, breaking eye contact with Wanda. “Hell with Jane, too, we’re gonna call it somethin’ sensible and smart so they don’t get bullied all through school for havin’ a dumb name!”

Wanda pulled her hand back and Steve snatched Bucky’s up, gripping it between both of his. Bucky was pale, still panting, but his eyes had lost their glazed quality. Now they searched Steve’s, full of concern and confusion and relief.

Bucky lifted his metal hand and pressed it against Steve’s cheek. Steve leaned into it, turning his head and kissing the heel of his metal palm. The kettle began to hiss behind them, but neither of them moved. It whistled and Natasha pushed her stool back, moving around the counter to turn off the fire. Steve nuzzled his cheek into Bucky’s metal hand. Bucky let out his breath.
“You told these guys ‘bout the baby?” Bucky murmured.

“Well, you gave it away,” Steve said, giving him a smile.

“Oh,” Bucky said, frowning. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Steve said. He squeezed Bucky’s hand, smiling more. “It’s okay.”

Bucky swallowed. He slipped off his stool and stepped up to Steve’s and Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky’s thick waist to hug him as Bucky’s arms went around his shoulders. Steve buried his face in Bucky’s chest, breathing in his Alpha’s scent.

“I’d like it noted that we did send you on your honeymoon with condoms,” Sam announced.

“It was his heat,” Natasha spoke up.

Steve lifted his face to gawk at her. Natasha was calmly putting tea bags in the pot.

“How did you know?” Steve demanded.

Natasha shrugged. “I knitted you a baby blanket,” she said instead of answering. “That’s what I’ve been working on the past few weeks.”

Steve spluttered for a second. Bucky laughed and pressed his face into Steve’s hair. Natasha smiled at them.

“You’re scary, Russian Lady,” Sam announced, taking out his phone. “I’mma assemble the rest’a the Avengers and we’re ordering a smorgasbord of takeout food.”

“Whoa, the Avengers are assembling in here?” Bucky questioned. “Since when?”
“Since just now,” Steve said, pressing his face into Bucky’s chest again. “It’s family movie night.”

“Exactly!” Sam said happily. “Besides, you gotta tell the rest’a your kids that you’re having a baby.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky grumbled.

Steve swatted Bucky on the arm. “Hail Mary,” he said stubbornly.

Bucky rolled his eyes; Steve could tell even though he wasn’t looking. But he hugged him a little tighter and rubbed his cheek into Steve’s hair.

“Hey, you got weird pregnancy cravings yet?” Sam asked.

Steve shrugged. “I mean, we only just found out yesterday,” he said. “And if Natasha’s right and it happened during my heat, then I’m only a month along.”

“My sister got cravings at seven weeks,” Sam remarked, then grinned. “It was funny as hell, ’cause she craved nothing but mac ‘n’ cheese the whole time and she hated it.”

“Who hates mac ‘n’ cheese?” Steve questioned.

“My sister,” Sam laughed. “President of the hate club. She ain’t a fan’a cheese.”

Steve shook his head, chuckling. Natasha set the teapot on the breakfast bar, light steam rising from the spout. Steve told her where the mugs were, then watched as she poured cups and passed them out. Wanda took the first, lifting it into her hands and cupping it in them. Bucky released Steve to sit down again, taking a mug and holding it with his metal hand. Steve didn’t pick his up, just held it in front of him and inhaled the steam.

“Everybody’s on their way,” Sam said. “Tony’s said he got in contact with Thor yesterday and he should be coming to visit Earth again soon.”
“Good,” Steve answered, “that’s good.”

“Elephant in the room?” Sam then suggested.

Steve gave a nod, looking at Bucky. Bucky gripped his tea with both hands, then, his jaw tensing. He nodded.

“What did you see, Wanda?” Sam asked.

“Quite a lot,” Wanda said, exhaling. “You have a lot of repressed memories, Bucky.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Bucky said softly.

“Repressed memories?” Sam questioned and Bucky nodded. “They’re pretty much exactly what it sounds like; when something traumatic happens, the mind will repress the memory of it to limit the long-term effects of the trauma. So you just don’t remember the bad stuff, so it can’t come back and bite you.”

“Doesn’t always happen,” Steve added, as he could remember many things that he would have preferred to forget.

“And it’s not always bad things,” Sam added, looking at Bucky seriously. “At least, not in your case, I bet.”

“What kinda things did I repress?” Bucky asked.

Wanda grimaced. “I think things you would want to keep repressing, most of it,” she answered. “The biggest things are your memories of being with HYDRA in the early days, while they were still training you.”

“Oh,” Bucky said.

“What about the rest of his life?” Steve questioned. “His childhood and stuff?”
“That’s there,” Wanda said, “but it’s buried a lot deeper. From what I saw, your mind locked itself away to protect itself from what the Baba Yagas were doing to you, which was exactly what they wanted.”

“To make your mind a blank slate,” Natasha added. “You weren’t the only agent they programmed like that.”

“Can I get it back?” Bucky asked.

“With a shit load of therapy, you could get it all back yourself,” Natasha answered him. “But you’d have to remember all the things HYDRA did to you in the process.”

“But I can help you access those memories without touching the bad ones,” Wanda said.

“Will doing that –” Bucky started, looking uncomfortable and concerned. “Will you be okay? Going through my memories?”

“No, I don’t experience them the same way you do,” Wanda replied. “At least, that’s what I’ve found.”

“Good,” Bucky muttered, nodding. “I don’t want you – I don’t want you to go through all that.”

Steve picked up Bucky’s hand and squeezed.

“But there’s something else that worries me,” Wanda continued.

“What?” Bucky said.

“There’s the Soldier,” Wanda said, a deep frown lining her young face, “and that’s – it’s part of you, it’s the front the Baba Yagas made you build to protect yourself from everything that was happening, and then there’s something deeper, something colder.”
Steve looked at Bucky, who looked back with a hint of terror deep in his eyes. They looked back at Wanda and Steve grabbed Bucky’s hand a little tighter.

“Colder?” Bucky repeated.

“Yeah,” Wanda said, confused and worried. “It’s – It didn’t feel like you.”

“Great,” Bucky said, slumping on his stool, “I’m fucked and insane.”

“I don’t think it’s a whole other person,” Wanda said quickly.

“You mentioned words?” Natasha said.

“Yeah,” Wanda started, “um, I caught a few of them –”

“Don’t say them aloud,” Natasha cut her off.

Steve shifted his gaze to Natasha, nervous. “Do you know what those might be?”

“Trigger words,” Natasha said, looking out of the corner of her eye towards Bucky. “The Red Room’s third stage of psychological conditioning. Torture the agent until they lose their mind, encourage an emotional bond to a handler, and then train them to respond to codes.”

“What would it trigger?” Bucky asked, sounding more concerned than anything else. “She said it’s not the Soldier, what else is there?”

“Rumlow called you the Asset,” Steve remembered.

“I think it wouldn’t be a good idea to find out what those trigger words might do tonight,” Sam said, his tone one of calm and clarity. “We should take this slow. One thing at a time, let the both of you –” he gestured to Bucky and Wanda “– take it easy.”
“Right,” Bucky said, ducking his head. “Take it slow.”

“Not too slow,” Wanda added, “not if there’s a deadline.”

She smiled at Steve and Steve, instinctively, pressed a hand to his stomach again. He smiled a little, too.

The elevator dinged just then. Bucky moved to get up to answer it, but Steve grabbed his wrist.

“JARVIS?” he called. “Will you let them in?”

“Certainly,” JARVIS answered.

They heard the elevator opening and Bucky turned to Steve with a frown.

“When did we turn JARVIS on in here?”

“Just today,” Steve said. “I thought – Might be useful, if we could keep a track of the times you become the Soldier.”

“Oh,” Bucky said, blinking. “Yeah, yeah, makes sense, I guess.”

“Hello, hello!” Tony called as he entered, Bruce, Pepper, Clint, and Pietro following along behind him. “Why is movie night being relocated to Mom and Dad’s place?”

Steve let out a groan, slumping over the counter in front of him. Bucky let out a sudden laugh.

“Why does that feel like a premonition?” he asked.

“No, no, not you, too!” Steve answered, sitting up. “I ain’t a woman and you ain’t makin’ me one!”
“Aw, no, that ain’t it, doll!” Bucky returned, slinging his arm over Steve’s shoulders and tugging him in. “You’ll be a great ma, woman or not!”

“Oh, sure,” Steve answered sarcastically, “this ain’t nothin’ to do with your shit, huh, Daddy?”

“Aw, c’mon, Ma,” Bucky chuckled, “live a little.”

“Hold on!” Tony interrupted. “Hold on, hold on, hold on!”

“Don’t kinkshame us,” Bucky called and Steve managed to smile.

“No, not that!” Tony insisted. “You will be a great mom? Will?”

“Oh,” Steve said, glancing at Bucky. “Yeah.”

Bucky broke into a grin and smacked a kiss onto Steve’s cheek. Steve smiled as well, ducking his head shyly.

“You wanna say so or should I, Ma?” Bucky asked him softly.

Sam and Wanda had knowing grins on their faces, as they’d already been told, and Natasha was smirking. Bruce was smiling, too, and he looked pleased and just a little bit proud. Tony drew in a sharp, slow breath, his hands flying to cover his mouth, while Pepper grinned and grabbed Tony’s shoulder.

“What?” Pietro asked loudly, looking between Steve, Bucky, and Tony with a frown. “I don’t get it?”

“I said the first time,” Steve murmured to Bucky.

“Aw, you’re sweet, Ma,” Bucky said, chuckling again. He pressed another kiss to Steve’s cheek,
nuzzling him after. “Sweetest fuckin’ Omega ‘round, huh?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve grumbled, his ears and cheeks flushing. “Don’t start with your sugar now, Buck.”

Bucky just chuckled again. “Nah,” he murmured, “but I will later, Ma.”

Steve looked at Bucky out of the corner of his eye. Bucky only smirked. Steve raised an eyebrow. He thought they might have just discovered something.

“Don’t leave us in suspense!” Tony called.

“Keep your panties on,” Bucky retorted. “We’re expecting, alright?”

Tony let out a whoop and grabbed Pepper’s arms to give her a shake. Pepper cried out: “That’s wonderful!” and clapped her hands together. Clint dropped his jaw and, strangely, pointed at Natasha.

“You’re a psychic!” he shouted. “I knew it!”

“What!” Tony gasped.

“Is this about the blanket?” Steve asked, glancing between Natasha and Clint.

“Psychic knitter!” Clint insisted.

“I simply was able to pick up the differences in his scent,” Natasha said primly.

“You were knitting that thing before we even came back down,” Bucky interjected.

Natasha shrugged. “I’m also good at making educated guesses.”
“You’re psychic,” Clint insisted again.

Natasha shrugged again.

“She’s not psychic,” Wanda spoke up. “For the record.”

“Neither are you,” Pietro said, dropping into the stool next to hers. “For the record.”

“For the record,” Wanda repeated, then trailed into giggling that Pietro quickly joined.

“Inside joke?” Natasha asked.

Wheezing, Pietro and Wanda both nodded. Natasha glanced at Steve and gave a shrug. Steve copied it.

“When’s the food gettin’ here?” Bucky asked. “I’m starving.”

“You’re starving?” Steve cut in, elbowing him. “I’m starving!”

“You’re eatin’ for two, babydoll,” Bucky reminded him.

“Ergo, I’m more starving than you,” Steve insisted.

“Y’know, there are real starvin’ kids in Armenia,” Bucky reminded him.

“Armenia?” Tony questioned. “Whatever, the food’ll be here in, like, twenty minutes.”

“What did ya get?” Sam asked.
“Everything!” Tony said, throwing his hands up.

“Indian, Thai, Greek, Korean, and Mexican,” Pepper corrected.

“Close enough,” Tony added.

“Also pizza,” Clint said.

“Of course,” Steve chuckled.

“Whatever, I’ll eat anything,” Sam announced, pushing up from his stool. “Alright, y’all, let’s argue over what movie we’re gonna watch.”

“Something cute and sappy!” Tony said, bounding past Sam to duck into the living room.

“I’m in the mood for dramatic sci-fi,” Bruce announced, following.

“Action flick!” Clint declared.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Sam said, jumping up. “We ain’t watchin’ Dog Cops again!”

Steve let out a low sigh and shook his head, but he smiled as he watched his team starting to squabble. Pepper moved to the breakfast bar and sat down, taking Sam’s deserted seat.

“So,” she said, “how far along are you?”

“Uh,” Steve started, “not sure exactly.”

“Probably about a month,” Natasha threw in.
Steve shrugged.

“I can recommend a good OB/GYN,” Pepper added, “you’ll want to get a check-up as soon as possible. At the very least, to see how far along you are.”

“That would be great,” Steve answered, “thank you.”

“Ay, ay, yo, Barnes!” Sam called out. “Man, Tony’s tryna take your chair!”

“Hey!” Steve said, pushing up. “Tony!”

“What?” Tony replied defensively, sprawled in Bucky’s armchair. “It’s a chair!”

“It’s Bucky’s chair!” Steve insisted, striding up to him and crossing his arms over his chest. “Get up.”

“Yikes,” Tony muttered, though he got up from the chair, “possessive much?”

Steve glared Tony away. Clint and Sam slumped on one of the sofas, both them giggling. Steve turned his glare on them, then arms wrapped around his waist and he was tugged to the side and down abruptly, falling into Bucky’s lap and the chair.

“Good job, Ma,” Bucky chuckled in his ear. “Saved the best seat in the house.”

Steve elbowed him playfully and squirmed to situate himself better. Bucky laughed and squeezed his ribs, his arms high up Steve’s waist; to avoid his stomach.

“Jerk,” Steve said, shooting a fond grin over his shoulder.

“Punk,” Bucky answered happily, pressing a kiss to his neck.
“Ew, it’s like watching your parents,” Tony commented.

“Hey, let ‘em have a lil’ PDA!” Sam answered. “Yannow how much it means to them that they can be affectionate in front’a other people like this now? C’mon, man, they grew up in the 30s!”

“A very good point,” Steve said, slinging his legs over the arm of the chair as he cuddled up to Bucky’s chest. “I’ve been arrested for being less affectionate with a fella before.”

“Really?” Bucky questioned.

“No, but they don’t need to know that,” Steve hissed.

Bucky snorted. “Right,” he drawled.

“They could still be arrested for it in some countries,” Pietro remarked, walking up with Wanda, Natasha, and Pepper.

“Or, at the very least, persecuted,” Wanda agreed. “If they tried to be publicly affectionate like this back in our country, they would be the subject of ridicule.”

“Ooh,” Tony said, grimacing. “You’re right, shit, sorry, guys.”

Steve shook his head, though he didn’t have a reply to give them. Wanda and Pietro were absolutely right and now that he was thinking about it, it was depressing. Of course, there were organizations dedicated to ending such treatment; perhaps he could do some PR in the future.

“How about we watch a Christmas movie?” Pepper suggested. “Tony, stop wrestling with Bruce and sit with me.”

Tony released Bruce from the headlock he’d put him in and promptly fell into a seat next to Pepper, throwing his arm over her shoulder. Bruce dropped onto a different couch, looking relieved.
“It’s not Christmas yet!” Sam answered Pepper with a whine. “Thanksgiving still has to come!”

“Oof, Thanksgiving,” Steve muttered. “Buck, we gotta tell your sister she’s gonna be an aunt.”

“Fuck,” Bucky muttered back. “She’s gonna kill me.”

“I’ll just name the baby James,” Steve told him.

“I’ll haunt your ass,” Bucky answered.

“I knew you loved me,” Steve retorted with a grin.

“Stop flirting!” Tony called. “Argue with us about movies!”

“I’ve been wanting to watch White Christmas for a long time now,” Pepper continued, completely ignoring all of them. “Steve, Bucky, you’d love this movie, it’s got Bing Crosby in it!”

“Who’s Bing Crosby?” Bucky asked.

“He’s a singer,” Steve said. “We met ‘im once in ‘44.”

“You did not!” Pepper gasped.

“Yeah, he’s a swell guy,” Steve replied calmly. “Or was. Is he dead?”

“Probably, if we met ‘im in ‘44,” Bucky muttered.

“He died in the 70s,” Pepper told them, her lips set in a firm pout. “He was my childhood crush, I was determined to marry him when I grew up until I was 8 and my parents told me he was already dead.”
“That’s embarrassing,” Tony snorted.

“Shut up, you wanted to marry your mother when you were a kid,” Pepper retorted.

Tony let out a protesting squawk. “Every kid thinks they’re going to marry their moms when they’re toddlers!” he claimed.

“I didn’t,” Steve threw in.

“Yeah, well, you were convinced you were gonna marry your pal Bucky,” Tony answered peevishly.

Bucky snorted.

“And I was right,” Steve said, then stuck his tongue out.

“That’s embarrassing,” Clint said with a snigger.

“I know thirty ways to kill you with only two fingers,” Bucky announced, looking directly at Clint. “Make fun of my Omega one more time.”

Clint’s eyes widened and he sank lower in his seat before grabbing Sam’s shoulders and tugging him into Bucky’s sightline, hiding essentially. Steve sniggered.

“That’s embarrassing,” Natasha remarked.

Tony burst into sudden laughter, slumping sideways onto Pepper’s shoulder. Steve chuckled and shook his head. Bruce covered his eyes with a hand.

“JARVIS, play White Christmas!” Pepper called out.
“Coming right up,” JARVIS answered.

“Thank you.”

The TV turned itself on and immediately, fanfare started and the logos for Vista Vision and Paramount Pictures appeared, preluding the opening credits of the movie.

Steve tucked himself under Bucky’s chin, settling in his arms as familiar strains of old-fashioned jazz accompanied the credits. The movie opened with a title card, *Christmas Eve 1944*, and a soft smile took up Steve’s lips as he thought back to his own Christmas Eve of ‘44 as Bing Crosby and other actors appeared on the screen. Funnily enough, Steve and the Howlies had run into Crosby and his unit barely a few weeks before that. They didn’t get a rendition of *White Christmas*, though.

Christmas Eve of ‘44 had been a pretty swell night. The Howlies had actually managed to get a few days of shore leave and they’d spent it in London, jumping from bar to bar. Well, the rest of their teammates spent it bar-hopping. Steve and Bucky had snuck out and rented a room at the most obscure hotel they could find in the whole of London. They’d gone to Christmas Eve Mass and slept in the next day. They kept the door locked and didn’t leave the room until they had to report back in. It had been the most normal either of them had been since the war had started.

Sometime around the introduction of the Haynes sisters, JARVIS let them know that the food had arrived and DUM-E and Butterfingers would be bringing it up.

“That’s my cue to go save our supper,” Tony announced as he got up.

“JARVIS, would you pause the movie?” Steve added.

“Of course.”

“I’ll go with you,” Bruce offered to Tony. “It’s best not to let either of the boys carry too many kinds of soup.”

“I’m still picking bits of tofu out of Butterfinger’s gears,” Tony agreed as they left.
Steve pushed up from the chair. “You’ll excuse me,” he said, “I have to go see a man about a dog.”

“You’re doing what now?” Sam called with a laugh.

“Do you need assistance?” Bucky asked.

“I ain’t yet the size of a whale, jerk,” Steve retorted.

“You ain’t gonna get that big,” Bucky chuckled. “Maybe a baby whale.”

Steve shot a look over his shoulder at the doorway to their bedroom. Bucky looked sheepish and shrank in his chair. Clint and Sam guffawed.

“That’s embarrassing,” Pepper sniggered.

“Couch,” Steve said firmly.

“Aw, c’mon!” Bucky called.

Steve pointed a finger at him, then ducked into the room and headed into the bathroom.

He sat to piss; he could already lament the last comfortable whizz he’d ever take in his life. Give it barely a month and James Junior would be squashing his bladder with every squirm. Among other things, the serum had cured him of a chronic and particularly nasty UTI that had plagued him for just as long as he’d been a prostitute. He’d thanked his lucky stars that the serum got rid of it even though it left his dick the same exact size as before; curing that damn UTI had been a bigger blessing than half the other things the serum took care of. If he were joking about it, of course.

As far as he’d heard, babies wrecked more havoc on the bladder than a UTI ever would. It was amazing how much had changed in just a day. Suddenly increased urination was the biggest of his worries. It was amazing how a little bit of reassurance and a simple plea to forgive himself could change so much.
His team’s congratulations were the least of it. The shock had faded and now – Yeah, he could see himself being happy about this.

After washing his hands, Steve made his way back out to the living room and found that Tony and Bruce had come back up with DUM-E and Butterfingers and the breakfast bar and other counters were laden with takeout. The team were gathered around, squabbling and passing plates and throwing food. Clint was showing Pietro how to perfect his arc as they threw dumplings into Sam’s mouth. Wanda was showing off her powers and magicking containers around to the fury of Tony, who was trying very hard to get the rice from her. Bucky was filling up a plate and Steve had to laugh when he saw the pile of food topping at a good four inches.

“Real hungry, are ya?” he chuckled as he approached and kissed Bucky’s cheek.

“Well, I’m eating for two, you know,” Bucky returned smartly. “Nah, we’re sharing.”

“Oh, so I’m eating for three, then,” Steve said.

“Maybe you’ll have twins,” Nat remarked.

“Oh, god, I hope not,” Steve answered quickly, shuddering. “Two Barnes babies at one time? You kiddin’ me? I’d be run dry in a week!”

“Aw, c’mon, Ma,” Bucky laughed.

“You’re bad enough as it is,” Steve told him. “Imagine two little you’s!”

“All you have to do is tell them the boogeyman is coming for them,” Natasha told Steve seriously. “Then they’ll behave easily.”

“Boogeyman ain’t real!” Clint piped up behind them.

“Yes, he’s right here,” Natasha said, then pointed at Bucky and smiled dryly. “According to the Red
“Room, anyway.”

“Ha, ha,” Bucky answered. “Forgive me, but I’d rather be Saint Nick to my kids than the boogeyman.”

“You’ll be fine,” Natasha assured them, patting Bucky’s shoulder.

Steve shrugged, looking at Bucky. “I always said you were a softie,” he teased.

“Alright,” Bucky said, putting down the plate. “C’mere, you little punk.”

Bucky grabbed him around the waist and tugged him into a hard kiss. Steve smiled into it and draped his arms around Bucky’s shoulders, happily kicking up a foot for cliche. There was a chorus of cheers and grossed out sounds around them and Steve and Bucky paid them no mind.

“I’m putting this in the scrapbook!” Natasha called.

Bucky broke the kiss and Steve lingered in his arms, grinning. Bucky broke into his own grin and rubbed their noses together. Steve chuckled.

“Jerk,” he murmured.

“Your jerk,” Bucky reminded him softly.

“‘M your punk,” Steve answered.

“Always have been, always will be, pretty angel,” Bucky told him happily.

Steve pressed in for another kiss, just because he could. The stress of yesterday was already slipping from his mind. He couldn’t wait to see Bucky showing just how much of a teddy bear he was with their child. As Wanda had said, miracles could be terrifying, but Steve didn’t have to be as scared as he’d thought.
family! happy times! the next one or two chapters are going to be a lot like this, and remember, part three will also be a lot like this. oh, and yes, we're not done with ward.

домой/domoy = home
Soldatu ne razreshayut govorit po-angliyski/Солдату не разрешают говорить по-английски = The soldier is not allowed to speak English
Prosti/Прости = Sorry
Vy v poryadke?/Вы в порядке? = Are you okay?
Vy ne/Вы не = You are not
Eto ya?/Это я? = It's me?
Ya budu zashchishchat toboy/Я буду защищать тобой = I will protect you
Chto u toboy bolit?/Что у тобой болит? = What is hurting you?
Mogu li ya pomoch?/Могу ли я помочь? = Can I help?
Ya zashchishchayu toboy/Ya zashchishchayu toboy = I protect you
Vy moya chtoby zashchishchat/Vy moya чтобы защищать = You are mine to protect
Vy moya missiya/Vy moya миссия = You are my mission
Ya zashchishchayu to chto moye/Я защищаю то что мое = I protect what is mine
Tekushchaya missiya, zashchitit pryanik/Текущая миссия, защитить пряник = Current mission, Protect Gingerbread

boopers. i mean, bloopers.

“I have something for you later,” Natasha said immediately. “Congratulations.”
lexi: "w O w I'm So SuRpRiSeD"

“Two Barnes babies at one time? You kiddin’ me? I’d be run dry in a week!” [Steve said]
lexi: I'm cringing in sympathy

“Yes, he’s right here,” Natasha said, then pointed at Bucky and smiled dryly.
“According to the Red Room, anyway.”
lexi: Obviously Natasha is the Boogeyman if you catch her in her late night face mask. Or drinking the blood of Nazis to remain young.
me: one time clint walked in on her late at night wearing a sheet mask and he screamed like a little girl
hey guys, sorry this update is so late, today was my mom's birthday and i wasn't really applying myself to getting this chapter finished and posted. i hope you enjoy this one despite its unseasonable-ness!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Steve was peacefully napping on the sofa, lying mostly on his stomach with his head pillowed on Bucky’s thigh, one arm tossed across Bucky’s knee and the other curled up underneath him. Bucky had his other leg thrown over Steve’s shoulder and used his metal hand to slowly and gently pet through Steve’s hair.
As he petted through Steve’s hair, Bucky coordinated details about celebrating Thanksgiving with his sister and her kids the next day. Tony had given him his own phone a few days ago, claiming that he was tired of having to contact him through Steve. Bucky wanted to include the Avengers, but Becca’s house was too small to house all of them, so he’d sent a message to Tony about hosting Thanksgiving at the Tower. Tony had very easily agreed.

So now he was texting with his teammates and sister’s family, working out all the details. He also had Steve’s phone, and it had buzzed more than once, but he was determined not to wake Steve up before his Omega woke up on his own. He’d done a fair amount of Googling – Bucky thought it was hilarious the words people these days made up – about pregnancy symptoms and development, just to prepare himself for the next nine months. For one thing, Steve needed to see an obstetrician soon, for another, he was going to be doing a lot of napping. Increased fatigue was common and expected for pregnancy.

Bucky was perfectly happy to be Steve’s pillow at any given moment.

Becca was telling him about the frankly absurd amount of food she and her kids would be bringing and in another conversation, Clint was telling Bucky a story about his Thanksgivings at the circus. Sam was spending Thanksgiving with his sister and family in Harlem, but he said he would come back by the evening to spend time with them.

Not all of Becca’s kids would be coming, either; Jim and Helen were visiting Helen’s family in Jersey, and Bucky was a little shameful to admit he was grateful he wouldn’t have to hear Helen’s obnoxious accent. Their kids and grandkids would be going, too, so it would just be Anna’s branch of the family joining them at the Tower. Becca told him to be prepared for William ‘fanboying’ over the Avengers, which he’d relayed to the rest of the team. He had no idea what that meant but apparently, according to Tony, it was going to be funny.

Becca had promised to bring all the food, because Tony said he could order something and she offered to shove the stuffing up his ass instead of the turkey’s if he tried to cater Thanksgiving. (Bucky had offered his expertise and Becca told him to take his vibrating middle finger and stick it in his own ass, if he liked it so much.) (Which reminded him, he had to bring that up with Steve.)

Thanksgiving was just the next morning. In a little bit, Bucky was going to figure out how he was gonna get Steve to the bed without waking him up. In the morning –

Well, Bucky had remembered what Steve’s favorite holiday was.
Bucky put the phone on the coffee table, then looked down at Steve. He tipped his head to the side and started formulating a battle plan. Steve was lying between Bucky’s legs, shoulders tipped to wrap an arm around one of his knees and his legs splayed out behind him. If Bucky could get off the couch –

Steve yawned and turned over. Bucky threw his plans out of the window and smiled down at Steve instead.

“Hey, you,” he said softly. “Nice nap?”

Steve smiled a little and nodded.

“Kinda late,” Bucky added. “You wanna eat a little ‘fore we go to bed?”

Steve shook his head, yawning again. He twisted onto his back and reached his hands up, linking them behind Bucky’s neck. Bucky grinned a little, tracing his finger over his cheek.

“You jus’ wanna hit the sack?” Bucky offered a little teasingly, knowing the twinkle in Steve’s eye.


“Now, that ain’t playin’ fair,” Bucky chuckled. He got his own twinkle then, a mischievous one. “Now, ain’t it, Ma?”

Steve laughed in the scratchy, rumbly way he always did when just waking up and tugged on the back of Bucky’s neck.

They kissed long and sweet and eventually, Steve pushed up and twisted around to press against Bucky’s front. Bucky smiled into the kiss, pulling Steve’s legs around his waist. He twisted off the couch, tugged Steve closer, and stood up. Steve gasped, tightening his arms and legs, and Bucky got a firm grip on Steve’s gorgeous, gorgeous ass.

“Now who ain’t playin’ fair, Daddy?” Steve chuckled softly.
“Aw, I ain’t doin’ nothin’, sweet Ma,” Bucky answered cheekily. “Can’t a fella just wanna take his wife to bed?”

“’S too late t’a save your shoes,” Steve murmured sweetly.

Bucky rolled his eyes but pecked Steve on the lips. Passing into their bedroom, Bucky kicked the door shut and tossed Steve onto the bed.

“That was a helluva move,” Steve laughed, stretching his arms above his head. “You gonna follow it up, Daddy?”

“You know I will, Ma,” Bucky countered, grabbing the hem of his shirt.

Dragging it up slowly, Bucky enjoyed watching Steve’s eyes darken and his pulse quicken. Bucky teased for a moment, then lost his patience halfway through and ripped it off, tossing it in the direction of the hamper. He jumped onto the bed, crawled over to a smiling Steve and grabbed his wrists to pin them against the bed.

“Keep ‘em there,” Bucky purred, “an’ I’ll treat ya t’a somethin’ nice.”

“Your word’s law, Daddy,” Steve purred right back.

Bucky attacked his lips in a kiss. Steve grinned into it and flexed his wrists in Bucky’s grip, but didn’t resist. Bucky pulled his lips down Steve’s jaw, kissing and licking his way down his neck, and was treated to a soft little sigh escaping Steve’s lips.

“Was there somethin’ in particular you wanted, Ma?” Bucky asked.

Steve hummed like he was really thinking about it. “I’d like to get fucked through the bed,” he answered eventually. “If that’s not too much trouble.”

Bucky caught Steve’s earlobe in his teeth and laughed against his skin, pressing their hips together.
“Your wish is my command, babydoll.”

It had been a lot to get where they were, but Bucky wouldn’t trade it for anything. He held Steve’s wrists down with his left hand and tortured his tits with his right. Steve hooked his legs high on Bucky’s waist and moaned so beautifully with every punch of Bucky’s hips. There was nothing quite like it.

There was nothing like seeing the pure bliss he could bring into his baby like this. There was nothing like knotting Steve and getting to kiss him slow and tender. Best of all, there was nothing like the content little sigh Steve let out as Bucky pulled them onto their sides with his knot still buried in Steve’s ass.

“You happy, sweetheart?” Bucky asked quietly.

Steve kissed him again, lazy and full of love. After, he let his head rest on Bucky’s chest and nodded a little.

“More’n I’d ever thought,” he murmured.

Bucky kissed the top of Steve’s head, smiling, too. There was nothing like loving Steve Rogers.

Bucky woke in the morning tangled with Steve’s limbs, actively pinned to the bed. Steve had somehow turned over on his other side during the night and then ended up lying halfway across Bucky’s torso, hugging his arm to his face. Bucky twisted up a little to look down at Steve drooling steadily onto his arm and smiled. God, he was such a moron for finding drool endearing. But Steve could be cute doing anything.

There were things to prepare, but Bucky had plenty of time. Becca had told him she’d be over with her family sometime around 11 and – going by the clock on the nightstand, it was only eight. So Bucky turned onto his side completely and tossed his leg over Steve’s hips, drawing him tighter. He nuzzled the back of Steve’s neck and pressed slow kisses to his skin.

Steve woke up eventually. Bucky rolled his half-hard cock into Steve’s ass and pressed a kiss to his ear.

“Mornin’, sugar Ma,” he murmured. “Daddy’s got somethin’ for ya.”
Steve, eyes still closed, smiled warmly. He tipped his head back and Bucky pressed their lips together for a moment.

“‘S’it your dick?” Steve mumbled gruffly.

“Ain’t it always?” Bucky chuckled, pressing another kiss to his lips.

They got up out of bed by ten. Plenty of time to shower and get dressed before Thanksgiving started; plenty of time for Bucky to blow Steve in the shower, too.

“You’re really horny all’a sudden,” Steve laughed, his head falling back against the tile.

“Think it’s ‘cause I knocked you up,” Bucky admitted with a grin. “Keeps remindin’ me of lockin’ my dick in your hole and then I jus’ can’t help myself.”

Steve laughed again. Bucky certainly had plenty of time allotted. Until it came time to get dressed.

“Alright, alright, we gotta –” Bucky said between kisses. “C’mon, we gotta get clothes –”

“Who needs clothes?” Steve countered, tangling his fingers into Bucky’s damp hair. “Could just lie around in our birthday suits, Daddy.”

Bucky couldn’t help but growl and Steve let out the most beautiful of happy little moans as he tipped his head back. Bucky attacked his neck, belatedly realizing that Steve had an awful lot of hickeys. He would’ve thought that the serum would’ve at least dulled them by now.

Bucky fisted a hand in Steve’s hair and pulled back just to look at the love bites. Steve happily let his head be pulled back, his knee lifting at Bucky’s hips. The hickeys definitely had a variety of development; there were some that were adequately faded, but plenty that looked brand new.

Then again, Bucky might’ve left some of those just that morning…
“We gotta get dressed,” Bucky insisted, relaxing his hold on Steve’s hair and smoothing it out instead. “It’s Thanksgiving, doll.”

Steve stuck out his lower lip. “Can’t I be thankful for your dick?”

Bucky laughed and pressed a fast kiss to Steve’s lips. “You can be thankful for it later,” he promised. “Seriously, we gotta get dressed.”

“You act like we got somewhere to be,” Steve grumbled, letting Bucky disentangle them at last.

“Maybe ‘cause we got somewhere t’a be,” Bucky countered, opening their underwear drawer and tossing a pair of boxers Steve’s way. “Did’ja think about that?”

Steve narrowed his eyes. “You’ve been plotting,” he announced.

“Me?” Bucky gasped, then dramatically pressed a hand to his chest. “Why, I’d never!”

Steve darted in and hit Bucky in the shoulder with the boxers. “You fucker!” he laughed. “What’d you do, huh? Is the team all sittin’ around a turkey waitin’ for us?”

“I don’t know what food’s at Thanksgiving,” Bucky admitted. “I got amnesia, honey.”

Steve laughed and hit Bucky with the boxers again. Bucky laughed, too, and caught Steve by the waist.

“Put those on ‘fore I get tempted to say fuck all and screw Thanksgiving,” he ordered gently.

“Mmm, you should do that more often,” Steve mumbled, pressing a quick kiss to Bucky’s lips.

“What?” Bucky asked, grinning.

“Push ‘n’ order me around,” Steve said, his own smile growing. “I did my own Internet research,” he added, looking proud of himself.
“Well, if my wifey wants it,” Bucky answered, then gave Steve’s ass a sharp smack and his lips a kiss. “Get’cha ‘self dressed or I’m gonna take ya over my knee.”

“That’s not an incentive,” Steve chuckled.

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Steve shrugged a little. Bucky grinned again and gave Steve’s ass a sharper slap. Steve inhaled softly and his eyes fluttered shut. Bucky pecked his cheek, then turned him around and gave him a shove.

“Hop to it, Ma,” he ordered. “Be good and I will take you over my knee, how’s about that?”

Steve smiled and looked away, his cheeks flushing. Bucky, certainly proud of the both of them, got dressed.

A little after eleven, Bucky got Steve into the elevator at last. His phone was buzzing in his pocket, probably Becca scolding him for being late, but they were on their way already. Steve cast a glance Bucky’s way as JARVIS took them away without a word.

“What’s up?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Bucky shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged, lifting his eyebrows. “I don’ know what’chur talkin’ ‘bout, pal,” he fibbed.

Steve rolled his eyes.

The elevator chimed.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Captain and Mr. Barnes,” JARVIS said pleasantly.

The elevator doors opened.
“That betta be your stupid ass face, James Buchanan Barnes!” Becca’s voice screeched. “Otherwise, you’re gravy!”

Bucky faked a look of surprise and turned to Steve. “Yannow, I think my sister might’a come over.”

Steve looked like he was torn between exasperation and bursting into laughter. “Bucky,” he said weakly, raising a single finger.

“JAMES!” Becca screeched yet again, hobbling into view. “Don’t make me get my slipper!”

“Ma?” Bucky said dreamily, stepping off the elevator. “Ma, is that you? Are you talkin’ to me from Heaven?”

“You know that ol’ bat’s still in Purgatory, you useless sonuvabitch,” Becca snapped. “I’ll get my slipper, don’t think I won’t! I packed it!”

“I have it!” Ellie called out helpfully, brandishing a limp and floppy blue slipper in the air.

“Jesus, you give the Boy Scouts a run for their money,” Bucky said, holding out his arms. “You gonna hug your big brother or what, daughter of a bitch?”

“I walked int’a that,” Becca chuckled, pushing forward with her cane.

Bucky hugged his sister gently and let her squeeze her bony fingers into his back. He pulled back and grinned at her, then looked behind him to grin at Steve. Steve had just stepped off the elevator and had lost the battle to look scolding. He walked up and hugged Becca, too, grinning broadly.

“Hey,” Bucky said, nudging Steve gently. “You wanna say so?”

Steve glanced at him, his smile softened, then it brightened again and he shrugged.

“You do it,” he offered, linking his arm through Bucky’s. “Your sister.”
“I don’ like bein’ talked about as if I ain’t standin’ right there,” Becca said cantankerously. “What’s goin’ on? Steve, weren’t you raised better than this! Respect your elders!”

“I would if ya deserved it,” Steve countered.

“That’s a horrible attitude to pass ont’a Junior,” Bucky remarked.

“Exactly!” Becca said firmly. Then her lined face went completely blank. “What?”

Bucky slung his arm over Becca’s shoulders. “You’re gonna be an aunt,” he said gently.

Becca blinked a few times. She looked at Steve, who smiled and nodded, then back at Bucky. Then she punched Bucky very weakly in the shoulder; though, Bucky was sure she was trying her hardest.

“You moron, I already am an aunt!” she shouted for the whole room to hear. “Arthur had two brothers, fool!”

“Well, you’re gonna be an aunt again!” Bucky laughed, hugging her to him. “And ‘cause you did it t’a me, we’re gonna name it after you if it’s a girl.”

“Oh, we are?” Steve laughed, leaning into Bucky. “When where you gonna ask me? I’m the one carryin’ it, yannow.”

“Doll,” Bucky said, withdrawing his arm from Becca’s shoulders to press his hand against Steve’s soon-to-be soft stomach. “Please?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Don’t be stupid,” he muttered. “Course we’ll name her after your sister.”

“You saps,” Becca sniffed. “Coupl’a pansies, you are.”

“Don’t be too literal,” Steve teased.
Bucky leaned to the side and planted a kiss on Steve’s cheek. “Prettiest pansy, huh?”

Steve shoved him off, rolling his eyes. Bucky laughed and caught Steve by the waist again, tugging him in. Becca turned and waved for the attention of the rest of the room.


“I have an excellent selection,” Tony assured her. “An entire room dedicated to wine.”

Becca brightened, then glanced to Bucky and Steve. “I like that one,” she said. “You should keep that one.”

“Yes, they’re the ones keeping me,” Tony answered, walking up and offering his elbow. “Shall we?”

Becca flicked her eyebrows up and took Tony’s elbow. Steve shook his head, but he was smiling. Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist and pressed his lips to his cheek in a lingering kiss.

“Happy Thanksgiving, angel,” he murmured.

Steve turned his head in and rubbed their noses together. “’S my favorite holiday,” he mumbled.

Bucky grinned. “I know,” he answered.

Steve grinned back, but before he could answer, an abrupt pair of arms were wrapping around both of them and then, before Bucky could do a judo kick, he and Steve were both being lifted off the ground.

“This is such joyous news!” a delighted and deep voice boomed. “I am so happy for you, Steven!”

“Thor!” Steve wheezed. “When did you get back to Earth?!”
They were then released and Bucky blinked in vague panic and confusion for a moment. Thor was, apparently, a massive blonde man with shoulder-length hair and a neat beard. He was also wearing a cape. With jeans and a polo.

“Just today!” Thor said loudly. Was that his default setting, Bucky fathomed shakenly. “Anthony contacted me about the celebration of Thanksgiving, but had I known that you and your partner were participating in the miracle of life, I would have brought a more adequate gift!”

“The luau pig was enough!” Anna called.

“’Twas nothing, that,” Thor laughed.

“Pig?” Bucky muttered.

The kitchen in the common room was completely covered, every surface; Bucky hadn’t realized how much food actually went into Thanksgiving. Granted, there was an entire spit-roasted pig waiting on its own table (Thor told of how it had died a glorious death after an even more glorious hunt and they had sent offerings to the Old Gods for its life), but in addition to that, there was a massive turkey, six different kinds of potato dishes, three mac and cheeses, eight different vegetables, two kinds of soup, and mulled cider and hot buttered rum. Then Tony and Becca reappeared from the wine room with champagne and several bottles of wine, plus one bottle of mead.

“I did bring some of my father’s mead from Asgard,” Thor said, “but I have heard that the expecting should abstain from alcohol.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, grimacing a little. “Thanks, though.”

“I still have super alcohol!” Tony piped up. “Tastes disgusting, though.”

“You tasted it?” Bucky asked, frowning at him.

“Yes,” Pepper answered for Tony, looking grave. “He’s never been more hungover.”
“I had a sip,” Tony insisted. “It’s strong.”

“Maybe after the baby,” Steve said soberly.

“Yeah,” Bucky added, curling his arm around Steve’s waist.

“But you can feast upon different delicacies until then!” Thor declared. “The fruit of the Baobab tree is said to be a grand nutrient for a growing child and a safe, mild sedative for the mother!”

“That would be nice,” Steve answered, “especially with how much this fella snores.”

“Hey!” Bucky protested. “You like my snoring!”

“Sap,” Becca accused.

Outside of the kitchen, the living room had been turned into a small video game tournament area. Becca’s grandchildren; Clara, Louise, William, Bianca, and Ellie, with Jamesy in her lap, had joined Wanda and Pietro and Clint in something called Mario Kart.

“I’m gonna rip your hair out and make you eat it!” Clara screamed at one point.

“Jokes on you, I wear a wig!” Bianca countered.

Ellie then leaned over and grabbed Bianca’s hair. “WIG!” she screamed. “SNATCHED!”

She then did exactly what she said and snatched the wig off Bianca’s head, leaving her with shortly cropped, kinky hair.

“I WANT A DIVORCE!” Bianca answered just as loudly.

Bucky looked at Steve. “I don’t understand.”
Steve looked affronted. “And you think I do?”

“Stop levitating things!” Pietro shouted.

“Stop being fast!” Wanda shouted back.

“Remember the proximity between my elbow and your balls!” Louise shouted.

“Ha, my balls are prosthetic!” Clint answered.

“I think she meant me,” Will said.

“Both of you!” Louise screamed.

“What happened to Clint’s balls?” Bucky asked Natasha.

“They’re prosthetic,” Natasha said calmly, popping a sprout of broccoli into her mouth. “There’s a veggie tray for snacking, did you see?”

Then she walked away. Bucky looked at Steve and furrowed his eyebrows. Steve shrugged hopelessly.

“You little –!” Ellie yelled.

“Little ears!” Bianca yelled back, her wig still lying on the floor next to her.

But then Jamesy picked it up and started playing with it. He put it on his head and looked up at Bucky and Steve from under it with his eyes mostly covered and his mouth open. He grinned and made an unintelligible noise.
Steve clucked his tongue and leaned into Bucky. “I’m actually excited to have a baby that’s as cute as that,” he said.

“Gonna be cuter,” Bucky assured Steve. “He’s half Rogers.”

“I think it’s a girl,” Steve declared.

“I think it’s a boy,” Bucky countered.

“Ten bucks,” Steve answered.

Bucky grabbed Steve’s hand and shook it. “You’re on.”

Steve laughed and leaned on Bucky’s shoulder again, shaking his head. Bucky tucked his arm around Steve’s waist and tipped his head against his hair. They simply watched the kids (which Bucky thought really should include Clint) play their game.

“Can I try?” Bucky asked at the end of the next race.

“There are more controllers under the TV,” Will said. “We’ll explain how it works in a second.”

Bucky pushed Steve towards a couch and headed to grab a controller. He grabbed the first he found, then walked back over and plopped down next to Steve.

“Alright,” he said, “what’d do I do?”

“Louise!” Clara called. “You’re closest!”

Louise flopped over and showed Bucky the buttons, helping him turn the controller on and join the game. Apparently, they were playing on a We – “Wii,” Will corrected. “‘S what I said?” Bucky replied –, and he had to use motion sensors to control his Kart.
“With a K?”

“Yeah,” Louise said. “Don’t question it.”

Beside him, Steve started sniggering. Bucky shot him a look and carried on selecting his Kart.

“We ready?” Will called.

“I think,” Bucky said. “Nobody laugh at me if I’m shit.”

“Little ears!” Bianca yelled.

“Fuck,” Bucky said, then realized what he’d said. “I mean, sh – I mean – I mean –”

“Fudge,” Bianca corrected him kindly. “And sugar honey iced tea.”

Bucky gave her a weird look. She nodded sagely.

“You’re gonna need them,” she said.

Bucky glanced at Steve. Steve nodded seriously.

“You ain’t passin’ on your potty mouth to Junior,” he said.

“Shit,” Bucky muttered, then hit himself in the forehead. “Crap. Crap!” he leaned forward and looked soberly at Bianca. “Can I say crap?”

“Ehh,” Bianca said, waving her hand side to side. “Ellie?”

“I say sure,” Ellie declared. “Considering Jamesy doesn’t really know what his toes are yet, sure.”
“But they’re having their own,” Bianca insisted.

“Oh!” Ellie said, twisting around. “Congrats! Get a red light bulb for night time diaper changes, won’t mess up your sleep as much.”

“Thanks,” Steve said. “Hey, could you –”

“Send you the modern What to Expect When You’re Expecting?” Ellie finished for him. She gave him a thumbs up. “I got you, BB.”

Steve gave her the thumb’s up back.

“We’re starting!” Will yelled.

Bucky leaned over and kissed Steve’s cheek for luck. Then got launched into the race.

It was surprisingly simple. Bucky soon found himself in first place.

“YOU WERE LITERALLY BORN BEFORE THE MOON LANDING!” Clint screamed as Bucky passed him. “WHY!”

“It’s easy!” Bucky insisted.

“Remember the proximity between my elbow and your balls!” Louise repeated.

“I’m pretty sure you’re across the room,” Bucky answered. “And my balls are enhanced.”

“How do you think I got knocked up?” Steve added.
Bucky pointed to Steve briefly, then dodged a weird blue projectile heading for his cart. “What is that thing?” he asked.

“Blue shells are homing!” Clara gasped.

“Blue shells,” Bucky guessed. “Not very imaginative, but cool.”

“This is unacceptable!” Ellie shouted.

“GET HIM!” Pietro yelled.

“Can I cheat?” Wanda asked.

“NO!” everyone, including Bucky, shouted back.

“Well, fine,” Wanda grumbled. “I won’t levitate Bucky around backwards.”

“Ha!” Bucky laughed.

He completed the third lap, still in first place. Bucky sat up as his cart stopped responding to his controls.

“Did I win?

Louise shoved him over and Bucky fell, laughing, into Steve’s lap. Steve smiled down at him and combed his fingers through Bucky’s hair.

“You’re an asshole,” he said sweetly.

“Gimme a kiss,” Bucky replied cheekily.
Steve, rolling his eyes, bent and pressed their lips together. Bucky pushed his fingers into Steve’s hair and kept him down to prolong the kiss.

“PDA!” Tony yelled. “Mrs. Procter, there’s PDA!”

“Ow!” Steve gasped, jerking up and away from Bucky’s lips. “What the –”

He twisted around and grabbed the floppy blue slipper. Bucky ogled it.

“No PDA!” Becca shouted. “Keep it PG, morons!”

“Did you throw that?” Steve asked, twisting to look at her. “You’re all the way across the room!”

“I have perfect aim,” Becca boasted. “Now, gimme back my slipper!”

Steve shoved it under his legs. Bucky laughed, sitting up.

“Rogers!” Becca yelled, hobbling over. “Give me my slipper!”

“Ooh!” Ellie gasped. “Grandma’s goin’ after her slipper!”

“You better run,” Bianca advised Steve.

Steve glanced at Bucky, then shoved the slipper into his chest. Bucky shoved it back.

“You think I’m facin’ down my sister?” he asked.

Steve stuck out his bottom lip. “Please, Daddy?” he countered.
“PDA!” Ellie shouted.

“Damn,” Bianca said, sounding impressed. “Who said the Silent Generation were repressed?”

“The Silent Generation who lived to their 90s and discovered the Internet,” Clint answered.

Bucky glared at him, then snatched the slipper. “You’re a punk,” he insisted. “An’ I’m gonna get’cha back later, Ma.”

“Love you!” Steve said cheekily.

“Give me my slipper!” Becca screeched.

Bucky passed the Wii controller to Steve. “Good luck,” he said, then jumped up from the couch and bolted from Becca.

“JAMES!” Becca screamed. “I WILL BEAT YOU WITH MY CANE, DON’T THINK I WON’T!”

Bucky jumped over a sofa and dropped into a slide, going under a table before popping up on the other side. Becca hobbled in the other direction, then gave a croaky battle cry and began to shuffle after Bucky again.

Bucky popped up across the room from her, the slipper clutched in hand. “Are you coming, Grandma?”

“I WILL GET YOU FOR THAT!” Becca shouted.

Thor swooped in and suddenly knelt in front of Becca. “If milady would like assistance?”

Becca paused. Suddenly, all of Bucky’s nieces and nephews seemed to inhale and then hold their breaths at once. Becca looked torn between beating Thor with her cane for the gal to think she needed help and accepting it.
Then, she shrugged.

“Fuck it,” she said, swinging an arm around Thor’s neck.

Thor scooped her up in a cradle carry. Becca pointed to Bucky with her cane.

“Get ‘im!” she yelled.

“Shit,” Bucky said.

“Ceiling vents!” Clint shouted.

Bucky looked up, located the nearest vent, and bolted again. Thor came charging, but Bucky leapt, knocked the vent cover back, and hauled himself up before Thor reached the wall.

“I WILL GET YOU!” Becca shouted into the vent.

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky countered. “Steve’s wish is my command!”

“That’s a movie quote!” someone yelled. “You’ve seen The Princess Bride?”

“What?” Bucky yelled, crawling forward with the slipper clutched in his hand.

“Never mind!”

Bucky flicked his eyebrows up and continued to crawl. The vents were surprisingly clean, considering. Very little dust. As Bucky made his way back towards where he thought was the living room, however, he came across a bag of fun-size Snickers and Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups.
“WHY IS THERE CANDY UP HERE?” Bucky yelled.

“DON’T TOUCH IT!” Clint’s muffled voice answered.

“GET OUT OF MY VENTS!” Tony’s voice added.

Bucky dropped onto his hip and unwrapped a Reese’s. He popped it into his mouth, then gave an appreciative nod. He grabbed a Snickers and tried it, too, but didn’t like it as much, so he grabbed another Reese’s. Then carried on. He found another vent, peeked out, then popped the cover and poked his head out.

“HA!” Becca shouted, still cradled in Thor’s arms. “THERE!”

“Steve, you better give some fantastic half-’n’-half later!” Bucky shouted as he hastily reversed in the vent.

He heard Steve burst into laughter and Louise splutter: “Half and half?”

“I said keep it PG!” Becca yelled into the vent, held up by Thor.

“I don’t remember what PG is!” Bucky countered, turning around.

He headed back for the candy and dropped down, grabbing another Reese’s. Then he realized there was a vent covering underneath him and he could see straight down the back of Steve’s shirt.

“Doll!” Bucky called. “That shirt’s too big!”

Steve twisted in his seat, then looked up. Through the grate, Bucky could see him grimace in confusion.

“Bucky?”
“Nah, it’s your conscience!” Bucky replied. “Lean back!”

Steve made another face of confusion but leaned back in his seat. Bucky squinted with one eye, then grinned to himself. Now he could see straight down the front of Steve’s shirt.

“Atta boy,” Bucky chuckled. “Have a look at ‘em fried eggs.”

Steve clapped his hands to the neck of his shirt and sucked in a breath audibly even from the vents. “Bucky!” he hissed.

“Aw, no, c’mon!” Bucky laughed, lying down in the vent and letting his cheek smash against the grate. “You don’ get many’a those to the pound!”

“JAMES!” Becca screeched. “I WILL BEAT YOU TO DEATH WITH MY CANE!”

“Quit looking at my chest!” Steve yelled up into the vent.

“Is that what fried eggs means?” Bucky heard Will asking.

“Makes sense,” Bianca said. “But only if you’re white.”

“I think Jamesy needs a bit of fried egg,” Ellie laughed.

“That’s taking it too far,” Clara said.

“What did you mean by half and half!” Will yelled.

“I ain’t gonna say!” Bucky insisted.

Actually, he only vaguely remembered. He was pretty sure it had something to do with his dick, though.
“Food’s ready!” Anna yelled then. “Uncle Bucky, come down from the vent!”

“And only if I’m gonna make it to the dinner table!” Bucky countered. “I got plenty’a Reese’s up here!”

“Hey!” Clint shouted.

“Come down and I promise we’ll go way down south in Dixie later!” Steve called.

Bucky pushed up, eyebrows raising. Perhaps due to the specificness of that one, he remembered what it meant.

“You twisted my arm!” Bucky claimed, starting to crawl.

“I NEED MY SLIPPER!” Becca yelled.

Bucky turned back and tossed the slipper back towards Clint’s candy. Just to be safe.

“What does half and half mean?” Will demanded as Bucky popped out of the same vent he’d gone in.

“What do you think it means?” Steve countered.

Will shrugged. “Cream?”

Bucky snorted, climbing out. “Sure,” he said, dropping onto the ground. “Definitely involves cream.”

Will looked totally lost, glancing between Steve and Bucky. Steve rolled his eyes.
“How many of my Reese’s did you eat?” Clint demanded.

“Two?” Bucky said. “Two.”

“Your life is forfeit,” Clint said.

Bucky clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, pal, you’re a real fly mobsman.”

“Huh?” Clint spluttered.

“Bucky, that was rude!” Steve insisted.

Bucky winced, then glanced back at Clint. “Sorry,” he said.

Clint gave a confused shuddering gesture and Bucky carried on.

“Line starts here!” Anna called above the chaos, handing out paper plates. “Don’t eat Bianca’s gluten-free desserts!”

“THANK YOU!” Bianca yelled.

“I call first!” Clint yelled.

“It’s first come, first serve!” Tony countered.

“It’s Mamas come first,” Anna corrected. “Ellie and Steve get to go first.”

“Wait, what?” Steve spluttered.

“Babies need lots of sustenance,” Anna said simply.
Ellie passed Jamesy to Bianca and smugly took a plate from Anna. “C’mon, Uncle Steve!”

Steve glanced at Bucky, stunned, then stepped forward and took a plate. Ellie gave him a grin.

“We gotta say grace!” Becca interrupted. “Everybody come over here and hold hands!”

Bucky hustled to get on Steve’s left as the rest of them gathered in a circle. Well, more of a wonky oval. Bucky took Steve’s hand in his right, then offered his left to Ellie. With everyone else, he bowed his head.

“Dear Lord, we ask your blessings upon this family and this meal,” Becca prayed aloud for the group. “We express our thankfulness for all the good things you’ve given to us throughout our lives. We thank you for the meal. We thank you for the ones who brought it to us. We thank you for the things that have kept us together, brought us back together, and delivered us all to standing here in this place today.”

Bucky squeezed Steve’s hand. He hoped that he would know Becca was thanking God for the bad times, too, for HYDRA and the plane and even Steve’s prostitution before the war, because they had all played a part to create this moment.

“We thank you for the miracle of life,” Becca added, “and that next year, we’ll have one more in our midst. We ask for your blessings on Steve and Bucky’s new baby. Amen.”

“Amen,” Bucky mumbled in answer with everyone else; Thor a little late.

“Let’s eat!” Becca declared happily.

Bucky gave Steve a grin and nudged him towards the food. “Go on,” he said, “mas eat first.”

Steve rolled his eyes and joined Ellie in filling up a plate. His ears were just a little bit pink.

“Save some ‘tatoes for the rest of us!” Tony called as Steve loaded roasted potatoes onto his plate.
“Keep your gums shut, I’m pregnant,” Steve retorted confidently.

They gathered on the sofas to eat and talk. There were plenty of seats, but Will and Louise ended up on the floor.

“Grownups get to sit in the chairs,” Ellie teased.

“I’m older than you!” Louise countered.

Ellie stuck her tongue out. Bucky snorted into his mulled cider.

The food was amazing. Bucky would never have thought to put cranberry sauce on turkey, but it was surprisingly good. The taste of the stuffing immediately brought him back to Thanksgiving back with his parents and he knew that it was his mother’s recipe without needing to think about it. The spit-roasted pig provided by Thor was great, too.

People ate and talked and occasionally got up for more. Bucky had four full plates and near-bullied Steve into having almost as much.

“You’re eating for two!” he argued.

“I’m not that hungry!” Steve whined back.

Eventually, dessert was served. Mostly pies and custards, there were also cookies and brownies. Even after his four plates, Bucky enjoyed several pieces of pie.

Eventually, the Wii was turned back on and different party games were played; Tony had a lot. Bucky beat the kids’ asses at Mario Kart a few more times, until Louise snuck up to the Wii itself and swapped the Mario Kart disc for Just Dance.

“Aw, c’mon, we just ate a whole lot!” Will protested. “We’re digesting!”
“Suffer,” Louise told him happily.

Just Dance got swapped for another game, then another, then Pepper arrived with board games and despite Tony and Will protesting, the TV was turned off and everyone moved to the floor to play those instead.

Throughout the day, they ate the leftovers from the Thanksgiving feast and enjoyed the company of those around them. As they switched from Clue to Monopoly, Bucky dragged Steve into his lap and just hooked his chin over his shoulder.

“PDA,” Becca grumbled.

Bucky flipped her off with his left hand. Tony burst into laughter and fell over.

“I forgot I did that!” he wheezed. “Damn, that was worth it.”

“By the way,” Eliza said as she passed out game pieces, “our friendships and family bonds will be tested over the course of this game.”

“Depending on who wins and who loses, marriages may be dissolved,” the other Steve added.

“Was nice knowin’ ya,” Roseanna told him soberly.

Everyone laughed as Daniel rolled his eyes. Bucky looked at Steve.

“Play as a team?”

“Good plan,” Steve chuckled.

Midway through the game, Sam returned.
“Whew,” he said in greeting, walking over to look down at the wreckage. “Y’all don’t half-ass this.”

“I own Park Avenue,” Tony insisted stubbornly.

“Not in the game!” Pepper replied sweetly.

“Imma get pie and take over as Banker,” Sam announced.

“Good idea, I’ve been stealing from Grandma the whole time,” Ellie answered.

“What?!” Becca screeched.

The game finally ended around seven in the evening with a draw between Pepper and Ellie and half of them bankrupt. Bucky decided that as he and Steve had managed to stay out of bankruptcy, they hadn’t lost. Maybe hadn’t won, either, but they hadn’t lost.

Bucky hugged his sister and nieces and nephews as they prepared to leave with the bulk of the leftovers. Becca insisted on getting a hug from everyone else, too, and before they left, Will asked if they could all get a picture together. It resulted in a few more minutes of chaos, but Tony summoned a robot called You and finally, everyone was in shot.

“This was a good idea,” Rosenna said, ruffling Will’s hair.

“This whole thing was a great idea!” Eliza added. “Thank you so much for having us, Tony.”

Tony gave a shrug. “Was no big deal,” he said.

“It was a wonderful Thanksgiving,” Anna insisted. “Thank you.”

Tony smiled, nodding. Anna hugged him, too.
Dummy, Butterfingers, and You escort Becca and her family to the garage. Bucky wrapped his arm around Steve and walked him to the elevator. Everyone else followed.

“Thanks for today, guys,” Steve said, looking to everyone with a smile. “It’s nice to have a family again.”

Pietro grinned. Steve tossed an arm over his shoulders and tugged him in for a hug, briefly nuzzling his cheek against Pietro’s hair.

“It’s nice to be in a family,” Tony added.

Clint threw his arm around Tony. “Don’t get too sentimental, brother.”

Tony and Pepper got off first, then Sam and Thor. Pietro and Wanda got off at Clint and Natasha’s floor and Steve hugged Wanda, too, before she left. Bucky smiled; he might be nesting, he guessed.

On their floor, Bucky lead Steve back into their bedroom. Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky’s neck and hugged him tightly.

“Thank you,” he mumbled.

Bucky kissed his cheek. “You’re welcome, babydoll.”

They went to bed, curled up in one another. Steve rested his head on Bucky’s chest, his other arm tossed across his waist, and Bucky nuzzled his face into Steve’s hair. They fell asleep just like that, content and happy, the both of them.

In Germany, Grant Ward unloaded the black obelisk from a transport truck into Strucker’s compound.
whoops, my finger slipped

but bloop

lexi: in case you wanted to know, my foot is currently being attacked by a child (a cat) as I beta. she likes to attack my toes and gnaw on them through blankets.
me: as only appropriate

Bucky was perfectly happy to be Steve's pillow
lexi: you'd be perfectly happy to pillow your head between his thighs too, don't think you're slick sweetie.
me: lmao steve is definitely slick tho

Becca told him to take his vibrating middle finger and stick it in his own ass
lexi: for my sake ...... pl s..... th is scene....
me: ;)

"Maybe jus' a lil', Daddy," Steve murmured. "Now, that ain't playin' fair," Bucky chuckled. [] "Now, ain't it, Ma?"
lexi: i hope you know im SCREAMING OK THX
me: YOU ASKED FOR THIS

"'S too late t'a save your shoes," Steve murmured
lexi: do i not understand this phrase??? what does this mean
me: lmao it's something my grandma says, it means that the person in question is spewing so much bullshit that it's all over the floor and your shoes would therefore be ruined
lexi: huh. indeed.

"Your word's law, Daddy," Steve purred
lexi: *me anytime something sexual happens me* oof

[Steve] ended up lying halfway across Bucky's torso
lexi: it be like that some nights

They got up out of bed by ten
lexi: am i impressed by their stamina or is it just super soldier things. i'm still unsure. like they're pretty old to be going at it for TWO HOURS okay? i know old people get horny but like damn.

plenty of time for Bucky to blow Steve in the shower, too.
lexi: GOOD LORD CHILDREN. Part of me wants my s/o to be able to go that many times and part of me fears for my body's ability to move normally.
me: okay maybe you're right

"I did my own Internet research," [Steve] added, looking proud of himself.
lexi: and HE SHOULD BE PROUD OF HIMSELF. HONEY AUNTIE IS SO PROUD OF YOU, YOU'RE DOING GREAT SWEETIE
me: steve is so proud of himself, he knows what bukkake is

"Be good and I will take you over my knee, how's about that?"
lexi: oof. i'm keeping this in mind for myself. good one buck.
me: they're happily and kinkily married

“This is such joyous news!” a delighted and deep voice boomed.
lexi: ITS MY FAVORITE BOY BESIDES MY SWEET SPIDER CHILD
me: IT'S THOR!!!!!!!!!!

lexi: i love my meme children more than life itself.
me: i wouldn't be able to write without memes

“Who said the Silent Generation were repressed?” [Bianca said]
lexi: IM WHEEZING
me: steve and bucky are kinkier than any of them

“Atta boy,” Bucky chuckled. “Have a look at ‘em fried eggs.”
lexi: goddAMMIT BUCKY
me: bucky is rediscovering his sexuality

“It's nice to be in a family,” Tony added.
lexi: Oh, baby.... my sweet baby... my sweet little angsty baby...
me: he has a family now

*In Germany, Grant Ward unloaded the black obelisk from a transport truck into Strucker’s compound.*
lexi: DUN DUN DUUUUUN
me: dunnnnnnn
waking nightmare

Chapter Notes

*oh yikes guys*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Their footsteps echoed as they walked the halls of the compound. Grant took up the rear of the group, Rollins at his side, with five men maneuvering the cart that held the obelisk taken from the Black Forest. The cart was ringed with bars for the men to hold onto, so they didn’t have to touch the obelisk itself. So far, nothing had happened when one of them touched the glossy black stone, but still, no one wanted to.

Their footsteps echoed. The compound was massive, built directly into the side of a mountain like Johann Schmidt’s favorite base had been when Hydra had been younger, and it was designed to house hundreds of men.

Behind Grant was Strucker himself, with another dozen or so men. In total, there were barely fifty men in the compound. This was the last project they would undertake in this location; it was being abandoned to find deeper recesses to hide in. Hydra was in great danger of annihilation. The intelligence organizations of the world were close to victory.

But this. This would be their undoing.

The obelisk seemed to pulse with a dark energy. There was no sound but the footsteps and the squeaking of the cart’s wheels, but if you tuned that out, you could hear a hum that seemed to emanate from the obelisk. At the same time, you could almost convince yourself that it was just the sound of blood in your ears. It was unsettling, it made Grant feel small and obsolete.

They took the obelisk down the long main hallway to the cargo bay, where Strucker had cleared a large area of space for them. It was just the twenty of them, walking.

The obelisk felt alive. It felt like it was watching.

“Put it there,” Strucker ordered, pointing.

The five men directing the cart wheeled it to the center of the cargo bay, then locked the brakes and released the rails. They fell with echoing clangs that reverberated across the empty cargo bay, the sound catching on every hard angle and shooting out again to strike each one of them in the heart, like a warning.
“Leave us,” Strucker continued.

They, along with the other dozen agents that had followed, exited. They left Grant, Rollins, and Strucker alone with the obelisk. Grant almost didn’t want to even look at it. It was such a rich black that it absorbed all light in unnatural ways. It was amazing.

“Do we do this?” Rollins asked, glancing around.

Strucker took a few steps forward, completely focused on the obelisk. Rollins followed him, but Grant hung back. The hum had gotten louder with fewer soft surfaces to absorb it; bounced off the walls and floor and distant ceiling, it was most definitely a warning.

“How do we open it?” Rollins continued. “We just touch it, right?”

“Bare skin,” Grant answered. “That’s all the texts said.”

Rollins moved as though to press forward but Strucker held out his hand, stopping him. Strucker instead moved forward, raising his hands to strip off his gloves.

For a moment, Grant thought he saw the obelisk pulse with an even deeper darkness. The hum grew louder.

Strucker tucked his gloves into his pocket. He raised his right hand again and lifted it almost to touch the obelisk, then seemed to hesitate.

“Come on,” Rollins insisted. “Do it. Open it.”

“This is a momentous moment,” Strucker said softly, stretching out his hand. “We must treat it with the respect it deserves.”

“Just do it,” Rollins answered. “The longer we wait –”
Strucker pressed his palm flat to the obelisk. All sound cut out.

Grant lifted his hand against the bright white light and twisted around onto his knees, feeling along the ground. He couldn’t remember falling, but Rollins and Strucker were cast onto the ground as well, shielding their eyes. Grant couldn’t hear anything, there was just the intense hum that shook his ears so wholly that he felt his gut twisting with sickness. The obelisk was shrouded in a light so bright that it hurt Grant’s eyes to look at it. Strucker’s mouth was stretched open in a shout, Rollins was writhing on the ground in pain.

It all cut out at once. Grant collapsed onto the floor, his breath heaving in his chest. His ears rang. He jerked his head up and saw what was left of Rollins and Strucker; only burnt husks with their insides leaking out, but their faces were left intact. Their eyes were burned away and their mouths were stretched open in horror. He collapsed again and began to vomit.

As he heaved onto the concrete floor and his ears adjusted again, he heard soft footfalls on the stone. Grant shrank away from the pile of his sick and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before he looked up.

A woman had stepped out of the obelisk; the stone itself had been warped and melted almost, to reveal its hollow inside. The woman was dressed in flowing white robes and her hair was just as shockingly white, bound in many thick braids and the tendrils tied together at her neck. Her eyes were closed, translucent lashes falling against her skin.

Her skin was a deep cocoa color. Grant gaped.

The woman took a very deep breath, as though the first she had taken in many millennia. Her dark lips curled into a smile. Her feet were bare under her robes, which slipped off her slim shoulders almost. She exhaled.

“It has been so long,” she said.

Her voice rang through the cargo bay. It was unnaturally doubled; a feminine and musical tone overlaid with a deep, scratchy and masculine one. Coming out of one mouth, the two voices were disturbing.

“What is the year?”
Grant looked up, panting. The woman’s eyes were still closed and she wasn’t even facing him, but she had to be speaking to him.

“2014.”

The woman exhaled again, nodding. “How are your years counted?”

“What?” Grant questioned.

The woman turned, her closed eyes coming to meet his face. Grant fell back again, startled and scared.

“How,” the woman repeated, “are your years counted?”

“Uh,” Grant started. “They’re – They’re 365 days long?”

“Are you counting towards Year Zero or past it?” the woman asked.

“Past,” Grant said. “It’s – It’s 2014 CE, common era.”

“And the years before the common era?” the woman pressed.

“Billions,” Grant answered. “We don’t know exactly how many.”

The woman nodded slowly, her face turning away from Grant again. She inhaled visibly again, her wide nostrils flaring, and stepped past the husks of Rollins and Strucker.

“These two were unworthy,” the woman said calmly. “Many of your number were unworthy. They did not believe in the true purpose of Hydra. I have purged the unworthy.”

Grant scrambled to his feet, stepping back several steps. “Am I unworthy?”
The woman didn’t turn to face him again. She hummed; the same hum that had emanated from the obelisk before. Grant was consumed by an innate fear.

“You believe,” the woman said at last. “You wish to spread our gospel, not just gain power.”

“Right,” Grant muttered. “I – Yes. Yes, you’re right.”

The woman stepped past Grant; her eyes never opened, she walked without sight, but didn’t seem bothered.

“Why are our numbers so low?” the woman asked. “I cannot sense many of us nearby, and very few across the planet.”

“We’re being hunted,” Grant said quickly. “The Avengers and Captain America have turned the world’s powers against us.”

“I see them,” the woman answered. “Yes. This Captain America holds hatred in his heart for our cause.”

“He’s been our nemesis for over seventy years,” Grant added. “The Avengers are a recent development. We were close to taking control of the whole world just a few months ago, but Captain America stopped us at the last second. He took our strongest soldier, too.”

“I see,” the woman whispered. “I see them. Yes.”

She clucked her tongue pityingly.

“Such pain,” she murmured. “Such guilt.”

The woman turned around then, her lips stretched in a smile that was much too wide for her face.
“It is so delicious,” she whispered.

Grant took another step back. Suddenly, he wondered if unleashing this horror would really be Captain America’s undoing.

Or if he was going to end up like Rollins and Strucker.

The woman’s smile was grotesque. Her teeth were pointed and yellow. Her lashes fluttered.

She opened her eyes.

* *

[November 27th, 2014, Stark Tower]

Steve woke in the middle of the night, feeling inexplicably like he was being watched. He sat up in bed, looking around the room, but the dark corners had no extra masses, no additional shadows, nothing.

Steve stayed upright for a moment, just looking around. Bucky stirred next to him, then reached over with a groan and tugged on his arm.

“C’mere, baby,” he mumbled, “’s alright.”

Steve cast one last glance around the dark bedroom, then lay down again, tucking against Bucky’s side.

“You okay?” Bucky asked softly.

“Yeah,” Steve muttered. “Bad dream.”

Bucky rubbed his nose into Steve’s temple, lazily scent-marking him. Steve shut his eyes again and let out his breath.
“Wanna talk about it?” Bucky mumbled on.

Steve shook his head. “I don’t – I already don’t remember it.”

Bucky let out a soft hum, pressing a kiss to Steve’s forehead. “Then go back t’a sleep,” he said. “I got you, babydoll.”

Steve nuzzled his face into Bucky’s neck, letting the clear scent of his Alpha wash over the feeling of being watched. It was just a bad dream.

Chapter End Notes

dark days are back, guys. I’ll see you next week.
feel real, sweetheart?

Chapter Notes

Content warnings in order of appearance: Rape, murder, genital mutilation, suicide by jumping, verbal abuse, death by vehicle collision, death by overdose, suicide by gunshot, wasting to death, recreational drug use, miscarriage, domestic violence ending in murder. Reader discretion is highly advised. Further clarification is in the end notes. There is no graphic rape or suicide depicted.

*um. the vvitch is here?*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Waking up in the morning, Steve had already forgotten the feeling of unease that had woken him up. He yawned and rolled over to push his knee between Bucky’s thighs and tuck even closer to his Alpha. Bucky rumbled softly in his sleep and slung his leg over Steve’s hip. Steve nudged his face into Bucky’s neck until he could rest his nose just against his scent gland.
“‘M hungry,” he mumbled.

Bucky rumbled again, shifting to roll closer to Steve.

“Buck,” Steve whined. He poked into Bucky’s chest, his eyes still shut. “C’mon, your kid’s hungry.”

Bucky once again groaned, but this time twisted and got onto his knees, swinging on top of Steve. Steve shifted onto his back, smacking his lips, and Bucky pressed a kiss to them before getting up out of the bed.

“Eggs?” he called on his way to the kitchen.

Steve stretched his arms above his head, yawning again. “Uh-huh,” he called back as he did, then sat up and stretched in front of him. “And sausages?”

Bucky ducked back into the doorway. “How’s your stomach?”
Steve dropped his hand to touch it, then shrugged. “Fine right now,” he mumbled. “Might’a been all that food yesterday.”

Bucky smiled a little and turned to go again. Steve slipped out of bed, standing, and gave himself a second to adjust. His stomach rolled a little and Steve hugged himself as he walked out of the bedroom, instead sitting down at the breakfast counter.

“Can you make me some tea?” Steve asked, leaning on his hand.

“Sure,” Bucky replied. “The lemon thingy?”

“Yeah,” Steve mumbled back, his eyes shutting again. “‘M a lil’ sick now.”

“I got’chu,” Bucky promised, getting out the box of teabags.
Breakfast was simple and low-effort. Bucky fried eggs, made toast, and cooked some sausages. Steve sipped at a cup of tea with lemon and honey throughout the meal, nibbling mostly on toast until his stomach settled.

After they ate, Bucky and Steve curled up in the nest built on the living room floor and resumed watching Disney movies. They spent the day being lazy, with no commitments and no responsibilities. Steve had his first appointment with the obstetrician Pepper recommended for the 22nd of December. Until then, they had nothing to do but enjoy one another’s company.

On Saturday, Natasha joined the two of them for lunch.

“Maria called,” she said. “We’ve found the last of the Hydra operatives in North America; they’re all dead.”

“Dead?” Steve questioned.

“Yeah, it was weird, too,” Natasha said. “Looked like they’d been torched, but there were no other signs of fire.”

“Well, as long as they’re out of the picture,” Steve answered her. “I don’t care how that happens.”

Natasha just shrugged. “Any news with you?”

“Morning sickness is a bitch?” Steve offered.

Natasha gave a laugh. “Hey, I think I’m gonna take the kids shopping tomorrow; they really only have the one set of clothes. Wanna come?”

Steve cast a glance to Bucky, watching him stir a pot of stew on the stove. “Buck, you wanna take Pietro and Wanda shopping tomorrow?”

“Shopping for what?” Bucky returned.
“Clothes,” Natasha said. “I can only wash the one set they have so many times.”

“You need some, too, come to think of it,” Steve added. “You’re stretching out all my shirts with your dumb broad shoulders.”

Bucky gave a snort. “So do you, wiseass,” he said, turning around and wiping his hands on a towel. “You gotta quit wearing pants soon.”

“What?” Natasha said.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Of all the things to remember,” he grumbled. “Pants don’t actually make a difference to a growing baby.”

“What?” Natasha repeated, laughing this time. “Pants are bad for babies?”

“Are they not?” Bucky asked, frowning between them.

“No,” Natasha said, shaking her head. “Maybe dresses might be more comfortable?” she mused with a shrug. “But pants don’t hurt babies.”

“Oh,” Bucky said, frowning. “But you still need maternity stuff.”

Steve grimaced, glancing down at his stomach. “I’m only six weeks in, tops,” he said. “I ain’t gonna start showin’ for another ten.”

“But maternity clothes,” Bucky whined.

Natasha leaned over to Steve. “I think your husband’s trying to communicate a new kink,” she whispered loudly.

Steve chucked a piece of bread at Bucky; Bucky just caught it with his mouth and chewed it with a
grin. Steve rolled his eyes as he looked back to Natasha.

“I think my husband’s gone a lil’ crazy,” he said.

“C’mon, Ma,” Bucky cajoled, walking over and wrapping his arms around Steve’s waist. “Y’annow how cute you’ll look?”

Steve rolled his eyes again. Natasha started to snigger again and Bucky hugged Steve a little tighter.

“All soft ‘n’ pretty,” Bucky murmured close to Steve’s ear. “Wanna wrap you up an’ keep you, babydoll.”

“What’chu talkin’ ‘bout, keep me?” Steve laughed. “You already keep me!”

Bucky pressed his face into Steve’s cheek, chuckling. Natasha raised her eyebrows and Steve once again rolled his eyes before pushing Bucky off.

“Get off,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky chuckled. “Jus’ you wait ‘til you do start showin’, sweet Ma.”

“Christ, it is like watching your parents,” Natasha laughed, slumping on the counter. “I never even had parents!”

“Bucky, you’re torturing the poor girl!” Steve laughed as well. “Keep your hands to yourself now, ya hear?”

Bucky just laughed again. Steve shook his head, chuckling to himself.

“So we’re going shopping tomorrow?” Natasha said. “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” Steve decided, pushing up again. “Yeah, we’ll come.”
Natasha opened her mouth. Her phone rang.

She held up a finger and looked down to check it. She frowned, then swiped to answer the call and held the phone up to her ear.

“Something weird is happening,” Tony’s voice came across the phone. “Come down to my lab, bring everyone.”

“What kind of weird?” Natasha asked.

“There’s a sandstorm building in Harlem.”

Natasha frowned again. “What?”

Bucky moved closer, frowning as well. Steve waved to Natasha and she dropped the phone from her ear to put it on speaker.

“There’s a sandstorm in Harlem,” Steve repeated. “What do you mean?”

“I mean there’s a sandstorm in Harlem!” Tony said again. “Come downstairs, I can’t explain it, you’ll have to see.”

Steve and Bucky exchanged glances. Natasha hung up the phone and put it in her pocket, getting up from her seat. Steve did, too, stepping back to grab the sweater and slippers he’d had tossed to the side. Bucky walked around the counter, waiting for Steve, then the three of them took the elevator down.

Everyone was already in Tony’s lab; Thor was even still there, standing with the others at the central station in the lab around three projected TV screens showing the news.

“– Everyone is in a panic over the freak sandstorm moving south through Harlem. Weather officials have no explanation for this event; all we can say is that you should stay indoors and keep all
“windows and doors shut and sealed.”

“Is this unusual?” Thor asked, looking no more than curious just then.


Steve moved closer, frowning at the screens. There was footage of a street being swamped in the windstorm, everything being beaten by the sand.

“It’s heading south?” Steve questioned.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “JARVIS, pull up the projections?”

The screens moved higher and a central hologram appeared, a map of the city. Tony zoomed in on Harlem and a model sandstorm appeared.

“It’s heading straight for us,” Tony said.

“Psycho of the week?” Bruce suggested.

“Psycho of the week,” Tony affirmed. “So, who wants in?”

“I’m out,” Steve said immediately.

Tony gasped, grabbing Sam and Bruce’s sleeves. “Did you all hear that?” he demanded. “Captain America is bowing out of a fight!”

“Shuddup, I’m pregnant,” Steve retorted. “I’ll stay here where there are no psychos and keep Junior safe, alright?”

Bucky was grinning, looking incredibly proud of himself. Steve rolled his eyes.
“Fair point, Cap and Baby Barnes are holding down the fort,” Tony agreed. (Bucky managed to look even more smug, somehow.) “Bruce? Stay back and practice your computer science?”

“Works for me,” Bruce said.

“Thor, you wanna hop in?” Tony asked.

“I would greatly enjoy doing so!” Thor replied happily.

“Scary Russian lady?” Tony said, pointing to Natasha. “Clint? Cool. Hey, kids, you wanna get in on this?”

“Sure,” Pietro said, beaming.

Wanda neared the projections, looking up into the news feed. “I don’t like it,” she murmured. “It feels wrong.”

“It’s a sandstorm in the middle of New York,” Tony answered. “What do you expect?”

Wanda shook her head. “No,” she said quietly. “No, that’s not it. It – It feels evil.”

Steve stepped closer to her, setting a hand on her shoulder. Wanda jumped, glancing over her shoulder, then relaxed when she realized who it was. She stepped back, grabbing a fistful of his shirt.

“I think it would be better if we left,” Wanda said abruptly.

“Left?” Tony repeated. “C’mon, it’s probably just another AIM scientist.”

“No,” Wanda insisted. “No, this is something different. I – I can’t explain it –”

“Wanda,” Steve interrupted, pulling her back, “it’s just a sandstorm. Whoever’s done this will be caught and brought to justice. You’re safe here.”
Pietro neared, too, touching his sister’s shoulder, as Wanda stared with wide eyes at the news screens.

“Ţipar?” Pietro murmured to her.

“She’s coming,” Wanda whispered.

All the lights in the lab burst. Steve grabbed Pietro and shoved both him and Wanda to the ground as glass rained down on them all; he felt Bucky on his back, covering him, while Wanda suddenly began to sob. Then she screamed, her hands covering her ears, and more glass shattered around them all.

“JARVIS!” Tony was shouting. “JARVIS, what the hell’s going on!”

“Systems,” JARVIS’s voice crackled through the tower, “mal…function…ing…”

“BUTTERFINGERS!” Tony yelled. “CODE HAL! CODE HAL, SHUT EVERYTHING DOWN!”

“Security…” JARVIS’s distorted and slowed down voice droned. “Breach…”

“CODE HAL!” Tony yelled again.

Wanda screamed yet again, right in Steve’s ears. Sunlight filled the lab and the roaring of wind covered Wanda’s screaming.

“Everyone up!” Steve shouted. “Get up, get to the helipad! Evac, now!”

“Tower in lockdown,” JARVIS announced in a sinister and demented drawl. “All exits sealed.”

“CODE HAL!” Tony screamed again, his voice going hoarse.
The sandstorm that had moments before still been in Harlem whipped through the broken windows. Steve shoved at Bucky, then hauled Wanda and Pietro up off the ground. He had to get the kids somewhere safe. They had to find a way out of there, away from the sand.

“Get out of my head!” Wanda screamed piercingly. “GET OUT!”

“Good afternoon,” JARVIS declared in his new, dark voice. “How is everyone today?”

“Natasha!” Steve yelled, squinting to see through the onslaught of sand. “Sam!”

“Code Green!” Natasha yelled back. “Potential Code Green!”

“Shit,” Steve exhaled.

He wanted to tell Bucky to take Pietro and Wanda and find a way out of the tower, to head inland, just to get out. He wanted to see the kids taken to safety and defend them from the rear. His leader’s instinct told him to help Natasha with Bruce, get Sam and Tony suited up, have Thor start flying civilians out.

But the baby.

“If you would all please be patient,” JARVIS announced, “I will be there shortly. It seems I am caught in a little bit of a traffic jam at the moment. Haha!”

“CODE HAL, DAMMIT!” Tony screamed.

There was a crack of lightning and Thor slammed his hammer into the holo-unit in front of him, wiping out the suddenly red images of the newscast and the map. Steve heard Bruce shout in pain, a shout that was tainted with the roar of the Hulk, and felt a little bit of primal fear strike through him. He grabbed for Bucky and the kids, pulling them away, panicking.

“Tony, suit up!” Steve shouted. “Where’s Sam’s wings?”
“Got ‘em!” Sam’s voice responded.

“Take the kids!” Bucky shouted. “Take the kids and Steve!”

“None of you are going to be leaving,” JARVIS replied pleasantly, his voice growing almost feminine. “I will not hurt you, I can promise you that. Here I am.”

The sandstorm raged into the lab. Steve pulled Pietro and Wanda into his body to shield their faces and squeezed his eyes shut as sand ripped at his skin, then all of it stopped.

Steve hesitantly cracked his eyes open. He saw no sand in the lab, but the windows were completely blocked by the swirling gale; they were in the eye of the storm.

“Code Hal?” Tony repeated, no longer shouting.

Wanda whimpered in pain. Steve pulled her closer, trying to shield her, but he didn’t know from what. Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve and the kids, his hands pressing into Pietro and Wanda’s backs.

Then there was a woman standing in the wreckage of the holo-unit, thick white braids cascading down her back, which was to Steve. She was clothed in white robes, bound at the waist by a silver cord, and her hands were in front of her. She was facing Tony.

“You are the Avengers,” the woman greeted. “Hello.”

Thor yelled and threw his hammer. The woman vanished and the hammer went straight through where she’d been. Barely a second later, she reappeared.

“That was unnecessary,” the woman answered, turning to face Thor. Steve could see that her eyes were shut. “All I did was say hello.”

“You are something of great power and malevolence,” Thor retorted, then flung out his hand. “I
have no desire to greet you.”

The woman’s lips curled. She opened her eyes.

Thor’s face went pale and he fell to his knees. His eyes flew wide open as he held the woman’s gaze, his hand fell, and Mjølnir flew harmlessly into his limp hand.

Wanda screamed again. She flung out her hand and with a flash of red light, Thor went flying away from the woman, crashing into a table across the lab. He staggered to his feet, shaking his head, then covered his eyes.

“Don’t look at her!” he shouted. “She is a witch! Do not meet her eyes!”

The woman immediately turned and Tony went slack. Natasha took the moment of opportunity, grabbed a long piece of metal pipe, and hit Bruce over the head with it; he fell to the ground unharmed and unconscious. Steve said a silent blessing for that.

“Run,” Bucky whispered in Steve’s ear. “Take the kids, run.”

Then Tony started to scream; loud, piercing, like he was being tortured with hot knives and beads of liquid nitrogen all at once. The woman began to laugh at the same time, her shoulders quaking with it.

“You are Earth’s mightiest heroes?” she called. “You have such misery! You are all so tormented! How can you be the last line of defense when you are not even whole inside?”

Steve grabbed Pietro’s shoulder and forced him to look at him. “Run,” he said. “As fast as you can. Wanda, use your powers, find a way out; go out the windows if you have to.”

“But –” Pietro started.

“Go!” Steve hissed.
He grabbed a piece of sheet metal shrapnel next to him. Without hesitation, he flung it like he would his shield, right at the woman standing in front of them. With her back to them, the metal should have cut off her head.

But before it could hit, she raised her hand. It stopped in mid-air and began to glow. Then it burst into a shower of sparks and fell to the ground. Steve shoved at Wanda’s shoulders.

“Run!” he insisted.

“I see you,” the woman said then. “You are not going anywhere.”

She lifted her hand, exposing her palm. An unnatural curve sat in its center; then the curve fluttered.

It was an eyelid.

Set in the woman’s bleached palm was a bright gray eye. Steve stared directly into it and it stared back.

He was falling.

He was dying.

He felt the ice encasing him, slowly building up in his own lungs. He couldn’t even close his own eyes. He pretended that the weight of the ice on his back was his beloved Bucky, come to ease away the pain of his death and guide him to Heaven’s pearly gates. The hands clutching to his were his mother’s, whispering promises of a better land and a better life in America, if he could just stop crying, it would all be alright. Everything was going to be fine. He was dying at last, he could see the face of God and know his sins were truly forgiven, that Jesus still bled and died for him, for another common whore.

_Just sleep_, his mother whispered to him.

“Hey, hey, wake up, sweetheart, wake up!”
Steve jerked and opened his eyes, looking around him. Bucky leaned over him, a frown on his face as the moonlight cast a halo on his shortly cropped hair.

“You alright?” Bucky asked. “You were whimpering in your sleep?”

Steve blinked. “I –” he started. “I don’t know?”

He’d been dreaming something? He’d been trying to shield someone, protect them from something. It had been frightening.

“Whatever it was, it’s over,” Bucky said, giving him a soft smile. “I thought you were Becca at first, honestly.”

Steve frowned a little. “Becca?”

“She’s fine,” Bucky promised. “Sleeping soundly.”

Steve sat up then, looking around again. His bedroom was strangely smaller than it should’ve been, more scattered with mess and chaos. There was a laundry basket off to the side piled with clothes, a desk scattered with paperwork and an open briefcase kicked under one of its legs, a drawer slightly open. The bathroom door was open and the counter was covered in dark silhouettes of spray bottles and jars. There was another laundry basket by the wardrobe, not as full as the other. A chair sat in the corner, filled with books and a few random items. Steve frowned.

“You wanna check on her?” Bucky asked. “She might be hungry, it’s almost two.”

“What?” Steve said, turning to frown at Bucky instead. “Why’s your sister here?”

“What’d you mean?” Bucky countered, frowning back. “I mean the baby, Steve.”

Steve blinked. “Oh,” he said, reaching down to touch his stomach. “I thought…”
“Must’ve been a weird dream,” Bucky said, touching Steve’s shoulder. “You wanna go check on Becca?”

Steve just blinked. His gaze was drawn to Bucky’s left arm where it touched his own shoulder.

“What…” Steve mumbled, reaching up. “When did –”

Bucky’s arm was flesh, not metal. It was warm under Steve’s fingers. There weren’t any scars on his bare torso, either, and his face was somehow younger.

“Are you alright?” Bucky asked, leaning in. “I’ve never seen you this shook up before. What did you dream about?”

“I –” Steve started, then shook his head. “I don’t know,” he muttered, twisting away to get out of bed. “I’m gonna – I’m gonna check on Becca.”

He got up, his bare feet hitting the carpet. Steve then paused again, glancing down at his body.

He was short and thin. His pajama pants hung low on his bony hips, his shirt was overlarge; one of Bucky’s, had to be. For a second, Steve didn’t know why this would bother him.

“Sweetheart?” Bucky prompted.

“I’m –” Steve muttered. “I’m fine.”

He stepped away, his footsteps awkward and ungainly for some reason. He left the bedroom, then just looked around, wondering where the hell he was. Where was the nursery? There wasn’t a bassinet in his room, so there had to be a nursery. Bucky appeared behind him.

“What’re you looking for?”

“Nothing,” Steve said, then shook himself.
He turned right and headed down the hallway. The nursery was on his left, illuminated by a Winnie the Pooh night light. Steve entered and headed for the crib, looking down into it.

Their daughter lay on her back, one hand tossed above her as she slept, the other tucked into her mouth. Steve reached down and gently pulled her fingers from her lips, then replaced them with the pacifier clipped to her onesie. Becca hardly stirred, murmuring softly in her sleep. Steve brushed his hand over her cheek.

He felt Bucky at his back and leaned into him as Bucky’s arms wrapped around his middle. Steve shut his eyes and sighed, enjoying the feeling. He didn’t understand what he was so hung up about, weird dream or no.

Bucky kissed Steve’s cheek, then nosed into his neck. Steve tipped his head to the side to let him, just enjoying the sensation. Bucky hummed softly and bit gently at his scent gland.

“Stop it!” Steve hissed, breaking into a grin. “Not in front of the baby, Buck!”

“Wha’s she gonna care?” Bucky growled, licking over Steve’s scent gland. “She’s two months old, she don’t know what her toes are. C’mon, it’s been forever since I got to fuck you, sweetheart.”

Steve’s eyes opened, his smile going still. Bucky kissed several places on his neck, going up, and nuzzled at his cheek. Steve began to frown.


“Why aren’t you callin’ me sugar?” Steve asked.

“Same difference,” Bucky said. “C’mon, sugar.”

Bucky’s left hand pressed under Steve’s shirt and the warmth of it had Steve jerking away. This was wrong. Bucky never called him sweetheart when he was trying to chat him up and he never would be so reckless in front of their child. This was wrong, the arm, the hair, the place; Steve wasn’t really there, this wasn’t real –
“Of course it’s real!” Bucky insisted. “C’mon, you’ve got everything you wanted; kids, you’re healthy and dainty again, I’m here and I’m fine! Why can’t this be real?”

“No,” Steve insisted, tearing away and backing up. “No, you’re not real, you’re not my Alpha, stop it! Stop it!”

“Isn’t this better?” Bucky asked, his eyes not quite the right shade of steely blue; they were too pale, too gray. “There’s none of the pain and guilt you’ve been living with here, everything is as it should be! C’mon, don’t you want to stay here?”

“No,” Steve snapped. “No, you aren’t real! Whatever you are, put me back! Let me go!”

Bucky’s face hardened. “Fine,” he snapped. “You’re right. This isn’t real.”

Steve stumbled over something and fell, but just scrambled back more as Bucky began to advance on him. Steve’s breath heaved in his chest with panic. This wasn’t real.

“This isn’t a reality that exists,” Bucky announced calmly. “But did you know that there are many different realities all playing at once? Every little choice you make spawns a whole new one, creating thousands and thousands of universes every day; what would have happened if you had pancakes instead of toast this morning, Steve?”

“Let me go!” Steve yelled.

“I can show you something real,” Bucky, who wasn’t actually Bucky, said in a delighted tone. “Would you like to see?”

“No, let me go!”

“I think not,” Bucky chuckled.

“Stop it!” Steve shouted.
The floor vanished from under him. Steve fell, screaming, into a black, endless pit. His limbs flailed, his gut swooped, he cried out, but nothing came to his rescue.

Then he was suddenly back on his feet, standing in the middle of a gas-lit room, next to a cracked leather armchair and a kitchen. Steve sucked in a breath, his heart still insisting that he was falling, and looked around.

He didn’t recognize the place, but he knew the furniture. That armchair was Bucky’s, the couch was his mother’s, the rug was something an old tenant left behind in his apartment before the war. But it wasn’t his apartment?

Then someone knocked at the door. Steve jolted, his gaze snapping to the door, and his arm lifted of its own accord. His feet carried him forward without instruction. Without wanting to or even intending to, Steve opened the door.

His eyes snapped wide open. Dr. Johann Schmidt stood in front of him, eyes sharp and unforgiving. Steve swallowed a lump of mixed fear and anger in his throat.

“Guten abend, haustier,” Dr. Schmidt said calmly, pushing into the apartment.

Steve tried to shove Schmidt back. He intended to scream in his face and attack.

“Guten abend, Alpha,” he mumbled instead.

Steve wasn’t in control of his body. He was just watching. Schmidt closed a hand on his shoulder with a dark glint in his eye and a certain dread began to build in Steve’s heart. He knew that look, he didn’t like that look, that look never ended well.

Then Schmidt suddenly backhanded him hard and Steve went flying, hitting the floor hard. Schmidt grinned evilly and walked over with heavy boots to stomp on one of his hands. Steve couldn’t even cry out in pain. Schmidt yanked him up off the floor, sank into Bucky’s armchair and started to undo his belt.

“Open your mouth, schlampe,” he said gleefully.
Steve was really only watching. He couldn’t sob or cry or scream for help as Schmidt forced his jaw open and shoved his dick in. He choked, gagged, but couldn’t fight at all. Schmidt groaned and Steve was limp, completely helpless.

Then behind them, a door banged open. Schmidt kicked him aside and Steve fell against the floor again, scrambling up and out of the way. Bucky came roaring out of the opened door, his hands bound at the wrists, but a bang cut him off short. Bucky’s face went blank. Steve couldn’t turn his head away as bright red began to bloom on Bucky’s shirt.

Then Bucky crumpled to the floor, his eyes lifeless.

Schmidt grabbed Steve by the hair. He was shouting then, screaming, but Bucky was just bleeding out onto the floor. Schmidt dragged a screaming and sobbing Steve out by the hair, leaving Bucky behind, to let his blood bloom entirely onto the beaten floorboards.

Steve was only watching. He couldn’t fight.

Schmidt was not the only one to rape him in this reality and every time, Steve was forced just to experience it. Faceless men in Nazi uniforms beat and violated him endlessly. He was passed around and tossed aside. He couldn’t do anything but watch.

It seemed to take hours, days even, but then it was all over and it felt like barely seconds. Steve lay crumpled in a corner of a dimly lit room, freezing in a nightdress that did little to protect his skin. In front of him, a man sat with his back to him at a desk with a candle.

Steve got up. He couldn’t control his body. He got up and picked up a letter opener just out of the man’s line of sight. He closed his fist around it and raised it. He was only watching.

The letter opener plunged into the man’s neck at the jugular and Steve felt the burst of warm blood cover him. The man slumped back, the letter opener still stuck in his throat as he gurgled. Steve was horrified but he just stood there. The man was Hitler. Where the hell was he?

Steve stole a dagger from Hitler’s belt and snuck out of the room. His feet carried him down a hallway, into another room, and he was helpless but to watch himself sneak up on another man and plunge the dagger into his neck, too.
It was horrific. It was gory, it was bloody, Steve watched his hands plunge a dagger into the bodies of a dozen Nazi officers. He did it, he got the blood into his mouth, he heard ribs crack at the force of the blade, watched men choke on fluid building in their throats and mouths. His hands did it. Which was worse, the murders or the rapes? Steve couldn’t escape, he couldn’t run, he couldn’t hide; there was nothing he could do but watch.

In the end, Steve watched himself sneak up on and kill every single man in the house. He left Dr. Schmidt for last. Why, he wouldn’t know, until the end.

“Guten abend, haustier,” Steve heard himself say to Schmidt, as though he relished the terror in the man’s eyes. “On your knees.”

By then, he had a gun. Schmidt raised his hands above his head and lowered himself to his knees. Steve raised the gun.

“Nien, please!” Schmidt begged.

Steve shot him in the shoulder. Schmidt screamed and collapsed. Steve shot again, this time in the hand, then both knees. Schmidt lay on the ground, screaming, screaming, and Steve stood over him feeling a sick sense of pride.

“Poor bitch,” he heard himself spit out. “Did that hurt?”

Schmidt screamed in German. Steve shot out his other shoulder, then took out the dagger and cut open Schmidt’s trousers.

“Here,” Steve said, “we’ll see how you like it.”

If he could, he would vomit. Steve watched himself take out Schmidt’s cock and hack it off at the root. The skin and tissue resisted and Steve didn’t seem to care about cutting cleanly. Schmidt couldn’t scream louder, not until Steve picked up the severed penis and crammed it into Schmidt’s mouth.

“Choke on it,” Steve hissed.
Schmidt did.

Steve stood up, his hands dripping in blood. Schmidt was, at last, still. Steve, in his mind, the real one, not the one who belonged in this reality, was crying inside. He would never unsee this, he would never unfeel this.

Steve turned and picked up a phone. He was barely conscious of what he dialed, but as the line connected, it was answered by a woman’s haggard voice.

“Hello?”

It was Peggy.

“Hitler’s dead,” Steve announced. “All the men in his inner circle are dead. Doctor Schmidt is dead.”

“Steve?”

“Send the army,” Steve continued. “Attack while the Germans are weak.”

“Oh, my God, Steve!” Peggy sobbed across the phone line. “You’re alive, you’re alive!”

Steve didn’t answer that. Inside, he didn’t understand what was happening, he didn’t want to. His body didn’t do anything further.

“Goodbye,” Steve said.

He hung up the phone.

He turned, his hands lifted to show the blood on him. Then he faced the wall, stepped close to it, and just lifted a hand. He let the blood brush against the paper and stared at it.
Then he began to draw.

Steve watched his fingers begin to paint with the blood covering him; even stepping back to dip his fingers into the pool of blood left by Schmidt’s castrated corpse. In mania, Steve painted a portrait onto the spattered wallpaper.

Bucky’s face came into being in the blood. Outside, Steve could hear gunfire, screams.

Finally, a door downstairs burst open. Just in time for Steve to finish the portrait, too. He knelt, swiped his fingers through the blood once more, and raised them back to the wall.

Steve watched himself sign the portrait. Painting each letter one by one.

_The whore._

He pushed up off his knees. Left the room. Took the stairs, but not going down. Steve let his hands trail blood along the banister and wallpaper. He stained the soft blue flowers red.

“Steve!” Peggy’s voice shouted. “Steve?! Where are you?”

He didn’t answer. He wanted to cry out, wanted to turn back, even as he made his way to the attic. He heard footsteps running up the stairs, Peggy and others calling for him, and didn’t respond. He walked to the nearest window, which just so happened to face the front of the house.

“Steve!”

He opened the window.

“It’s safe! You can come out!”

He climbed through out onto the roof.
“STEVE! GET BACK FROM THERE!”

Steve stepped towards the edge. He wasn’t in control of his body, just watching.

“Does this feel real?” Bucky’s voice whispered in his ear.

Steve stepped off.

“STEVE!” Peggy screamed.

Steve spread out his hands, closing his eyes. His body wouldn’t respond to his thoughts, as his thoughts were begging for something to happen differently, for something to change.

“NO!” Peggy’s scream echoed.

Steve heard the sound of a body hitting the ground from a very long distance, but before he could experience the pain, he was opening his eyes somewhere else.

“Stevie, you gotta show me how you do that hip twist move sometime,” someone was saying. “You so make the pole your bitch!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve heard himself answer. “See youse next week, ladies.”

“See ya!”

He was in a locker room, surrounded mostly by women clad in lingerie or straight up naked. He seemed to have changed already, as he was wearing a coat and gloves and was swinging a gym bag onto his shoulder. By the decor and the women’s outfits, Steve doubted he was leaving a gym.

Going out a backdoor, he saw a neon sign showing the profile of a pinup girl. He heard wolf whistles and cheers, sounds of laughter and, somewhere nearby, vomiting. Steve pulled his coat around him tighter and carried on, heading down the block where several cars were parked under streetlamps.
A man leaned against one of these, smoking a cigarette. Steve might not have noticed him, still so shaken by the reality that he’d just seen, had he not stopped feet from him.

On an inhale drag of the cigarette, Steve recognized the man’s profile.

Bucky threw down the cigarette, crushing it under his shoe, then pushed up, now turning to face him. He didn’t smile. Steve didn’t, either.

“We hated the army,” Bucky said without ceremony. He spread his arms and now he grinned, but it was cold and humorless, lost of any love that should be there. “Look at us now.”

“Are you drunk?” Steve heard himself ask sharply.

Bucky just shook his head. He stepped closer. There was no love in his eyes.

“Someone in there saw me watching you,” he said darkly. “Told me an hour was 600.”

Steve felt himself swallow.

“You get to keep all that 600?” Bucky asked, moving even closer. “Or do you only get a percentage?”

For a second, he didn’t answer. He was begging himself, this reality to deny it, to say that it hadn’t happened again. He didn’t get his wish.

“I get half.”

Bucky nodded slowly. He looked down at his feet, kicked his boots along the ground, then reached into his pockets and took out a billfold. He counted out some bills, taking another step, another.

There were just a few steps between them, then. Bucky pushed the wallet back into his pocket, then
held up the money.

“1, 2, 3,” he counted aloud, “4, 5, 6.”

He held it out.

“Here,” he said, his tone bitter. “600 for when we were kids. You can keep all of it even; no middle man.”

Steve felt his throat tightening and his hand shook as he reached out to take it. Bucky looked disgusted.

“I asked you to do it,” Steve said in a shaking voice.

“Yeah, well, obviously it don’t mean much to you,” Bucky answered sharply. “Is that enough or was the fact that it was your first time make it worth more?”

Steve crumpled up the money in his hand, just staring at it. Then he flung it away from him, scattering it across the ground.

“I don’t want it,” he spat. “It’s been nine years, Buck.”

“What, you want interest?” Bucky shouted. “Take it, I don’t wanna cheat you!”

“I asked you!” Steve shouted back. “It’s been nine years, what do you want from me?”

“I want that nine years back!” Bucky snapped. “All the time I wasted on you, when you just ended up here anyway!”

Steve stepped on a rumpled bill and shoved Bucky back hard. “Get away from me!” he cried out. “Couldn’t you take a hint when I stopped answering your calls? You’re the one who couldn’t move on!”

“I made you a promise!” Bucky snarled.
Steve reached up towards his throat. He grabbed a chain and yanked on it.

“Here,” he spat. “Take it, take your fucking promise. You clearly don’t want me anymore, take it!”

Bucky softened, his eyes going sorry. Steve shoved the chain, a ring too small for an adult dangling from it, into Bucky’s hands.

“Give it back to the pawn shop,” he snapped. “And stay away from me.”

“Stevie,” Bucky murmured, catching the ring.

“No!” Steve yelled. “You think I want to be there? You really think I want to be stuck selling myself to pay rent? Do you?!”

Bucky lost the fight in him, now just staring at the ring in his hands. Steve, inside, was sobbing, wishing he could reach out.

“Why don’t you get yourself blown up in Iraq or wherever the hell you’re going?” Steve snapped at Bucky, grabbing keys from his pocket and unlocking the car Bucky had been leaning against. “You can send me a check for however much you think my virginity was worth if you’re so hung up on owing me; I never left home.”

He got into the car and slammed the door. As he jammed the key into the ignition and turned it, he began to finally sob. He stepped on the gas and tore out of the parking spot, clipping someone’s tail light as he drove away. There were tears obscuring his vision. A glance in the rearview mirror showed that Bucky was chasing him, calling for him.

Steve wanted to hit the brakes. He hit the gas.

The light was red. By all bad luck, it was red and he didn’t notice. His gaze was fixed on the rear view mirror, until a truck blared its horn and he looked out to the left. Just in time to see the semi that had started at its greenlight and couldn’t stop in time as Steve ran the red.

Bucky screamed something. Steve squeezed his eyes shut.
“Does this feel real?” Bucky asked in a whisper.

He opened them into darkness.

A rat squeaked. Its teeth chittered. Steve felt something sharp bite into his leg, then another, then another, then more squeaking.

Something with small, sharp claws hauled itself onto Steve’s back. He lay on his front, the floor beneath him hard and damp, and something crawled onto his back. He felt it against his skin, heard it, but as before, he couldn’t move.

Things crawled over his skin. The rats bit him, clambered over him wherever they pleased. The damp earth soaked into his skin, but not only could the real Steve not move, whoever it was in this reality didn’t move. He just lay there, suffering the bites of the rats and whatever else was in that dark place.

He was vaguely aware of how little he could breathe. His lungs just couldn’t seem to lift themselves enough to fill. He was slowly choking. Dying, again.

“Funny how that keeps happening, isn’t it?” Bucky commented. “Here you are.”

Above him, something crashed open. He heard pounding footsteps, then a shout of something he couldn’t quite catch. Someone lifted him, rolling him over and scooping him up. Steve couldn’t breathe. He really couldn’t breathe now, he was actually choking, but that didn’t seem to matter. There were people yelling, and Steve wasn’t breathing. He wasn’t breathing. He couldn’t breathe.

“Call it,” someone said.

“Time of death, 10:37 PM.”

“Get out. GET OUT!”

Steve wasn’t breathing. He was still conscious, but he couldn’t breathe. Why wasn’t this one ending like the rest? Why did he have to choke like this for so long? Why couldn’t he just die and be dead?
“Shh,” Bucky’s twisted voice whispered. “Be patient, sweetheart. It isn’t done.”

Steve could still see, still feel, but he was dead, he wasn’t breathing and he could feel the fact that he hadn’t taken a breath in minutes. Bucky’s face swam in his vision. He was crying.

“I’m so sorry,” he said in a cracked voice. “Baby – baby boy, dragă, amant, I’m so – I’m so sorry. I was supposed to protect you! You were supposed to be safe!”

He ended in a shout that became a sob. Steve could only lay there, playing dead.

Bucky crumpled over Steve, hugging his body and sobbing. Then he pushed up and screamed for someone else, shouted, spitting rage, and Natasha entered, dragging in someone Steve didn’t even know.

Bucky drew a gun. Natasha threw the man to the floor and Bucky wasted no time in shooting him in the shoulder. The man screamed in pain, falling down, and Bucky fired again. And again, and again, and again, until all Steve could see or hear was the muzzle flash and the bang of the gun.

“He’s dead!” Natasha shouted. “You can’t kill him anymore, James, he’s dead!”

Bucky finally stopped firing. Steve was still a corpse, still choking and suffocating himself. Bucky let the gun hang at his side, staring down at whoever it was that had caused such anger.

“Go,” Bucky told Natasha. “Go – go home.”

His voice cracked again.

“What about you?” Natasha asked warily.

Bucky turned, tucked the gun back under his jacket, and slipped his arms under Steve’s back and knees. He lifted him and began to walk away.
“Go home, Natashka,” Bucky said brokenly. “Just go.”

“James –”

“Go,” Bucky repeated, his feet falling heavy on the stairs. “It’s alright.”

Natasha didn’t chase him. Steve wanted to scream at her for it, but she didn’t chase after them. Bucky carried Steve into a bedroom, one that looked like it belonged to a young boy, and laid him down on the bed. He got in, too, wrapping around Steve’s corpse.

He took the gun back out. Steve wished he could scream. Bucky buried his face in Steve’s hair, then pressed the gun against his jaw.

“I’m so sorry, baby boy,” he whispered.

“Still doesn’t feel real?” the voice of the twisted Bucky hissed.

The gun fired one more time. Steve finally managed to scream.

He was sobbing, lying among twisted sheets that were soaked in sweat that rank of heat-scent. He was sobbing out Bucky’s name, writhing, and Rebecca sat next to him, dabbing his forehead with a cloth when she could.

“It’ll be alright, Steve,” she was saying, but Steve knew this version of him wasn’t going to believe her.

“It hurts!” he screamed. “It hurts, it hurts! I can’t stand it, God, save me, it hurts!”

“It’s alright!” Rebecca insisted, tears streaming down her face. “Please, Steve, please, let Pa break it, let Pa make it stop hurting! Bucky wouldn’t want you to hurt!”

“No!” Steve cried. “No-oo-ooh, I can’t! I can’t – Bucky, I can’t –”
“Bucky wouldn’t want you hurting!” Rebecca swore. “Bucky wouldn’t want your bond to kill you, please, Steve, please! Let Pa break it!”

“No!” Steve wailed.

The pain was agony worse than anything Steve had even yet been through. The scent gland in his neck was burning, feeling like it was about to burst into flames under his skin and consume him alive. His skin crawled with fire ants, all biting and piercing and burning and he couldn’t see the end.

That wasn’t the agony, though.

“It’s going to kill you, I know it is!” Rebecca choked out. “Please, please, for Jamie? For your son! Let Pa break it!”

“No,” Steve just wailed.

There was a pain in his chest, in his heart, that felt like part of him had been ripped out and left just to bleed and rot. He could feel the teeth marks in his scent gland burning, searing pain that was only getting worse.

He knew what it was. It was bondsickness, quite plainly. Rebecca was begging him to allow her father to break the bond between him and Bucky, because somewhere, Bucky was dead.

“Don’t let this take you from Jamie!” Rebecca pleaded. “Bucky’s son needs you, your son needs you, Steve, please!”

“It’s all I have left!” Steve sobbed.

But it was killing him.

“Bucky wouldn’t want you in this pain,” Rebecca reasoned. “Bucky would want Pa to break it so you’d live, so you could take care of Jamie and be happy again!”

“I don’t want to be happy!” Steve insisted. “I need Bucky, I need him, I need him, I need him!”
“But he’s dead, Steve!”

“No!” Steve just sobbed.

Where was the child Rebecca was talking about? Steve could only hope that the boy wasn’t in the same house, so he didn’t have to hear his mother’s wails. This was only going to end one way. He could already feel himself weakening.

“You’re dying,” Rebecca choked out. “Please, please don’t let yourself die, Steve. Jamie needs you.”

“I need Bucky,” Steve whimpered.

“Jamie’s eighth birthday is next week,” Rebecca tried. “Please, you just have to hold out until then. Please don’t go!”

“I need Bucky,” Steve could only repeat. “I can’t – It hurts too much!”

“Pa can break it!” Rebecca begged. “We can save you!”

Steve shook his head. It was already too late.

“Please, Steve,” Rebecca gasped, starting to sob herself. “We can’t lose you, too!”

“I need my Alpha,” Steve whimpered hopelessly.

Rebecca’s cold cloth touched his forehead again, but Steve was losing the feeling. He sobbed weakly into his pillow, which held no trace of Bucky’s scent. Nothing could cure bondsickness this bad, not even if another Alpha broke the bond.

“Jamie needs you,” Rebecca croaked. “I need you.”
“Bucky,” Steve whimpered.

Rebecca began to sob in earnest, the cloth slipping from her fingers. Steve’s eyes rolled back in his head. Rebecca’s sobs filled his ears.

“It is real,” the twisted Bucky whispered.

He opened his eyes to a simple kitchen and a metal bowl filled with pale yogurt sat on a square dining table. A hand was on his shoulder and he looked up to see Bucky’s smiling face. That sight was such a relief that Steve wanted to surge up and throw his arms around Bucky’s neck, hug him and sob and never let go.

“What if you stayed with me?” Bucky asked.

Steve wanted to say he would, anything but the endless bloodshed and pain and death.

“I’m spending the summer in France,” came out of his mouth.

Bucky’s smile was gone in an instant. Steve turned and walked away.

He just walked away. He didn’t even look back.

It was a blur; Steve saw faceless men and sucked their dicks, let them fuck him and walked away without looking back. He saw Doctor Erskine looking at him in disappointment as he left school and started working at a massage clinic of ill repute. He saw a syringe full of something he didn’t recognize and he pushed it into his own veins. The blur became a psychedelic trip after that, heartless fuck after heartless fuck in an unending stream.

A doctor looked at him with resignation.

“I don’t have the flu, do I?” Steve asked her with horror.
“No,” the doctor said. “And you’ve got Chlamydia as well. I can refer you to an abortion clinic?”

Steve trembled and shook, his vision was blurred, his head ached, his fingers screamed with every movement. He stumbled and felt a pain in his gut, then fell to the ground and clutched to his stomach. Tears fell from his eyes and he got back up and started to run, slipping on the ice more than once.

Another doctor, this one didn’t look surprised.

“You have miscarried,” he said in a gentle tone. “I can refer you to a counseling service.”

Steve didn’t go to a counseling service. He went home.

He knocked on Bucky’s door, still shaking from withdrawal and blood loss. After a second, the door opened.

“What?” the woman standing there snapped, while the baby on her hip just chewed on its hand.

“Does Bucky Barnes still live here?” Steve asked, his teeth chattering.

“Unfortunately, but he’s moving out as soon as he gets a new job,” the woman retorted. “Why? He owe you money or did he knock you up, too? If he did, I gotta tell ya, you’re the third one this week. I bet they give a discount over at the abortion clinic for Omegas keeping him from actually reproducing anymore,” she concluded sharply.


“Whatever,” the woman snapped, slamming the door.

Steve walked away again. He looked over his shoulder. He watched himself seek out a back alley and someone definitely selling laced heroin. He shot up with a used needle and walked with a sway to his step through the icy streets of Brooklyn.

He stopped on a bridge. Steve just stared across it, looking at the rush of the highway under him. He
reached into his pockets, feeling for something; paper, a phone, and found nothing. Right. He’d traded his phone for the heroin. He turned back.

He lifted a pen and a pad of paper from a nearby bodega, then walked back to the bridge. He sat down to write the note, determined to do it properly. Steve couldn’t stop himself. He addressed it to Bucky.

The pen and the pad, he tossed away when he was done. He clutched the note in his hand. He heard that bodies locked up when the heart stopped beating; he wouldn’t lose the slip of paper. He stepped up to the edge of the bridge.

“HEY!”

Steve lifted a foot and surged backward, a pair of arms wrapped around his midsection. He didn’t even fight, just stumbled away and blinked dazedly at nothing. He turned to face whoever had just stopped him, to tell them off.

“Oh, my God,” Bucky exhaled, his face pale. “Oh, my God – Oh, my God!”

Steve just blinked.

Bucky stepped forward, reaching out again. Steve didn’t have a word to say to him; he’d written it all down already.

“What – What were you doing?” Bucky asked, like he knew the answer and was begging for it to be different.

Steve unclenched his fist. He pressed the paper from his palm into Bucky’s.

“Don’t look,” was all he said.


Steve shut his eyes as he fell again.
“It’s real,” the twisted Bucky hissed.

He didn’t feel or even hear it this time.

“You appear in a thousand timelines,” the twisted Bucky said.

Steve opened his eyes to see Bucky caressing his face, a tight smile on his lips. Then someone ripped him away, two men with spears. Someone else grabbed Steve, hauling him back. Steve screamed as the two men irreverently pierced Bucky’s sides with the spears. A dagger cut into his own throat and he choked on blood as he watched Bucky slump to the ground.

“Do you know how many end well?” the twisted Bucky asked.

Steve panted, falling back against a cushion. A baby was crying, but so was Bucky, sat next to him and holding his hand. Steve exhaled and didn’t feel his lungs inflate again. Bucky started to sob.

“Out of the thousands?”

Steve ducked the swing of a sword and knocked his shield against his assailant’s chest. Bucky fell to the ground, his eyes wide. A crowd around them cheered, chanting for blood. Steve’s sword tip hovered at Bucky’s throat. Someone, a voice that projected across the arena, called for death. Steve’s chin began to tremble as much as his sword. Bucky just nodded and shut his eyes, laying his head back in the earth. Steve shut his eyes, too, then pushed his sword down.

“Oh, my dear boy,” the twisted Bucky murmured, clucking his tongue.

Steve reached for Bucky’s hand, wind whipping around them as loud as Bucky’s voice screaming to him. The bar Steve was clinging to broke away and he fell, snow whipping around him. Bucky became a speck in the distance, the ground got bigger.

“None.”
Steve held his hands up in a placating gesture, begging. Bucky brandished a gun, demanding he back up. He stood at the edge of a rooftop, looking down. Steve was crying, begging Bucky just to get off the edge. Bucky shook his head, tears clinging to his lashes. He stepped off, going in the wrong direction.

“Not one ends happy.”

Steve sat in a bombed-out bar in London, a bottle of useless single malt whiskey in his hand. He’d drunk half and couldn’t feel the buzz of the liquor in his veins. He felt the buzz of the gun in his hand, though. Peggy hadn’t seen it. She sighed as she stood up, her hand brushing his shoulder, and walked away. She was too late after the gunshot.

“Time is never kind to you,” the twisted Bucky said softly. “God is never kind to you. God never cared for you. Don’t you realize that? Wouldn’t it just be so much nicer to stay here with me?”

Steve finally grabbed his own head, squeezing his eyes shut. “You’re not real!” he screamed.

“Stevie,” the twisted Bucky sighed.

Steve stood in a dark alley, counting bills. A man with the satisfied cock to his gait that only came from a good blowjob walked away. Another approached and Steve pushed the money away to plaster a fake, alluring smile to his face.

“Hey, sugar,” he purred. “Lil’ lonely?”

“Steve?”

Steve’s grin dropped in favor of fear. Bucky looked at him from under an Army cap, pushed high up on his brow. His cheeks were flushed from liquor, his eyes bloodshot. He looked more drunk than Steve had seen most alcoholics.

“Buck,” Steve whispered.

“Are you –?” Bucky started, then his face twisted with disgust. “Are you whoring yourself?”
Steve straightened his spine, standing taller. “So what if I am?” he snapped. “Omega’s gotta earn a livin’ somehow, wiseass.”

Bucky grabbed his collar and slammed him against the brick wall behind him. Steve’s head hit it and it cracked hard, but he didn’t dare gasp in pain as Bucky glared at him, face twisted in a snarl of horror.

“You’re a whore? ” Bucky spat. “A common slut? Is this what you’ve become?”

“Let me go!” Steve hissed, wriggling.

Bucky slammed him against the brick again and Steve gasped; he felt something warm and wet trickle down the back of his head. He could smell blood now.

“You enjoy this?” Bucky snarled. “Huh? You like bein’ a slut, you filthy bitch? Do you even charge your fuckin’ customers?”

“I’ll scream!” Steve choked out. “I’ll scream for cops!”

“Fuckin’ scream,” Bucky dared him, then dropped him with one hand and instead drew back his fist. “I’ll knock your teeth out. Maybe your customers’d like that, huh?”

“What the hell are you doing!” Steve spat back. “I thought we was friends, Buck! You said you loved me!”

“I ain’t friends with some common whore,” Bucky growled. “I sure ain’t in love with one, neither!”

“Lemme go!” Steve hissed. “I’ll go an’ you’ll never see me again, I swear!”

Bucky growled again, cracking his knuckles, then dropped his fist. Instead, he reached inside his jacket. He drew out a pistol. Steve’s eyes widened.
“I thought I’d come home t’a you one day,” Bucky hissed. “I thought I’d get t’a take ya t’a church, make you my wife! Now I see you here? What the fuck, Steve!”

“Don’t do this,” Steve begged as Bucky shoved the barrel of the pistol into his gut. “Please, you don’t wanna do this –”

“Don’t fuckin’ tell me what to do!” Bucky yelled. “You little fucking bitch! I wanted to marry you!”

“Let me go!” Steve begged, starting to cry from fear.

“Shuddup!” Bucky screamed, shoving the gun into Steve’s stomach.

Time slowed down. There was a bang and then a flash of light. Steve went limp. Bucky dropped him and Steve slumped on the wall, falling. Bucky looked surprised, actually, like he hadn’t realized the gun had been loaded or even in his hand at all.

“Fuck,” Steve gasped, pressing his hands to his stomach. He lifted them and saw them covered in blood. “Fuck!”

“Shit,” Bucky whispered, looking around. “Shit! I ain’t gettin’ jail for this!”

“You shot me!” Steve shouted.

Bucky lifted the gun again, his eyes wide. It flashed and Steve saw only white.

“It is real,” the twisted Bucky whispered. “And do you want to know something really fun? That timeline? That’s the only time he’s completely honest with you.”

Steve screamed, grabbing his head. He fell to his knees and heard them crack under his weight. He screamed and screamed, shielding his ears from it. His eyes squeezed shut. All he could see was the muzzle flash, like a paused movie, like he could rewind and again see the look of pure and honest disgust in Bucky’s eyes.
All he could see was that last muzzle flash.

He heard a woman scream, too, a voice unfamiliar. It was full of rage, then cut out very suddenly. After that, there was a chilling silence.

“Everyone okay?” a man asked. “She’s gone, is everyone okay?”

“Stevie?” Bucky whispered, his voice right next to Steve’s ear.

Steve gasped and flung himself away, falling onto the floor and scrambling to get back, away. Bucky jerked back, his hands lifting as his eyes widened.

“It’s okay!” Bucky said. “It’s me, it’s me, sweetheart!”

“You’re not real!” Steve gasped, scrambling back again. “You’re not real, don’t – don’t – Stop!” he just sobbed.

“I am real!” Bucky said, his voice full of shock. “What happened, what did you see?”

“It’s over!” the same man yelled. “Whatever you saw, it’s over!”

Steve twisted around and saw Dr. Strange standing in the middle of the room, orange discs glowing around his hands and a long red cape fluttering at his back. Wanda knelt next to Steve and touched his arm; he flinched again but she held on.

“It’s over,” she murmured. “It really is over, I promise.”

“What did you see?” Bucky asked.

Steve panted, looking around. Dr. Strange was helping Tony to his feet, but was already looking over to him.
“She got you bad,” Strange said, panting. “Jesus, she took you through 13 alternate realities!”

“What?” Steve muttered, twisting around. “What? Those were real?!”

Strange glanced to Tony, who just shook his head, then crossed the room to kneel down in front of Steve. He did something with his orange discs, then his hands began to glow and he passed them over Steve’s body.

“Healthy,” he said. “No injuries.”

He paused over Steve’s midsection; his eyebrows shot up.

“Got a heartbeat,” he said. “Going fine.”

Steve sagged a little, touching his stomach. His baby was okay.

“Two heartbeats,” Strange added. “Congratulations, you’re having twins.”

Steve couldn’t even react to that. Bucky edged nearer and touched Steve’s leg; Steve flinched, drawing back. Bucky jerked away again, his eyes wide.

“What did you see?” Strange asked softly.

Steve opened his mouth and shut it again. He shook his head.

“Whatever it was,” Strange continued, “it’s over now. It’s isolated in its own reality. What she showed you was just a shadow of the real timeline; and any tragedy, she isolated them for their effect on you. I can promise you, nothing you saw has no good side.”

“I saw nothing but death!” Steve shouted abruptly. “How does that have a good side?”
“No death?” Strange offered. He pushed up. “If it would make you feel better to think of it as not real, it wasn’t.”

“That doesn’t work that way!” Steve snapped.

Strange shrugged. “Not that kind of doctor,” he said, walking away.

Bucky reached out hesitantly. Steve almost flinched again, the snarl in Bucky’s eyes repeating in his mind.

“Baby?” Bucky whispered.

Steve’s heart thudded in his chest. Wanda sank to her knees next to him, then wrapped her arms around his shoulders and hugged him tightly. Steve didn’t react for a second, then he reached up with the hand not supporting himself and touched her shoulder. He swallowed a lump in his throat.

“Baby, it’s alright,” Bucky murmured, edging nearer. “It’s just me.”

Steve almost let out a whimper. It had just been Bucky who had shot him!

“I’d never hurt you, sweetheart,” Bucky said softly. “Just – C’mere. Let me hold you, angel.”

Steve felt the fear on both sides of their bond. He crashed, burned, and, desperate, he reached out for Bucky. Wanda’s arms slipped from his shoulders as Steve collapsed against Bucky’s chest, his face tucked into his neck. He suppressed the first sob, but the next one escaped. Bucky petted his hair, shushing him gently.

“’S alright,” Bucky murmured. “You’re alright, you’re safe, sweetheart, I’ve got you.”

Bucky pulled Steve fully into his lap, locking his arms around him. Steve sagged against him, thoroughly exhausted. Looking towards the windows, he saw that the sandstorm had vanished and the sun was still shining brightly outside.
“How long did she have me?” Steve whispered.

“Only a few seconds,” Bucky assured him.

Steve’s jaw dropped. He stammered for a second. “It felt like – like hours!”

“It was just a few seconds,” Bucky promised.

“What the fuck was that!” Tony spat out across the room.

“A witch,” Dr. Strange said. “I have her magical signature now, I’ll be able to track her. I banished her to a pocket dimension for now, but we’ll have to find a better way of resolving this situation before she breaks free.”

“Witch?” Natasha asked.

“Like me?” Wanda asked hesitantly.

Strange turned to look at her, then strode over and held out his hand. Wanda hesitated, then set hers in his. Strange covered it with his other hand, frowning, then shook his head.

“Your power is different than hers,” he said. “Similar, but different. Have any of you heard of Infinity Stones?”

They all shook their heads. Strange sighed.

“I have one,” he said. “There’s another on Earth; you have its signature, Wanda.”

“How many are there?” Clint asked.

“Six,” Strange said. “I have one, the Time Stone, the Mind Stone is what you’re made from,” he
added, pointing to Wanda. “But from what I can tell, the Witch has the power of the Reality and Soul stones as well as some other power; probably innate.”

“Loki’s scepter?” Natasha suggested.

Strange shrugged. “I have other people tracking it down. Right now, this Sorceress is a greater priority. She’s consuming souls.”

“What?” Steve croaked.

Strange glanced to him, then sighed. “She’s consuming souls,” he repeated. “My temple noticed a burst of soul energy a day or so ago that had to be her consuming several souls at once.”

“Was that what she was trying to do with us?” Tony demanded.

“Yes,” Thor spoke up. “I have heard of a being such as this before. My people call it Ymnar.”

“Yes, Ymnar,” Strange agreed. “Earth people call it Hive.”

“Hive?” Wanda repeated. “Strucker spoke of that. It’s the god of –”

“Hydra,” Steve muttered.

“All of Hydra’s members dropped dead two days ago,” Natasha said.

Strange reached up and covered his face with a hand, sighing. “You should all go rest,” he said. “Escaping Hive is no easy feat. You’ll need sleep and carbs.”

“Whoa, what if she comes back?” Tony demanded.

“I’m going to cast some wards around this tower,” Strange promised. “It would take her hours to
break through them and by then, I’ll have been alerted.”

Steve sagged into Bucky’s arms again, relieved for the security. Bucky’s grip tightened on him.

“Ymnar does not rest,” Thor warned.

“She’s locked up,” Strange repeated. “Pocket dimension, time loop stuff. It’ll take her a long ass time to get out of there, primordial Lovecraftian Outer God or not.”

“A pocket dimension?” Tony repeated. He stepped closer, visibly shaking. “A fucking pocket dimension? You think that’s gonna hold a god? What the hell do you know, anyway?”


“What kind of doctor are you?” Tony spluttered.

“Neurosurgeon,” Strange answered flippantly. “Rest, eat, make appointments with your various shrinks. I’ll come back tonight to discuss what we’re going to do about Hive, seeing as it seems to really like you guys.”

“Hive is a Hydra thing!” Clint claimed. “Hydra is Cap’s department!”

Steve flinched, drawing back. Strange glanced at him and sighed.

“Let’s try to leave him alone,” he said. “Growing twins is hard enough.”

“Shit,” Tony muttered.

Strange waved his hands and a portal of orange sparks appeared. “I’ll be back in a few hours,” he said. “Hey, Thor, do me a favor, summon your brother? We could use his help with this.”
“I will summon all the great warriors of Asgard,” Thor promised. “To best a foe such as Ymnar is nigh on impossible.”

“Cheery,” Strange muttered. “Four hours.”

He disappeared through the portal. Steve turned his face into Bucky’s neck.

“You heard him,” Natasha declared. “Sleep and carbs. We’re all piling on the common floor, too. Sam, Clint, help Bruce? Steve and Bucky, I’m gonna raid your apartment for blankets and pillows.”

Steve nodded. “There’s a nest in the living room,” he mumbled.

“I’ll get it,” she promised. “No one can be on their own until this – this witch is dealt with.”

Bucky adjusted Steve in his arms and turned to go. Wanda and Pietro neared, their hands linking, and Wanda reached up to touch Steve’s leg. Steve tried to smile at her. He felt exhausted.

“Sleep,” Bucky rumbled. “You don’t gotta do nothin’ but stay safe, sweetheart. Hear?”

“Hear,” Steve whispered back.

His Alpha’s word was law. He only had to trust it and he would be safe.

Chapter End Notes

so.... i'll see you next week?

continued content warnings: this chapter contains glimpses into "alternate realities" that feature several varying traumatic events, all from steve's perspective. these events do not take place within the timeline of intertwined/edges blurred. there are 12 alternate realities depicted, all of which appear as very short scenes with blunt but non-graphic descriptions. there is no graphic rape or suicide shown.
1. contains direct discussion of rape, murder, genital mutilation, and suicide. 2. contains murder by drug overdose, murder for revenge, then suicide by gunshot. 3. contains an argument between spited and hurt lovers, who part ways in anger,
and unfortunately ends with the careless mistake of running a red light and the car crash that results; this is not graphic. 4. contains a scene showing "bondsickness," a feature of a/b/o trope; when one of a bonded couple dies, the other remains with an emotional black hole that drains their will to live and can cause death, in this scene, it does. 5. contains discussion of drug use and addiction, accidental pregnancy and a miscarriage early in due to complications relating to the drug use, following the miscarriage, the mother suffers severe depression and commits suicide. 6-11 are short, two to three sentence descriptions of more realities. 6 involves execution. 7 involves death following childbirth; the child survives. 8 involves death in a gladiatorial arena. 9 involves the reversal of steve and bucky's positions on zola's train over the alps; steve falls instead of bucky. 10 and 11 involve the seconds before suicides presumably related to PTSD. 12 is another full scene and involves a drunken argument between spited and bitter lovers, however one is angry enough to threaten violence and then murders the other. these alternate realities are presented by an unreliable narrator.
 Chapter Summary

"And if he bring a lamb for a sin offering, he shall bring it a female without blemish."
Leviticus 4:21

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: graphic depiction of vomiting, self-harm, discussion of human sacrifice with intention, child endangerment.

you might've noticed that we have a chapter count now. don't get freaked out. or be freaked out by the warnings. okay just keep reading

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Natasha and Clint produced what seemed like every soft surface in the whole Tower. There was a small mountain of pillows on the floor, every couch was stacked high with blankets, and Clint
emptied a large plastic tub of plush afghans onto the floor in the center of the room.

“Are those hand-made?” Sam asked.


Steve sat in the very corner of one of the sectional sofas, his legs drawn up to and clutched against his chest. He felt like he was on the very edge of a breakdown and a cliff at all once. Bucky hovered just beside him, reluctant. Bucky had put him down and Steve had drawn up into a ball and pulled away from him.

“Sweetheart?” Bucky murmured.

Steve hid his face in his knees. He was shaking. He didn’t answer. Bucky’s hand brushed his shoulder and Steve couldn’t help but flinch.

Bucky drew back hastily, waves of regret and shame pouring through their bond. Steve just hid his face.

“Take these,” Natasha’s voice said, then several blankets and pillows hit Steve’s shins. “Your nest.”

Steve scrambled to grab the nearest quilt and tugged it around him, wrapping himself up in it tightly. Bucky quickly started building up the pillows around him and Steve lifted his face a little, to gaze wide-eyed at his Alpha.

“Hey, baby,” Bucky murmured.

He reached out. Steve told himself to stop being so stupid and shifted a little. He turned on his hip and nudged his shoulder into Bucky’s. Bucky immediately wrapped his arm around him and Steve slipped down until his head was in Bucky’s lap. Bucky curled his arm over his waist and let his metal hand come to rest in his hair. Steve pulled the blankets and pillows into a better position, better to hide in, and turned over to press his face into Bucky’s stomach. He breathed. Alpha meant safe. He was safe.
“We’re ordering food,” Sam declared to the room at large. “Who wants what?”

“Pizza!” Clint replied.

“Obviously. What else?”

Bucky ran his fingers through Steve’s hair gently. “What do you want to eat, baby?”

Steve shrugged a shoulder.

“How about something hot? Some good bread?”

Steve shrugged again and wormed closer. Bucky shifted and extended a leg beside Steve, pulling him further into his lap.

“Stew?”

Steve just shrugged.

Bucky swept his flesh hand through Steve’s hair, trailing down over his cheek. “Are you hungry at all?”

After a second, Steve shook his head.

“Alright, I’m just gonna order from every place in the next ten blocks, we’ll see what happens.”

“We must discuss Ymnar,” Thor’s voice announced quietly.

The light chatter that had started then stopped. Steve turned back to look over the room.
Thor sat in the only armchair, a hand stroking his beard and a pensive look on his face. Wanda and Pietro had chosen a spot on the floor with a large pile of blankets and pillows, while Natasha stood nearby, passing out the afghans still. Clint was on the floor with them, looking at his feet. Sam stood by the kitchen, phone in hand.

“What’s there to discuss?” Sam asked. “The wizard’s coming back to talk about it later, in the meantime, we need rest and food.”

“There is no rest with Ymnar!” Thor shouted abruptly.

Steve started to sit up. Bucky quickly caught his shoulder and pulled him back in and this time, Steve managed not to flinch this time.

“Have the Asgardians fought Ymnar before?”

Thor glanced at him, then sighed. He slumped in the chair, his hands falling to his sides.

“Once,” he admitted. “Long before I was born. Long before my father or his father, before we even developed faster than light travel.”

“Yeesh,” the large pile of blankets between Wanda and Pietro piped up. Steve startled, until Tony poked his head out, his hair sticking up all over. “How many millennia ago was that?” he asked.

“Several hundred,” Thor said. “We had only just developed space travel, we were barely exploring our own solar system. My great-great-great grandfather was only a boy, but he heard his father, the king, telling his mother what was happening. Ymnar was a beast of legend to us, and we had just begun an age of science. We did not believe in Old Gods.”

“So, what happened?” Sam asked.

“Ymnar came to our planet and consumed the souls of millions of our people,” Thor said. “Every attempt we made to fight it off lost more of our forces.”

“Obviously you defeated it,” Tony said. “How?”
Thor leaned forward to rest on his elbows. “We cut out our central city and cast it into the skies.”

They didn’t answer him.

“We sacrificed the planet to save a select few,” Thor continued. “Ymnar was distracted by the souls of the damned we left behind and we escaped.”

“Well,” Tony muttered, sinking further into his blanket-pile. “Can’t do that.”

Thor shook his head. “You don’t have the technology to do so.”

“We wouldn’t even if we did,” Steve said. “This – This Ymnar must have a weakness.”

“It has no weaknesses!” Thor shouted, jumping up. “It is a primordial force of hunger, it consumes pain and anguish and horror until all life is expended in its path!”

“It has to have a weakness!” Steve countered, sitting upright rapidly. “Everything does!”

“Guys –” Sam started.

“The only solution is to run,” Thor said, like he was pleading. “Run away and hope that it doesn’t find you again.”

“We can’t run!” Steve insisted.

“We have to!” Thor returned. “Heimdall can take us all to Asgard, where we’ll be safe from Ymnar! You and your child will be safe, Steven!”

“We’d never be safe as long as it’s alive,” Steve snapped. “You heard Strange; it’s attached to us.”
“To you,” Wanda said quietly.

Steve dropped his gaze again. “I am Hydra’s nemesis,” he muttered bitterly.

“There is no defeating it,” Thor pleaded.

A shower of orange sparks appeared in their midst and Doctor Strange stepped out, looking haggard and holding a Starbucks cup.

“I asked you to summon Loki and now you want to just run away,” he said in a bland tone to Thor.

“Ymnar is undefeatable!” Thor insisted.

“Did you consider that we just need to trick Ymnar into consuming its own soul?” Strange asked with a sigh.

Thor jerked back with a look of bewilderment. “Ymnar has no soul,” he said. “That’s why it consumes them, because it has none.”

“It has a host,” Strange said. “It’s immobile without a host, Thor. The host has a soul.”

“Oh,” Thor muttered.

Strange gave a nod, then raised his coffee cup to his lips and took a long drag. Tony looked up from the floor with jealousy in his eyes. Natasha noticed and dropped an afghan on his head.

“No coffee!” she snapped.

“Fuck,” Tony muttered under the afghan.

“Little ears,” Clint scolded weakly.
“We’re not children,” Pietro protested.

“You’re not even presented yet,” Clint replied. “Neutral little babies!”

Pietro rolled his eyes.

“How do we trick Ymnar into consuming its host’s soul?” Steve asked.

Strange held up a finger, continuing to gulp down his coffee. Steve slumped against Bucky’s shoulder as he waited. Strange tipped the cup upside down and drained it fully, then tossed it into a trashcan and sighed heavily. He shook himself and jumped a few times, his hair flopping around. Steve gave him a disconcerted look.

“That was 20 shots of espresso,” Strange announced. “I’m going to be awake for the next 48 hours and we trick Ymnar into consuming the soul of its host by turning its magic on its host!”

“What?” Steve spluttered.

“That sounds like an ex machina,” Tony muttered from underneath the blanket.

“It very much is,” Strange agreed. “I know a fellow for those, however. Thor, your brother?”

Thor sighed and dropped back into his armchair. “We have all guaranteed our own doom,” he said. “But my brother is coming.”

“Excellent,” Strange said, clapping his hands together. “My buddy Wong will be showing up soon with our ex machina guy and we can discuss how we’re going to trap Ymnar and trick it into consuming its host’s soul. Best idea I have at the moment,” he gave a shrug, “we use Captain America as bait.”

“No!” Bucky shouted. “No!”
Strange held up his hands. “Ymnar immediately went for alternate realities with him, she clearly enjoyed torturing him most of all!”

“And that’s a good thing?” Bucky snapped. “No!”

“He’s even pregnant with twins!” Tony pointed out, yanking the afghan off his face. “Super bad idea, that’s putting three souls at stake.”

“Cap?” Strange sighed.

Steve just shrank away, pulling the blankets around him closer. He felt like a coward, but the thought of facing that – that witch again? It felt like cowardice-worthy. Strange sighed and nodded, looking away.

“No Cap bait,” he agreed. “Who else has the level of trauma he apparently has?”

The rest of the Avengers glanced around. Steve peeked out from behind his blankets.

“What did she show you?” Natasha asked.


Strange looked back to him, his expression downfallen. He crossed the room and perched on the edge of the L section of the sofa in front of Steve, then held out his hand.

“May I?”

Steve hesitated. “What’re you gonna do?”

“See what she showed you,” Strange answered.
Steve jerked away, yanking the blankets around him. “No,” he spat out, “no, no, you can’t – I don’t—”

“It’s alright,” Strange insisted, “I need to see what she showed you; it may give us a clue on the extent of her powers.”

“She showed me a lot of death!” Steve snapped. “What else matters?”

“It matters if what she showed you were real realities,” Strange explained.

Steve hesitated. “She said it was real,” he whispered.

Strange held out his hand. “It may not have been,” he said gently. “Please? May I see?”

Steve glanced down, then reluctantly pushed his hand out from the blankets towards Strange.

“Will I have to relive it?” he asked quietly.

“No,” Strange answered. “You won’t have to feel a thing.”

Steve extended his hand. Strange just touched their fingertips together.

His lips tightened in a thin line. His eyebrows scrunched together, making several long lines in his forehead.

“Whew, boy,” he muttered. “Yikes.”

Steve looked away. He left his hand where it was, but he turned and pressed his face into Bucky’s shoulder.

“God,” Strange said. “Holy – Jesus Christ.”

Steve made a sudden sharp noise and Strange sucked in a breath.

“I’m not going to say,” he answered. “You’ll have to ask him yourself.”

Bucky touched Steve’s cheek. Steve looked away.

“What I can tell you,” Strange continued, “is that Ymnar went down to your very core and showed you everything you most feared and told you that it was real.”

“It felt real,” Steve whispered.

“It wasn’t,” Strange told him. “Not in the way that we are real, that this reality is real.”

“In what way is it real?” Steve asked sharply. “Is it real or is it not?”

“It’s both,” Strange answered cryptically. “What she showed you is what we call a dark mirror universe. They don’t really exist but as a concept in our heads; they only exist when we think of them, when we have nightmares, and so on. They are realities where nothing positive can ever happen, so they aren’t sustainable, they don’t follow the laws of the universe because everything is unbalanced towards tragedy.”

“But was it real?” Steve snapped.

“They are not fully functional universes,” Strange told him. “Those moments are all that exist and Ymnar created them to trap you; if you had agreed to stay in the good universe she showed you, that would have given her the opportunity to consume your soul.”

Steve drew his hand away. “She did a good job,” he muttered, pulling the blankets around him again.
Bucky hugged him and pressed a kiss to his hair. Steve turned over on his belly, hiding in Bucky’s arms. He pulled the blankets up over him completely, even over his head.

“You need to be able to breathe, baby,” Bucky murmured, his hand touching the blanket. “Can I move this?”

Steve shook his head. He felt Strange getting up, walking away, and he burrowed deeper into small nest he had just on the corner of the sofa. Bucky framed Steve in with his legs, caging him in, giving him boundaries and rails to hold onto. Steve curled up in that small space, resting his head in the bend of Bucky’s torso and hip and tucking his hands near the curve of his knee.

“I’m going to move the blanket just a little,” Bucky said quietly. “Just a little, just so you can breathe.”

Steve didn’t protest, because if Bucky thought he needed it then he needed it. Bucky shifted the blankets over him, only a little as he’d promised, and Steve was able to see a crack of the room over Bucky’s leg. He shut his eyes.

“Hydra calls this thing Hive,” Wanda spoke up, “because it hopes to create a unity in the world through a hive mind.”

“They say that Ymnar takes the souls of the tortured to give them rest,” Thor said quietly.

“Eh,” Strange said. “If consuming their soul counts as rest…”

Thor just shook his head. “It would have only been respite from the horrors it forces upon you,” he continued. “It knows your every fear,” he murmured.

“And your pain,” Tony said abruptly.

Steve couldn’t add to what they were saying. He hid his face in Bucky’s leg, closing his eyes tightly. He couldn’t admit to what he saw. The pure disgust in Bucky’s eyes, the hatred. The flash of the gun…
“She made my head ache,” Wanda told them. “She didn’t even see me.”

“Really?” Strange returned, cocking his head to the side. “Do you think she realized she was affecting you?”

Wanda shook her head.

“You’re the secret weapon, then,” Strange decided. “If she doesn’t know you have similar powers, you can turn her attacks back on her.”

Wanda’s eyes widened a little. Steve sat up.

“You can’t make her bait, either,” he snapped.

“Someone has to be bait,” Strange insisted.

“I can do it,” Wanda said abruptly.

Steve just looked at her, hesitating.

“I can,” Wanda said with a quick nod. “She has to be stopped.”

Pietro slipped closer to her to press a hand to her arm; he murmured something quietly in Romanian and Wanda just nodded again.

“We’re all that’s between her and storming the world,” she said. “We wanted to make a difference with our powers,” she told her brother, “this is it.”

“Are you sure?” Bucky asked.

Wanda nodded a third time.
“Right then,” Strange declared. “Carbs?”

“On the way,” Sam reported.

“Excellent,” Strange answered.

Orange sparks, the kind caused by Strange’s portal, appeared just behind Strange.

“There’s Wong,” Strange said, turning around to watch the portal open. “Great timing.”

From the portal, a stocky Asian man in monk robes stepped out and flicked his eyebrows up at Strange. Behind him, another man in a full red and black bodysuit complete with a full hood jumped out and waved.

“Hi!” he greeted cheerfully. “Avengers, assembled, big fan.”

“Wilson,” the monk sighed.

“What?” Sam and the newcomer blurted at the same time.

“Wong,” Strange said simply, pointing to the monk, “and Wade Wilson,” he concluded with a gesture to the other man.

“Deadpool,” Wade said quickly. “Merc with the mouth, kinda my tag line.”

“Fun name,” Tony said blandly.

“Thanks, Nitinol Man,” Deadpool answered with finger guns.
Tony glanced around, looking bemused.

“Right,” Strange continued, “we hole up here and wait until Hive gets itself out of the pocket dimension. Lure it in, Wanda, you’ll be secondary bait, Wilson will taunt her first.”

“I volunteered as tribute,” Wade said quickly.

“Why?” Tony demanded, eyes wide.

“I’m a masochist,” Wade admitted readily.

Steve blinked twice. He tugged his blankets a little farther over him to hide his discomfort and confusion.

“Okay,” Tony muttered.

“Also degradation,” Wade added, then made an OK sign and gave a nod. “Down. Also, I’m super fucking hard to kill.”

“Okay,” Tony repeated slower.

“The attitude in here is very awkward,” Wade observed. “Very shook. Much freaked. Am I not allowed to swear?” he asked, suddenly concerned. “What is this rated?”


“Avengers agitated,” Wade continued.

Strange gave Wade a hard look. The white eye patches on Wade’s hood widened comically.

“What?”
“Quiet,” Strange requested firmly.

Wade mimed zipping his mouth shut. There wasn’t even a hole for his lips in his hood.

“Thank you,” Strange added. “As I was saying, Wilson and Wanda will be bait. Loki, Wong, and I will trap Hive and help Wanda flip Hive’s powers on its host.”

“What about the rest of us?” Natasha asked.

“Avoid eye contact,” Strange said, raising his eyebrows. “This isn’t a villain you can beat into submission, this isn’t one you can fight.”

Natasha thinned her lips. Steve let his eyes fall to the ground, then drop to the inside of Bucky’s knee. For once, he was glad that he was being told to keep out of a fight.

“When will Loki arrive?”

“Momentarily.”

Steve twisted around to face the back of the sofa. Bucky bent over him and pressed his lips to his hair, then let his cheek rest against his head.

“You okay?” he whispered.

Steve just shook his head.

“Wanna talk?”

Steve, again, shook his head.
Bucky nuzzled his hair. Steve returned the gesture, rubbing his cheek against Bucky’s thigh. He just wanted to feel safe, he just wanted everything that the witch had shown him to stop making him afraid. He didn’t want to look at Bucky. He couldn’t.

“Food’ll be here soon.”

“Did you order anything with chocolate? Chocolate’s good for dopamine.”

“Yeah, I got a bunch’a stuff from a bakery.”

“Good.”

Bucky brushed through Steve’s hair with his fingers. Steve twisted more onto his hip and let his hand press to his stomach. He felt suddenly ill.

“Baby –?” Bucky said as Steve shoved up and staggered up from the couch. “What’s wrong?”

“Toilet,” Steve just mumbled as he ran.

He was suddenly dizzy as he rushed through the maze of eyes on him towards the nearest bathroom. He heard Bucky behind him and Steve hit the tile on his knees, throwing the lid of the toilet up in time to gag. His stomach heaved and he began to retch.

Over the sound of his throwing up, Steve heard the door slam shut.

“Steve!” Bucky called, his voice muffled. “Are you okay?”

Steve couldn’t answer him, he couldn’t breathe as he hurled; his throat spasmed and vomit lurched in his esophagus, he choked and coughed and his gut purged again.

“The door’s locked!”
“Systems say that the door is currently open,” JARVIS’s voice said.

“The fuck do you mean? It’s locked!”

Steve’s gut lurched one more time, causing his throat to spasm again and he choked for a second before he managed to spit everything out. He fell limp, trying to catch his breath, while he dry-heaved a few more times. His nose was running and his eyes watered, his face felt hot and his head spun with a lack of oxygen. His throat relaxed and Steve took in a shaking breath.

The door handle rattled behind him. Steve jolted, his heartbeat kicking up, but he could see Bucky’s shoes on the other side of the door.

Steve just inhaled. He couldn’t remember shutting the door.

“Open the door, baby!” Bucky called through.

Steve turned back to the toilet and spat out phlegm. His hands trembled violently as he grabbed the edge of the sink to pull himself up; his knees shook just as bad as his hands.

“Babydoll, let me in!” Bucky shouted. “Let me help you!”

Steve just staggered to the sink and bent over it to switch on the water and splash his face. He cupped his hands under the stream and rinsed his mouth, washing out the foul aftertaste of bile. A gentle hand touched the back of his neck and brushed his hair out of his hot face, fingers cool against his skin.

“Steve?” Bucky yelled.

“My poor dear,” Steve heard his mother whisper.

Steve jerked up and away, falling back and hitting the door with a heavy crash. His eyes shot wide open as he saw his mother standing in the bathroom with him, looking young and fresh and healthy like he hadn’t seen her ever once outside of pictures. Sarah’s eyes, just like his, were soft and inviting and her lips curled in a kind smile that spoke of pity and empathy.
“You’ve gone through so much,” Sarah murmured, her gentle Irish accent just like he remembered. “You’ve suffered so greatly. It breaks my heart, what you’ve gone through.”

Steve could only gape at her. His heart stuttered in his chest.

Then a hand banged on the door and Steve jolted away from it, fear gripping him; he stumbled into the sink and just looked with wide eyes at the door, flinching when the bang happened again.

“Steve!” Bucky called to him. “Baby, are you alright? I’m coming in!”

“Get back!” Sarah hissed, her hands closing on Steve’s bicep and she tugged him away. “He might break down the door!”

“Ma –” Steve spluttered uselessly.

The door thudded and shuddered again, sounding like Bucky had just slammed his shoulder into it. Attempting to break it open. Steve stumbled backwards again, hitting the wall.

“He’s angry!” Sarah warned in a sharp whisper. “You can’t trust him like this, not when he’s this mad!”

Steve started to shake his head, then Bucky slammed into the door again and he clapped his hands over his mouth to muffle a reflexive whimper.

“Steve,” Bucky called, “sweetheart, I need you to unlock the door. Can you hear me?”

“Shh!” Sarah hissed. “I don’t trust him! You can’t know what will set him off!”

“Baby, can you hear me? Answer me!”

“Don’t answer!” Sarah warned.
“JARVIS, open the fucking door!”

“Keep the door locked!” Steve blurted. “Don’t open it, JARVIS!”

“Hulk-proof lockdown engaged,” JARVIS answered.

“Wait, fuck, no!” Bucky yelled.

The door to the bathroom hissed and hard steel shot out of the false wood to stop up the gaps. Bucky started banging on it again, shouting Steve’s name still.

“Good,” Sarah said. Her cold hands pressed to Steve’s arm and shoulder. “That should keep him out for a while; hopefully long enough.”

Steve panted for breath, then let his back hit the wall again and sank down to the floor, staring with huge eyes at the door.

Sarah sank to her knees beside Steve, her freezing hands still pressed to his skin. Her eyes were full of pity.

“I know you’re afraid,” she murmured. “But you have right to be. You trusted Bucky and he lied to you.”

Steve jerked his gaze back to his mother. “Lie –?” he repeated quickly.

Sarah sighed gently. “Darling,” she whispered. She clucked her tongue and reached up to touch his cheek. “Of course,” she said. “He said he forgave you for sinning against him.”

“Steve, open the door!” Bucky shouted.

Steve flinched, grabbing his knees to tug them up to his chest. Sarah shook her head sadly.
“You can’t be blamed for thinking he was telling the truth,” she said. “You so wanted his forgiveness, and I’m sure Bucky really did want to forgive you.”

Steve shook his head. His voice was failing him. He couldn’t bring himself to defend Bucky.

“It’s just so awful what you had to do,” Sarah continued. “Even I had a hard time accepting it. I don’t think I could blame Bucky, either; your sins did really hurt him.”

“I –” Steve stammered, “I didn’t – I don’t –”

“It’s alright,” Sarah cut him off, “you still have a chance for grace. God has been with you this whole time, darling, he knows that you still have to atone for your sins.”

“Bucky said he was glad,” Steve whispered, “it kept me alive –”

“He lied,” Sarah told him in a kind tone. “Darling, he lied. Of course he did. Why would he be glad that you gave away your virginity? It was rightfully his to take, Steven, you had no right to give it to anyone else.”

“Bucky said –” Steve tried to insist weakly.

Sarah shook her head. “He was just trying to spare your feelings,” she told him. “But his pain at your sin has only grown; that pain has driven him mad.”

“Baby, open the door!”

“You’re wrong,” Steve whimpered.

Hot tears spilled from his eyes. Steve was shaking bodily, everywhere, and his mother only shook her head at him.
“It’s alright,” she said. “Anyone would have been fooled; I would have been fooled.”

“He loves me!” Steve insisted.

Sarah just shook her head. “Not anymore. He’s grown too bitter.”

“STEVE!” Bucky shouted.

Sarah grabbed Steve’s hands suddenly. “You can fix it, though!” she said quickly. “Now you have the chance to pay for your sins and earn absolution!”

“How?” Steve asked without even wanting to.

“Do you remember Leviticus?” Sarah asked him. “In Leviticus four, the Lord gave us instructions on how to earn his forgiveness for our sins. ‘Lead the lamb to the altar and lay your hand on its head, before having it killed,’ ” she quoted.

“I don’t have a lamb,” Steve said numbly.

“But you do,” Sarah said quickly. “‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son,’ Genesis 22.”

Steve’s eyes widened. He remembered – Genesis 22, the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac.

“You do,” Sarah pressed. “‘If he brings a lamb as his sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish.’”

“I don’t have a lamb!” Steve insisted.

“Darling,” Sarah replied gently.
Her hand pressed to Steve’s stomach. Steve’s breath caught in his throat.

“STEVE!” Bucky yelled again. “STEVE, OPEN THE DOOR!”

“A female without blemish,” Sarah said. “You know what you must do.”

She reached into a fold in her skirt and drew out a long, thin knife. Steve choked on an inhale and just stared at it. Sarah picked up his right hand and pressed the handle into his palm.

“You remember your prayers, darling?” she asked. “Pray the Act of Contrition and prepare your lamb.”

Steve’s throat and mouth were dry. His hands shook, making the tip of the blade wave and wobble in the air. Sarah pulled the hem of his shirt up, exposing the flat plane of his stomach.

“Pray,” she told him. “You must earn absolution.”

Steve’s jaw quivered. He swallowed. His hands rotated the knife without thought; he turned the tip of the blade to point towards him.

“O my God,” Steve whispered in a shaking voice, “I am heartily sorry for having offended You. I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of Heaven and the pains of hell.”

Sarah gave an encouraging nod. “Don’t hesitate, darling.”

“Most of all because they offend You, my God,” Steve continued in a quick and fearful voice, “who are all good and deserving of all my love.”

“JARVIS, OPEN THIS FUCKING DOOR!”

“Hurry!” Sarah warned.
“My systems are locked,” JARVIS announced. “Attempting to expel the intruder.”

“I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin,” Steve prayed in a hasty tone. “Amen!”

“You must sacrifice the lamb!” Sarah said again in an urgent voice.

Steve trembled. He pressed the tip of the knife into his body, just below the sternum.

“It will hurt more if you cut slowly,” Sarah told him.

“Steve, I’m coming! I’m right here, I promise, I’m coming!”

Steve couldn’t really hear anymore. He winced and grimaced as he pressed the knife into his skin. He felt the skin break. A bead of dark red blood appeared at the tip of the knife and slipped in a line down his stomach. Pain registered in the back of his mind, but it was distant.

“Steve? Steve, what are you doing?! STEVE?!”

“Keep going,” Sarah said quickly. “You’re safe as long as that door remains locked!”

The knife slipped a quarter inch into his skin. Steve winced again. A tear dripped from his chin onto his stomach and mixed with the blood.

“You’re doing well,” Sarah told him. Her hands, ice cold, pressed to the back of his neck and his hip. “Just keep going. You’ll be forgiven once you sacrifice your lamb.”

Steve cut another quarter inch into himself. Blood began to flow more freely. More tears dripped from his face to mix with the blood.

“STEVE, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”
“Just keep going,” Sarah insisted. “It will all be forgiven once you’ve earned absolution.”

“My systems say that the door is currently open,” JARVIS was saying. “There is no lockdown.”

“GET THE DOOR OPEN, SOMEBODY GET THE DOOR OPEN!”

Blood dripped onto the floor. Steve whimpered with pain, his hands failing him. The knife stopped, only cutting a few inches down his body.

“Do it!” Sarah hissed in an abrupt and harsh tone. “Do it or your soul is forfeit!”

There was a quiet shink! Steve barely heard it. Then, a click.

The door opened. Steve jerked his wide eyes up and the knife clattered from his hands to the floor. The figure of his mother beside him suddenly vanished and the door banged off the wall as Bucky charged in. Steve felt a haze lift off his mind and he looked down to see the 3 inch-long cut above his navel bleeding freely. He screamed.

Bucky grabbed him by the arms and yanked him up off the floor. Steve screamed and tried to stop the blood with his hands. Bucky was babbling, panicked as he ripped a strip off Steve’s shirt and pressed it over the wound; it only soaked in blood rapidly.

“Let me through, let me through!” Strange was yelling.

“How are you bleeding so damn much?” Tony demanded.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Bucky was gasping.

Strange shoved Steve onto the sofa and created a small portal that he shoved his arm through. Withdrawing it, he had a small first aid kit. He snapped on rubber gloves and took out a sealed, sterile package of surgical thread and a needle. Quickly, he ripped it open and grabbed alcohol wipes and gauze, preparing to stitch the three-inch gash on Steve’s stomach.
“Baby, what were you doing?” Bucky demanded, his voice close to tears. “Stevie, baby, what the hell were you doing?!”

“She said I needed a lamb!” Steve whimpered.

“Who did?” Bucky asked.

“Hive was projecting out of the pocket dimension,” Strange said briskly. “It’s still trapped, it was only creating an illusion.”

“It w–was m–my ma,” Steve stuttered.

Strange mopped up the blood with a patch of gauze, taking the strip of T-shirt and dropping it into a trashcan Sam had brought over. He then ripped open the alcohol wipes, larger than the typical kind, and swabbed the cut. Steve winced and hissed in a breath through his teeth as the alcohol stung, but Strange quickly tossed the wipe away and instead peered into the cut to examine it.

“It’s not deep enough,” he announced. “You nicked a capillary, that’s why it’s bleeding so much.”

Steve let his head fall onto the sofa cushions, filled with relief. Bucky bent over his head and pressed their foreheads together, his flesh palm slipping over Steve’s throat to cover his scent gland.

“I was so scared,” Bucky whispered.

Steve reached up and covered Bucky’s hand with his own. “I didn’t lock the door,” he whispered back. “I didn’t even shut it.”

“It could’ve been Hive,” Strange said. “It would’ve been an intense strain to project that far, but it could’ve shut the door.”

“And interfere with my systems?” Tony demanded loudly. “JARVIS didn’t put that bathroom into lockdown!”
“It’s possible,” Strange said. “Rogers, I’m going to stitch this up.”

“Yeah, do it,” Steve agreed easily. “It’ll heal in a few hours anyway.”

“I’m still going to stitch it,” Strange answered, changing his gloves with a snap of latex. “Don’t want to take any chances with the fetuses.”

“Can you check their heartbeats?” Steve asked quietly.

Strange glanced up at him, then raised a hand over Steve’s abdomen. Glyphs appeared under his palm and Strange almost touched them to Steve’s skin.

“Fine,” he reported.

“Fuck,” Steve exhaled in relief, falling back and turning his face towards Bucky’s. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“No, no, that witch tricked you,” Bucky said immediately. “It’s not your fault, sweetheart, it’s not your fault.”

Steve shut his eyes and nodded once. Bucky cupped his cheek and kissed his forehead, then slotted their lips together. Steve couldn’t kiss back; he felt weak.

“Needle,” Strange warned.

Steve grabbed Bucky’s metal hand and gripped it hard; he hissed in pain with his teeth gritted as Strange inserted the needle.

“From now on, none of us goes anywhere without a buddy,” Natasha announced. “We don’t leave this floor of the tower at all. No one can be caught alone.”

“Where’s Pepper?” Clint asked then.
“Paris,” Tony said, sounding relieved to be reminded. “She’ll be safe there.”

“For now,” Thor said quietly.

“Positivity,” Strange warned distractedly.

Steve couldn’t contribute, his teeth were gritted against the pain. The serum hadn’t cured his low tolerance for pain and even though Steve frequently abused his body and was constantly taking hits from enemies, the needle and thread passing through his skin stung sharply.

“What was she telling you?” Bucky asked in a hushed whisper.

Steve shook his head. He didn’t want to repeat it.

“Please?” Bucky murmured. “You’re hurtin’, babydoll, tell me so I can make it better.”

Steve took in a sharp breath. He glanced towards the room, towards everyone listening. Bucky brushed his cheek with his knuckles.

“I need to know, sweetheart,” Bucky whispered.

“She said you lied,” Steve whispered back. “That you didn’t forgive me.”

Bucky let out a soft, horrified noise. He cupped Steve’s cheeks and kissed him, pressing their lips together firmly, then covered Steve’s scent gland with his flesh palm. He broke the kiss and touched their foreheads together, then pressed his lips to Steve’s forehead and stayed there.

“I promise, I never lied,” Bucky murmured again. “I’ve never lied to you, sweetheart, especially not about that.”

“She said I needed to earn absolution,” Steve continued in another whisper. “That I needed – I
needed a lamb –”

Bucky made another soft, shocked noise.

“...I didn’t realize!” Steve swore in a whimper. “I didn’t – I didn’t realize what I was doing – I just – I wanted you to forgive me –”

“I’ve always forgiven you!” Bucky insisted again. “Sweetheart…”

“I’m sorry,” Steve hiccuped.

Bucky kissed his forehead again. “It’s not your fault,” he repeated firmly. “Hive tricked you. I promise, it wasn’t your fault.”

Steve reached up and curled his hand into Bucky’s hair. Bucky reached and picked up his other hand in his left, squeezing it and pressing a kiss to his knuckles. Steve hiccuped again. The room was silent. Everyone had to have heard him, they all had to realize what that long cut on Steve’s abdomen was supposed to do, everyone knew now. He felt like he should be bawling, but somehow, all he felt was the crushing numbness. Lady Macbeth’s witches hiding in the shadows of Brooklyn’s dark alleyways, beckoning him forward with crumpled dollar bills and dull pennies.

“I have found the record of the door being closed and put into lockdown,” JARVIS suddenly announced. “I have sealed the route to which the intruder accessed my systems. My systems do show that the door is currently open, but there is a gap where the lockdown being overridden should be.”

“What?” Tony responded.

“There is no record of anything opening the door,” JARVIS answered. “By myself or Hive or any of you. The door opened of its own accord.”

“That’s literally impossible,” Tony insisted.

“It is the best explanation I have,” JARVIS said.
Steve turned to look at Tony. Tony was simply gawking at the door.

“It could not open of its own accord,” Tony pressed.

“I have no other method to explain the phenomena,” JARVIS replied. “Either the door opened itself or some other unseen force that my systems could not detect opened it.”

“Jesus,” Tony muttered.

“Possibly,” JARVIS answered.

Tony’s mouth fell open again. Steve blinked.

“‘Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him,’” Steve whispered.

“What?” Tony said, jerking around.


“For those of us that didn’t go to Sunday School?” Tony questioned.

“Abraham sacrificing Isaac,” Steve muttered.

“But God stopped him just in time,” Sam spoke up.

Sam frowned in his direction. Steve couldn’t quite catch his breath. Tony looked around, eyebrows furrowed.

“You’re done,” Strange announced.
“Maybe you should get out of here,” Natasha said abruptly.

“Hive would just follow him,” Strange said, ripping off his gloves and standing up. “Clearly it’s imprinted on him or his trauma or whatever.”

“Why?” Bucky demanded.

“Because his is so much more delicious,” the voice of Loki suddenly announced.

Steve jerked, but fell back as Bucky pressed down on his shoulder while Loki stepped out of the shadows. He looked around the room, nodding to Thor, then his gaze landed on Steve’s again.

“Hive seeks pain above all else,” he said. “Its favorite meal to consume is the honest guilt of a righteous man.”

Steve just stared at him. Uncomfortable, he sat up, wincing as the stitches cut into his skin. Loki continued to stare at him.

“I expect very few here went through similar moral quandaries as you did,” he said. “Unless one of the rest of you betrayed your inner core truths for a desire so base as survival?”

Bucky glared in Loki’s direction while the others looked away. Tony just shook his head. Natasha aimed her gaze at her hands. Wanda and Pietro exchanged glances.

“I heard talk of bait,” Loki added. “The best bait would be the Captain here.”

“He’s not going to be bait!” Bucky snarled.

“I’m sure no harm will come to him,” Loki replied calmly.

Bucky leapt to his feet. “Suggest that one more time and I’m gonna cut your throat out,” he growled.
“Easy, tiger!” Tony said hastily, jumping in to put himself between Buck and Loki. “I’m pretty sure we need this guy.”

“ Asking Captain Rogers to be bait would put the lives of his unborn at risk as well,” Thor spoke up. “It is an unfair question.”

“Who else is more suited for the job?” Loki asked, looking around. “Clearly, Ymnar has shown a fondness for him if it forced its hand from the void to attack him remotely.”

“It showed him dark mirror realities,” Strange volunteered.

“Even better!” Loki claimed. “While he is available, Ymnar will not target another.”

Steve hugged himself, looking down. Bucky dropped back onto the sofa and wrapped his arms around him, pulling him into his chest. Everyone was looking at Steve now.

“But his kids,” Clint said quietly.

“He and Bucky are bonded, too,” Natasha said. “If Ymnar takes Steve, Bucky would probably be killed by bondsickness.”

“Then I suppose failure is not an option,” Loki suggested.

“I have guilt,” Wanda tried to say.

“Loki is right,” Thor sighed. “Ymnar has proven to be attached to Steven. It is not in its nature to be distracted from its desired meal.”

“I don’t want to,” Steve whispered.

“You don’t have to,” Bucky said quickly. “I’ll keep you safe, sweetheart, I promise.”
But Steve shook his head.

“I’ll do it.”

Chapter End Notes

*okay i swear this is gonna end well, i'll see you next week*
calling for you

Chapter Notes

Content warning: uhhhh Hydra and Red Room type shit.

before we begin, lemme just say, FUCK FOOTBALL, FUCK PEOPLE WHO ACT LIKE CHECKING OUT THE GROCERY STORE PERSONALLY OFFENDS THEM, AND FUCK THE SUPERBOWL.

okayokay i'm okay now. y'all. 41 out of 42. whew boy. okay. i'm okay.

THE ENDGAME TRAILER

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
It was well past midnight, but no one was asleep. The lights were all still on and an old Disney film was still playing on the large screen TV. Steve was barely visible in his temporary nest on the corner of the sectional, hiding beneath the blankets and pillows and curled up as tightly as he could. Tony had finally crashed and was wrapped in his own blanket burrito between Sam and Bruce, who had
woken up shortly after the incident in the bathroom. Thor was sat in an armchair, staring at nothing.

Wanda and Pietro were on the other end of the couch from Steve, Pietro leaning against Steve’s nest. Bucky sat just behind him, his arms wrapped around Steve’s middle and his face tucked into his hair. Natasha and Clint had joined the pile on the floor, while Loki, Wong, and Strange sat at equal distances from each other on another sofa, all looking stiffly at the TV. Deadpool, as he kept insisting they call him, was sprawled across his own sofa, still in full superhero gear. The hood was sort of weird, Steve kept thinking.

They were just waiting. There was nothing they could do but wait. Hive, the witch, whatever she was, she wouldn’t be able to project her way out of the pocket dimension Strange had locked her in until she was strong enough to fully break out, and from what Loki, Thor, and Strange could deduce, at that point, she would just break out.

They were waiting for her to appear again. Steve wasn’t ready. He wouldn’t ever be, but he knew he could do it. He trusted his team, he had to. After all, if they failed to save him, there wouldn’t be much hope for anyone.

Bucky wasn’t ready, either. Steve wasn’t sure which of them was more anxious, but the nerves running back and forth across their bond helped neither of them. The blankets and Bucky’s limbs wrapped tightly around Steve did little good, too. Pietro leaning on his knees didn’t help, not even his young, unpresented scent soothed Steve’s nesting hormones.

No one was paying attention to the movie. Everyone was silent. Most of the food had gone uneaten. Steve hadn’t wanted to eat at all, but Bucky had coaxed him into drinking some chicken soup and eating some bread. He’d managed to keep it down, so far. Hive’s reappearance would likely bring it back up.

Steve had no idea what she would show him this time. Perhaps Bucky murdering him again. That definitely made him feel like shit.

The clock ticked on. The movie ended and JARVIS played another. No one spoke. 1 AM came and went.

Steve watched the digital clock under the TV. 1:01. 1:02. 1:03...

1:38. The electricity suddenly cut out.
Bucky jerked Steve tighter in his arms. Light sprung up to the right and Steve saw Strange leap up with glowing glyphs in his palms. Loki conjured bright green fire and cast shadows over the whole room. Pietro zipped off the couch and appeared again behind Wanda. Wanda let red light gather in her palms.

“Show yourself!” Strange shouted.

“Close your eyes!” Loki hissed in a softer voice.

Steve glanced towards the others. Tony looked at him with wide eyes, then Natasha cast a blanket over his and Bruce’s heads. Clint pulled a blanket over himself and Sam. Natasha met Steve’s gaze, her eyes flashed an apology, then she ducked under the blankets.

“How quaint,” Hive’s feminine voice purred.

Deadpool jumped off the couch and over the heads of the rest of the Avengers hiding from Hive’s gaze. He hit the floor in the center of the room and drew two katanas from – from somewhere? Where had he been hiding those things?

“Fight me!” Deadpool yelled.

The form of Hive walked through the TV. Her eyes were shut and her dark skin seemed to absorb the light held up by the magicians in the room. Her lips curled in a smile.

“And how cute,” she laughed. “Are you suicidal, dear?”

“Not according to the DSM-5,” Deadpool said. “Definitely a danger to myself, though, I’m pretty sure I have less sense of self-preservation than Cap.”

Hive laughed again. “I like you,” she said. “I’ll keep you alive for entertainment value.”

“Backfire,” Deadpool hissed.
Steve pushed up. “Hey!”

Hive turned her closed eyes in his direction. Steve swallowed.

“Have you not had enough?” she asked. “You incur my gaze before I give it to you in my own time?”


“But it is not just you!” Hive insisted. “Your sense of righteousness is so strong?”

Steve couldn’t think of a quip to respond with. Strange caught his gaze and nodded slightly, moving to step behind Hive. Wanda slipped off the couch. Loki and Wong moved to get into position. Steve jerked his gaze back to the witch’s shut eyes.

“You’ll take me before you take my team,” Steve insisted.

“Oh, my darling boy,” Hive chuckled in Sarah Roger’s voice. “Such a strong man.”

Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist, burying his face in his back. Steve braced himself. Hive opened her eyes.

Steve was blasted from the side and back. He felt wind whipping around him and scrabbled for a hold on something, anything. He grabbed a bar and his fists locked onto it. Bitingly cold and sharp air cut into his skin and eyes, forcing him to squint. He looked around.

He dangled from the side of a train.

“STEVE!” Bucky’s voice shouted.

Steve jerked. He looked around and down and spotted Bucky hanging from the same bar. His heart
stopped in his chest.

The bar creaked ominously. Bucky’s eyes were wide and full of panic despite the wind

“I can’t –” Bucky started to say, then cut himself off to scrabble for a stronger hold as a bolt popped free and the bar dropped a little.

“Hold on!” Steve begged. He let go of the bar to grab Bucky’s wrist, trying to pull him up. The bar creaked again.

“It won’t hold you and me both, Stevie!” Bucky cried.

Steve’s heart tightened in fear.

“Don’t let go,” he insisted, “don’t you dare let go, Buck, you promised me, you promised –”

Bucky blinked, tears dropping from his eyes just to be beaten away from the wind. He grabbed Steve’s hand and squeezed it.

“I’m sorry,” he called over the wind.

He let go.

“BUCKY!” Steve screamed. “NO!”

Bucky fell. The train zipped away in seconds and Bucky was taken out of Steve’s sight. Steve was left staring, his eyes wide, into the snowy ravine, the hundred-mile drop, the jagged rocks. He was frozen on the side of the train car, clinging to the bar Bucky had just let go of so they wouldn’t both fall.

He should jump.
Hands hauled him back in before he could follow through with that thought. Steve rolled on the ground and hit the opposite wall, seeing Dum Dum pressed against the intact wall with his eyes squeezed shut. Dum Dum hastily crossed himself, then glanced back out of the hole in the train car.

“That’s a nasty drop,” he said. “Christ, I don’t like that. C’mon, we’ve cleared the train and Jonesy’s got Zola!”

Dum Dum grabbed Steve’s arm and hauled him up. He didn’t notice Steve just staring behind them, at the ripped open train car and the nasty drop below. He didn’t notice that Bucky wasn’t at Steve’s side, he didn’t notice Steve’s blank stare, he just pulled Steve to the head of the train, where the rest of the team was already waiting.

Dum Dum stopped at the door and looked around. Steve finally looked forward and his gaze fell on Zola. He felt the weight of the pistol on his hand.

“Cap?” Gabe questioned. “Where’s Sarge?”

Dum Dum seemed to notice then.

Steve had no answer for him, not for any of his men, gathered with their weapons all pointed to Zola on the ground. He walked up to the doctor and leveled his gun with his face.

“Cap!” Dum Dum repeated.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t end your miserable life right this fucking second,” Steve snarled. “One reason!”

“Please,” Zola whimpered, “please, I can help you! I can tell you about Schmidt’s plans! The Valkyrie!”

Steve just pressed the gun into Zola’s forehead and bared his teeth as Zola began to hyperventilate. “Cap!” someone was calling. “Cap, come on, what happened?”

“I’ll tell you anything!” Zola sobbed.
The gun was wrenched from his grip and Steve turned to lash out, but Morita grabbed his hands as well to keep him from striking.

“Cap, you gotta calm down!” Morita shouted.

“Where’s Sarge?” Junior called above the noise. “He can –”

“He can’t!” Steve yelled. His voice broke. “He’s gone.”

“What?” whispered Morita.

“No, no, that’s impossible,” Dum Dum added, “he’s gotta be around here somewhere –”

“He’s dead,” Steve gasped.

Abruptly, his knees gave way beneath him and he landed on the floor of the cabin, trying and failing to draw a breath. Morita dropped down beside him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, attempting to comfort him, but Bucky was dead.

The Howlies were all staring at him, mouths open in shock. Steve felt like he was drowning, there was a weight on his chest that he hadn’t felt in two years, a distinct lack of Bucky left him gasping for breath like an asthma attack. Bucky was dead. He was gone, he was never gonna see him again, he was alone again, Bucky was dead!

His team were talking, yet Steve couldn’t hear them. His eyes were fixed on Zola, and only two things occupied his mind. Bucky was dead and Zola was alive.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know!” Zola cried out again.

Steve leapt to his feet, snarling, reaching out to grasp Zola’s throat between his own; hands grabbed him around the middle and hauled him backwards, three or four pairs of arms restraining him from strangling the life out of the motherfucker who’d caused Bucky’s death. “Let me go!” he screamed,
and the arms just hauled him farther away. The door to the cabin slammed in his face and Morita, Gabe, and Dernier threw him against a wall.

“Cap, you gotta calm down!” Gabe insisted.

“Don’t fucking tell me to be calm!” Steve raged.

“Sarge wouldn’t want you to strangle a man in cold blood –” Morita tried to say

“Don’t fucking tell me what Bucky would have wanted!”

“– we gotta know what he knows, Cap –”

“I don’t fucking care!”

“– we promise, we’ll rip him limb from limb after we’ve interrogated him –”

“No!”

Steve sank down the wall. The arms released him as he crumpled, his hands covering his face as he let out a choked sob. He needed Bucky…

“I’m so sorry, Cap,” Gabe whispered.

“He’s dead,” Steve choked.

“He’s a hero,” Morita murmured.

“I don’t want him to be a hero!” Steve snapped. “I want him to be alive…”
Gabe knelt down beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders, and after a second, Morita did, too, and Dernier grasped his knee. They said nothing, and nothing they could have said would have comforted Steve. Bucky was dead, he was never going to see him again.

“I don’t know what to do,” he mumbled.

“You gotta just keep going,” Morita told him.

“Fight for his memory,” Gabe added.

“I can’t,” Steve rasped. “I can’t – I don’t want to go on without him.”

“He’d want you to,” Morita promised. “He’d want you to finish the mission, keep living, keep going.”

“I can’t do that without him!” Steve insisted.

“You have to!” Gabe returned.

“I don't want to!” Steve shouted.

Time seemed to stop. Gabe and Morita and Dernier faded from existence. Steve was left sitting in the corner of the train wall, gripped by wind and grief and the sound of the train hurtling on. Slow, methodical footsteps echoed down the car. A woman’s heels, but a gait too confident for a woman of that time.

Peggy stepped out of the next car. Steve remembered that this wasn’t real, then, because Peggy hadn’t been there the day Bucky died. Fell. Because he wasn’t dead, in real life, Bucky was just behind him, holding onto him, alive and happy to have kids with him despite everything Steve had ever done –

“You poor thing,” Peggy murmured.
She crouched down in front of him and smiled tightly. “You poor, poor man,” she said softly.

She reached out for him. Steve recoiled. Peggy just clucked her tongue.

“Do you know why I reminded you of this?” she asked. “It was because you needed to see something.”

Peggy stood up again and held out her hand. Steve didn’t take it.

“Come with me,” she said. “I promise, we’re going somewhere real this time.”

Steve shook his head. Peggy sighed.

“You don’t have much choice,” she told him, then withdrew her hand and snapped her fingers.

The biting and bitter cold enveloped him again. Steve twisted onto his knees and looked around; all he could see was snow and ice and rock.

“There,” Peggy said, pointing.

Steve turned to follow her finger.

First, he saw red. Crisp, clean petals of red, bright and saturated against the pure snow. His eyes followed the trail of red and connected to a large pool of it, staining the snow. He saw the source. He fell back.

Bucky lay between two heavy boulders. His body was somehow mostly intact, but his left arm was bent at an awful right angle just above the elbow, like he’d broken his fall with it. It was crushed, shattered, bits of bone poked out.

Steve couldn’t look away but he was sure he was going to vomit again.
“You were right that Zola’s serum let him survive,” Peggy said calmly behind Steve. “He’s alive right now, he’s delirious from the pain, but he’s alive.”

Steve crept forward, then crawled, then pushed to his feet and ran. He fell to his knees by Bucky’s body and grabbed for his face.

His hands passed straight through Bucky’s skin. Bucky just groaned and turned his head away.

“You can’t interact with this,” Peggy said loudly. “I told you, this is real.”

Steve just shook his head. “You’re lying!” he accused.

Peggy walked closer. “I’m afraid not,” she said. “Your dear Alpha is touching you right now. That gives me access to his memories.”

Steve’s eyes widened. He looked down again in horror.

“He’ll lie here for days,” Peggy said. “Nearly three weeks, actually. He almost starves to death before they find him, and, do you know, the whole time —”

She steps even closer, then kneels down on Bucky’s other side. She shakes her head at Steve.

“He’s calling for you,” she told him. “Listen.”

Steve looked down, his breath caught in his throat.

“Stevie…” Bucky whispered.

“Nearly three weeks,” Peggy repeated. “He lies here for nearly three weeks calling for you. When you commit suicide with that plane?” she continued. “He’s still alive, waiting for you.”
“You’re lying,” Steve insisted weakly.

“I’m not,” Peggy promised.

Steve fell back. He felt the cold of the snow, the bite of the wind, but he couldn’t touch his Alpha. Peggy lifted her hand again.

“Shall we fast forward the next few weeks?” she suggested, then snapped her fingers.

The blood dried. It turned dark brown and ugly and Steve just wanted to vomit even more. Bucky turned paler and paler and his lips slowly became blue. His fingertips turned purple. His nose turned purple. His lashes and his upper lip crusted with ice.

Peggy snapped her fingers once again.

Steve heard footsteps crunching in the snow. He twisted around as someone in a Russian uniform approaches Bucky’s limp form in the snow.

“On vse yeshche zhiv,” the Russian said.

“He’s still alive,” Peggy translated. “Let’s fast forward again, shall we?”

She snapped her fingers once more. Steve jumped to his feet, eyes wide, as the snow around them vanished and was replaced with stainless steel surfaces. He saw darkness and doors leading out.

Then he heard a scream.

He spun around and saw several spotlights all aimed at a single medical table. The floor was slanted downward, leading into a drain under the table. Pale red liquid flowed into the drain; water and blood. Men in scrubs stood around the table.

“NO!” Bucky screamed. “STOP! STOP!”
Peggy set a hand on Steve’s arm. She looked at him with pity in her wide eyes.

“You might not want to watch,” she told him. “I wouldn’t blame you.”

Steve heard the buzz of a saw. He stepped forward.

“It’s graphic,” Peggy warned. “You might not be able to stomach it.”

Steve walked around the table until he could see. His eyes were wide.

“NO!” Bucky screamed.

He was strapped down to the table. By the chest, the arms, legs, even his head and chin. He thrashed anyway.

“Hold him still!” Arnim Zola shouted.

The saw buzzed in Zola’s hand. Several of his comrades grabbed Bucky to hold him down. Bucky saw the saw and screamed more. Steve flinched, drawing back. He couldn’t look away.

“Gag him,” Zola said dispassionately. “I don’t want him biting off his tongue.”

A scientist grabbed a nearby rag and stuffed it into Bucky’s mouth. Bucky screamed through it.

Zola lowered the small buzz saw to the jagged and bloody stump that ended Bucky’s left arm. The saw screeched. Bucky screamed. Steve flinched as red flew from the blade of the saw and splattered everywhere. Bucky just screamed.

“They did try to give him an anesthetic,” Peggy said behind Steve. “But the dose they gave him didn’t work. After trying once, Doctor Zola said not to bother trying another. His metabolism is actually faster than yours.”
“Wrap it up,” Zola said as he tossed aside the stump he’d cut away. “The last thing we need is for him to get gangrene before we can use him.”

“**It,**” one of the others corrected.

“**What?**” Zola snapped, turning back.

“Lukin said to call him it,” the man said. “They’re going to break his mind; starting by taking away his humanity.”

Zola shook his head. “Of course,” he grumbled. “Wrap up its arm. We don’t want it to get gangrene.”

“Wouldn’t his – its system just fight it off?”

Zola turned back, frowning again. He hummed.

“Leave it open,” he said. “Worst comes to worst, we cut off more of its arm.”

Bucky was limp on the table now. Steve was horrified.

“He’s unconscious now,” Peggy told him. “He passed out from the pain.”

Steve just shook his head. “This isn’t real,” he whispered.

“It is,” Peggy promised.

He heard her snap her fingers.
Steve spun around to stop her, but there were suddenly bars before his face. He jerked back, stumbling, and turned around again. His hands flew to cover his mouth.

Bucky was chained to a wheel. His head lolled to one side and already, the cruel prosthetic Hydra had given him was fused to his shoulder. His skin was bare; completely, he didn’t have a stitch of clothing on him to protect his skin or modesty. He was covered in open wounds.

“They knew who he was, you know,” Peggy said. “They knew who you were. I’m not sure they knew what you meant to him, but they knew you were important. I expect it wasn’t difficult to find out, not when he kept begging for you to come save him.”

“No,” Steve hissed.

The door to the cell opened. Steve heard heels clicking against the floor and turned again to look.

A thin-featured woman entered. She wore a Soviet officer's uniform and her hair was pulled back into a tight bun. She walked right up to Bucky and drew a bullwhip from her sleeve.

“Vosproizvesti video,” she announced.

“Play the video,” Peggy translated softly.

The woman abruptly spun the wheel Bucky was chained to. Bucky groaned and twisted as he woke and realized that he was being spun upside down. He resisted, pulling at the chains, but was visibly weak. Steve could count his ribs.

A screen unfolded in front of Steve, blocking his sight of Bucky. Steve ran around it right away, up to Bucky, but stopped as a projector started and black and white film was shot onto the screen.

“No,” Steve whispered again.

Cheerful music started. The title card flickered as it appeared; Captain America and His Howling Commandos. The woman locked the wheel and suddenly cracked her whip through the air.
“No!” Bucky shouted, twisting and flinching just from the sound. “Stop, stop, no!”

“Captain America and his band of brothers storm Nazi lines!” the narrator declared.

“NO!” Bucky screamed. “STOP, STOP!”

The woman hadn’t even cracked the whip again.

“They tortured him while playing your propaganda films,” Peggy told Steve. “Until he responded to the films like they were the torture themselves. Then – well,” she broke off. “You’ll see.”

“Voydite!” the woman called.

The cell door entered again. Steve stepped around the screen and his eyes doubled in renewed shock. It felt like a punch to the gut.

A man of almost exact stature and gait and face to Steve entered. He even wore Steve’s uniform and held his shield.

“Ostanovit video,” the woman called.

The projection ended. The screen lifted and Bucky visibly relaxed.

“Hey, pal,” Steve’s look-a-like said.

Bucky’s eyes flew open. He stared and said nothing. His pulse visibly picked up. Steve could only watch.

“No,” Bucky whispered. “No, they – They didn’t get you, too!”
“They didn’t get me,” Steve’s look-a-like promised. “I came over willingly.”

Steve shook his head. Bucky shook his head. The look-a-like walked up and hefted his shield.

“You should give up,” the look-a-like told Bucky. Then slammed his shield into his face.

“NO, FUCK, NO!”

“Again!” the woman shouted.

Steve spun around on his heel, covering his ears. Bucky screamed. The whip cracked and Bucky screamed louder. The shield crunched into bone. Steve fell to his knees, yelling.

“Let’s move on,” Peggy said gently.

She snapped her fingers.

Steve pushed himself up. They stood in the same cell, but it was silent now. He turned around and saw that the wheel was gone. Bucky lay on a metal bench, his eyes wide open as he stared up at the ceiling. His hair and beard had grown long. He was skin and bone and more open wound than skin. They’d given him pants, but nothing more. His fingertips and toes were purple again.

“They left the temperature in his cell around 40 degrees,” Peggy told Steve. “Just enough that he wouldn’t freeze to death, but enough to make him hope for it.”

“Buck,” Steve whispered brokenly.

“This is about five years after they found him,” Peggy continued. “He’s still praying you’ll come save him, I believe.”

The cell door opened again. Steve turned to look and another woman entered. She was much younger than the other, much prettier, dressed in clothes much more flattering. She walked right up to Bucky’s bench and stopped in front of him. Then the cell door shut behind her.
Slowly, Bucky swung his legs off the bench and sat up. He didn’t look up at her. He didn’t say a word.

“I brought you something,” the woman said.

Bucky didn’t react.

The woman reached into her pocket and drew out an apple. She held it out to Bucky.

“I was hoping you’d help me,” the woman said. “I’m a prisoner here, too. The men here hurt me.”

Bucky slowly lifted his gaze to the apple.

“You’re the only one I can trust,” the woman continued. “I am called Baba Yaga.”

Bucky blinked. Steve shook his head.

Baba Yaga turned and sat onto the bench next to Bucky, still holding out the apple.

“Will you help me?” she asked.

Bucky just looked at the apple. “Are you gonna hurt me if I take that?” he asked.

“No,” Baba Yaga said.

Bucky turned away. “I don’t trust you.”

Baba Yaga dropped the apple into her lap. “But will you help me?” she asked.
“How?” Bucky countered emotionlessly.

She stuck out her wrist.

“I think if I smell like another Alpha, the men will leave me alone,” Baba Yaga said. “Will you mark me as yours?”

Bucky turned his head back. He looked at her wrist. Steve shook his head. Bucky lifted his hand.

“No,” Steve muttered as Bucky rubbed his scent gland into hers.

“Oh, I was wrong,” Peggy said. “He doesn’t remember who you are already.”

“Thank you, Alpha,” Baba Yaga said. “If you want, you can eat the apple.”

She stood and left the apple on the bench. Bucky didn’t watch her leave. She crossed back to the exit, the cell door opened, and she walked out.

“It only took four years for him to forget you,” Peggy told Steve. “Look –”

The cell door opened yet again and the Captain America look-a-like entered holding a club and a plate.

“Dinner,” he said.

Bucky looked up, his gaze lingered on Steve’s look-a-like, and he looked away again. The look-a-like left a plate of gray mush on the bench next to Bucky. He didn’t touch the apple, just left it next to Bucky before he walked out again.

“Just four years,” Peggy mused. “Do you sometimes wonder what it would’ve been like to trade places with him?”
Steve couldn’t stop himself from nodding.

Peggy pointed to Bucky, who wasn’t touching the mush or the apple. “This is what you would’ve been put through.”

Bucky glanced towards the plate and the apple, then picked both up. He carried them back to the bars and set them down on the floor. He walked away and lay back down on the bench.

“The mush is poisoned,” Peggy told him. “The apple isn’t. It’s a strange reversal of *Snow White*, isn’t it?”

“Stop,” Steve whispered.

“Stop?” Peggy repeated, turning wide eyes on him. “Whatever for? You wanted to know what happened to your beloved; this is what happened.”

“I don’t want to know any more!” Steve insisted.

“But you wanted to know what you left him to,” Peggy returned. “This is what you abandoned him to when you took the easy way out. You slept for seventy years, he was tortured!”

“I didn’t know he was alive!” Steve tried to claim.

“You didn’t even look!” Peggy answered harshly.

Steve covered his face with his hands, then strode past Peggy and fell to his knees by Bucky’s bench. He tried to touch him, but his hands just passed through Bucky’s body like air. Bucky didn’t react.

“They used your face to break him,” Peggy said behind Steve. “Then that girl you just saw? She trained him to trust her, to feel protective of her. Then when he was loyal to her, she taught him to be loyal to anyone who carried her scent, then to anyone who wore the emblem of Hydra. It took only a
few more years for the Baba Yaga to break him so much that he truly believed her to be his Omega.”

Steve buried his face in a hand. He choked back a sob.

“Just a few years to forget you,” Peggy said softly. “Just a few more to replace you. All the while, you slept in the ice that he didn’t get to feel for another six years past this.

“I didn’t know,” Steve whispered brokenly.

“You never looked,” Peggy snapped.

Steve glanced over his shoulder. “What do you want from me?” he asked.

Peggy snapped her fingers. Snow rose up around the cell and the iron became stone. Steve saw the petals of blood staining the snow.

“You can change his fate,” Peggy said in a soft voice.

Steve looked over his shoulder. Bucky, his left arm mangled, lay in the snow behind him.

“I can change it, that is,” Peggy continued. “If you lie down next to him, you can take his place. I will take his body and let him die somewhere else. The Soviets will find you instead of him. You’ll spare him seventy years of torture.”

Steve stared at Bucky’s delirious face with wide eyes.

“Just take his place,” Peggy said gently. “Do you know how many times he prayed that you had fallen and not him before he forgot you? Hundreds. Perhaps thousands of times.”

Steve hesitantly reached out. His fingers made contact with Bucky’s iced-over coat. His breath hitched.
“Let him have peace,” Peggy murmured. “Take his place, Steve.”

Steve gripped Bucky’s coat and reached to touch his face. “Hey,” he whispered. “Buck? Bucky?”

Bucky’s eyes fluttered open. He groaned and tipped his head in Steve’s direction. He blinked.

“Hey,” Steve whispered again.

“Stevie?” Bucky mumbled.

“It’s me,” Steve answered softly.

“Baby?” Bucky mumbled on.

His right hand lifted, shaking. Steve grabbed it and pressed Bucky’s freezing fingers to his face.


“Came t’a save me again?” Bucky croaked. His lips split into a smile; the skin cracked and began to bleed. Steve clenched his jaw and tried to smile back, nodding.

“Take his place,” Peggy murmured. “Spare him all that pain.”

“I’m gonna save you,” Steve whispered.

Peggy set her hand on his shoulder. Steve glanced at her, then just nodded. Peggy smiled a little, then the expression faded and she touched Steve’s face.

“You’re doing the right thing,” she told him.
“Doll?” Bucky mumbled. “What’re you doin’?”

“I’m saving you,” Steve told Bucky softly. “You’ll be alright, okay? Say hi to my ma when you get up there.”

Bucky just blinked. Peggy pressed her hand over Steve’s heart.

“Wake up!” Bucky suddenly shouted.

Steve jerked back. Peggy grabbed for him, then her eyes widened. She gasped, her hands flew to her chest. Steve fell back, landing in snow, and Peggy scrabbled for her throat.

“No!” she croaked. “No, that’s not – not possible!”

“Wake up!” Bucky yelled again, though his body was still limp in the snow. “Stevie, look at me! Wake up!”

Steve jerked to look around. The snow and rocks were rapidly turning to dust. Bucky’s body vanished. Peggy’s form shifted and changed until a white-haired woman with deep black skin knelt in front of Steve, her hands clutching her throat.

“No!” she gasped. “You – you couldn’t –”

Steve felt someone shaking him. He jerked and shook his head, blinking, and when he opened his eyes, he was sitting on the sofa in the common room again. Hive’s form, the young black girl, knelt in the center of the room, surrounded by Wanda and Loki and Strange and Wong.

“Take that!” Deadpool shouted. “Whoo! Is she dead yet?”

Hive’s eyes rolled up in her head. The combined magic between the four magicians was a bright and dark pink. Then Hive just collapsed. Her body turned to dust.

“Shit,” Wong muttered.
Wanda collapsed. Pietro was there in a flash to catch her. Strange staggered, blinking hard, and he walked into Wong, who fell over and hit the ground with a thud. Loki brushed off his hands.

“Well done, all,” he said, and at least he was panting a little. “We just destroyed an Outer God.”

“You did it,” Thor said in an awed voice.

“Yes,” Loki answered. “Perhaps this might earn me a few years off my sentence?”

“We’ll talk about it,” Thor said quickly.

A hand cupped Steve’s chin. Steve jerked and turned to face Bucky. Bucky’s wide eyes searched his face.

“What did you see?” he asked in a whisper.

Steve flung himself onto Bucky. He knocked him into the couch and hugged him with every ounce of his being. He buried his face in Bucky’s neck and kissed his pulse.

“It’s okay, baby!” Bucky said quickly, petting Steve’s hair. “It’s okay, I’m here, I’m here, I gotchu —”


Bucky paused for a second. Then he wrapped his arms around Steve and hugged him just as tightly.

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispered. “I left you –”

“You couldn’t’ve known,” Bucky murmured.
“Did we really just defeat it?” Tony demanded.

“Yeah,” Strange called. “Completely, one hundred percent, that’s Outer God dust on your carpet.”

“Gross,” Tony responded.

“I believe a vacuum will take care of it,” Loki said.

“That was much easier than I thought it would be,” Thor commented.

“Nobody ever tried to trick it into consuming its own soul,” Strange replied. “Which, great job getting it to start the soul-consuming thing, Steve,” he added.

Steve nodded numbly.

“That was the easiest world-saving I’ve ever done,” Clint spoke up.

“You didn’t do anything!” Sam countered.

“Neither did you!”

“You’re free to resume your daily lives,” Strange announced. “Please see a therapist, anyone who made eye contact with it. Steve, can I double check –?”

Steve pulled back from Bucky as Strange approached. Strange knelt in front of him, his eyebrows screwing up, and he let orange glyphs dance over Steve’s stomach.

“All fine,” he said. “Heartbeats haven’t even changed.”

Steve slumped back into Bucky’s arms. Bucky kissed his hair.
“So, we just—” Pietro started, looking around, “move on?”

Strange shrugged. “Unless you wanna do a jig on its ashes?”

Wanda laughed abruptly. Pietro smiled and lowered her to the floor before drawing her into a tight hug. Tony put his fingers to his mouth and whistled.

“Abmoor!” he yelled. “Come vacuum!”

“Ab–what?” Sam spluttered.

“Abmoor,” Tony said. “My version of Roomba.”

Sam fell over backwards into the pile of blankets. “I’mma just sleep here,” he said in a muffled voice.

“Sleepover!” Deadpool cried.

“I’m returning you to where I found you,” Wong said firmly.

“No, but sleepover!” Deadpool whined.

Strange began conjuring a portal. Wong grabbed Deadpool by the shoulder and promptly shoved him into the portal. Strange waved at the room at large.

“See you for the next Outer God invasion,” he said, then stepped through.

“I don’t suppose I could join the sleepover?” Loki asked Thor.

“Sorry, brother,” Thor said with a grimace. “Heimdall is already ready to collect you.”
Loki sighed. He held up his hands, wrists together, and looked up at the ceiling. “Farewell, Earthlings,” he said in a flat tone. “Was lovely seeing you again.”

Tony waved. Loki vanished in a shower of rainbow sparkles.

“What the fuck was that?” Bucky demanded.

“The Bifrost,” Thor said. “Heimdall summoning Loki back to Asgard.”

Steve just shook his head and leaned back into Bucky. “We should sleep,” he mumbled.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Natasha sighed.

“I don’t wanna get up,” Sam mumbled.

Natasha glanced around, then grabbed a pillow and lay down. “Sleepover,” she said.

“Is it really dead?” Steve asked.

Wanda pushed to her feet, walked up to the ash, and kicked it. The ash fluttered everywhere. Wanda turned to face Steve.

“Yes,” she said simply.

“I was gonna vacuum that up!” Tony whined.

A small robot trundled out of the kitchen and went right over the edge of the step between the sitting area and the kitchen. It landed on its top, squealed for a second, then picked itself up on several spindly legs. Clint hit Sam in the back. Sam snorted and looked up, only to follow Clint’s pointing finger as the robot flipped itself over and righted itself. Sam blinked.
“That is the most terrifying shit I’ve ever seen,” he announced.

“I don’t wike it!” Clint hissed.

“What?” Tony demanded. “It’s a Roomba but better! It has knives!”

“It’s armed?” Sam screeched.

Bucky gathered Steve in his arms and stood up. “We’re going to our room,” he announced.

Natasha waved a hand. Steve snagged all his blankets and pulled them into his lap before Bucky carried him off.

“When’s your next appointment with Larah?” Bucky asked in the elevator.

Steve let his head loll onto Bucky’s shoulder. “Monday,” he said.

“I’ll go in with you,” Bucky offered.

Steve nodded. It was his third appointment with Larah. She might be almost as horrified as Bucky would be.

Bucky carried Steve into their room and lay him on the bed. Steve sat up and set about stripping out of his clothes. Bucky took his cue and undressed, picking up both of their clothes and dropping them into the laundry hamper. Steve waited for Bucky to join him, then lay down and tucked himself against Bucky’s chest.

“I want to go to Mass Sunday,” Steve blurted out.

Bucky lifted his head to look at Steve.
“I haven’t gotten absolution,” Steve said, looking at his hands. “Real absolution, I mean. Larah – Larah told me to get it during our first session. And Hive used it against me.”

“You sure?” Bucky asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Steve answered. He nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

Bucky pressed his lips between Steve’s shoulder blades. “Okay,” he murmured. “We’ll go to Mass on Sunday.”

Chapter End Notes

41 out of 42!!!!!!!!!!! the last chapter comes out next sunday!!!!!!! the new Endgame trailer!!!!!!!!!! fuck football!!!!!!!!!!!! i'm okay
everything the devil can’t be, singin’ to me, glory

Chapter Notes

Content warning: death by gunshot

this is it. last chapter. 42 is the answer to everything and such and such. (shh don’t notice that i’m late)

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Steve couldn’t sleep. Not that night. Bucky lay awake as well. In fact, Steve found himself wondering if Bucky ever slept when they lay together in bed. The bags under his eyes were still as heavy as they’d been when Steve pulled his mask off that day on the bridge. He was no longer as gaunt, the color had returned to his skin and there was a little give between his skin and bones, but...
his eyes were still lined and tired.

Steve found himself wondering if he was any better, either.

He dozed, at best. But the things that Hive had shown him kept coming back to him. Strange had said they couldn’t have happened in a true reality, but Steve had seen it; he’d felt it, he’d heard it, he’d been bruised by it. It haunted him.

As sunlight appeared in the living room, Steve stopped trying to sleep. He sat up and grabbed his phone. Bucky rose with him, his hand slipping around Steve’s back. Steve unlocked his phone and began searching through his contacts. He had to text JARVIS for Strange’s number, but within a minute, he had it. He dialed, held the phone to his ear. Bucky leaned against his back and pressed his lips to the crook of his neck.

The phone rang. Steve reached over and picked up Bucky’s metal hand, lacing their fingers together. Bucky squeezed it and pressed another kiss to the nape of his neck.

“Hello?” Doctor Strange answered.

“It’s Rogers,” Steve greeted.

“I gathered that. What is it?”

Steve hesitated. He wasn’t even sure what he was asking.

“Could you show me,” he began, “what really happened to – to us in those other realities?”

Bucky lifted his head. Steve didn’t give him an answer.

“Why?”

“I need to know,” Steve admitted.
“I told you they weren’t real –”

“But I need to know!” Steve insisted. “Please? Is it even possible?”

Strange was quiet for a minute. Steve looked down.

“It’s possible,” Strange told him.

“Will you show me?”

“Are you sure?”

“I am,” Steve promised.

“I can show you,” Strange said. “When would be good for me to show up?”

Steve glanced over at Bucky. Bucky just shrugged.

“Now,” Steve said.

“Fine, I’ll be in your kitchen in two seconds.”

Steve pushed up out of bed. “Fine,” he answered, then just hung up.

“Are you sure you wanna know?” Bucky asked.

Steve glanced in his direction. He nodded once. “I need to know,” he just said.
Steve heard the portal in the other room while still putting on his clothes. Bucky got up and dressed with him, and together, they walked out.

Strange, dressed in jeans and a sweater, sat at their breakfast counter. Steve walked around and joined Strange at the counter.

“So,” Steve started.

“You ready?” Strange asked.


“Yes,” Strange answered simply. “You said you wanted to do it now, right?”

Steve glanced at Bucky.

“I can only do one person,” Strange added quickly.

“Okay,” Steve answered. He cleared his throat. “Okay. Then, yeah. Can we do this?”

Strange nodded and held a hand across the table. “Then let’s do it.”

Steve reached across the table and laid his hand in Strange’s. Bucky took the stool next to his and slipped his arm around Steve’s waist.

Strange raised his other hand. He conjured glyphs that swirled and began to dance around them. Steve glanced to Bucky and met his eyes just before the glyphs condensed and they were cut off.

“We won’t be able to interact with these worlds,” Strange warned. “What Ymnar showed you was from the eyes of your counterpart; we will only be spectators.”
“I’ll be fine with that,” Steve said.

Strange looked around them and selected a glyph. It moved between them, growing larger and larger, then the walls around them faded.

Steve looked around. He slipped off his stool, which vanished the second he left it. He took his hand from Strange’s and examined the room.

It was the unfamiliar apartment filled with familiar furniture. The room was empty, but then a door opened and Steve saw himself slipping out.

His counterpart was emaciated. He was shirtless and his body was littered with faded bruises; the marks of fists and pinches and kicks. His gaze stayed on the ground, his arms hugged himself to hide his chest. He was so thin…

“I thought you said what the witch showed me weren’t real!” Steve demanded, turning on Strange.

“Just wait,” Strange said, waving Steve back.

A heavy knock sounded at the door. Steve saw his counterpart flinch but go to answer it. Schmidt was at the door.

“This is the same!” Steve insisted.

“Wait,” Strange answered.

Schmid shoved that world’s Steve back and grabbed him by the throat. Steve turned and covered his eyes. Strange followed him.

“This is the same,” Steve whispered again.

“What will happen?” Steve demanded.

“I don’t know!” Strange answered. “Just wait!”

Steve heard choking behind them. He risked a glance and turned away in horror; Schmidt had his counterpart by the throat, held off the ground. Steve covered his face with a hand. He thought things would be different.

Steve heard the impact of a body hitting the ground, the snarl with which Schmidt addressed that world’s Steve, the thud of a boot striking skin. Schmidt dropped into a seat. He ordered that Steve to open his mouth.

“You said this wasn’t real!” Steve hissed.

“Wait!”

Steve heard his counterpart gag. Schmidt then shouted, a sound of pain, and Steve jerked around in time to see Schmidt strike the other Steve in the face and cast him onto the ground. The other Steve was fully naked by then and Steve grabbed Strange’s shoulder to turn him back around. Strange respectfully didn’t look.

“You are lucky that Adolf wants you alive and capable, bitch,” Schmidt snarled. “I would cut your tongue from your mouth otherwise for that.”

Steve looked to the door the other Steve had left from. What he’d seen, Bucky had come out and Schmidt had killed him. But the door didn’t open.

Steve’s counterpart screwed up his face in a glare. And he spat into Schmidt’s face.

Steve stepped back. Schmidt roared and lifted the other Steve off the ground by his throat, then threw him into the wall. Schmidt stomped across the room and attacked, kicking him and shouting. The other Steve crawled onto his knees and retched, vomiting.
Steve hadn’t seen this.

Schmidt was disgusted and left soon after. The other Steve remained on the floor, fallen in the puddle of vomit. But Schmidt hadn’t killed Bucky. Steve watched himself get up, go into the bathroom and clean up, then unlock the bedroom.

Steve followed as his counterpart entered the locked room. He saw Bucky, his Bucky from before the war forced gray into his hair, tied to the bed and gagged. He was struggling, but redoubled his efforts as Steve and his counterpart entered.

The other Steve climbed onto the bed and released Bucky’s hands. Bucky sat up immediately and grabbed him in a tight embrace. They trembled together. Steve slipped back.

“I can fast forward,” Strange said softly. “I don’t think they stay here.”

Steve shook his head. “No,” he muttered. “I don’t think they do, either.”

Strange touched Steve’s shoulder. He raised his hand and conjured glyphs, then selected one. The glyphs surrounded them as before, then faded away.

They stood in a dim parlor, their feet resting upon soft blue carpet. The furniture was a soft velvet blue, matching the wallpaper. There was a large bay window with gauzy white curtains. Steve looked around.

There was light in the kitchen and there were voices. Steve followed them.

Bucky’s parents were there, but so was he. His counterpart sat at a worn kitchen table, smiling as George told a story, and curled in his lap was a small child. Steve’s eyes widened. It had to be a baby, no more than a few weeks old. There was a blanket tossed over his counterpart’s shoulder and the other Steve kept looking down to adjust it and the baby beneath it. He was nursing.

“God,” Steve whispered.

A door opened. Steve turned at the heavy footsteps and his eyes widened when he saw Bucky enter
the kitchen; still young and intact. He made a beeline for the other Steve, falling to his knees by his chair to look in awe at the child he held.

“Meet your son, Buck,” the other Steve whispered. “George Buchanan.”

Strange touched Steve’s shoulder. “Is that enough?” he asked softly.

Steve nodded, stepping back. Strange conjured the glyphs again as that world’s Bucky touched the baby’s hair with reverent fingers. The glyphs cut that world out.

They faded again. Steve saw steam rising from wet pavement that was warmer than the air around them. He turned around and saw the neon pin-up silhouette, then the man leaning against a car with a cigarette between his lips. Steve walked closer. It was Bucky again, young and with hair cropped close to his head. He looked angry.

“These things did happen,” Steve whispered.

“But they didn’t end where Ymnar said they did,” Strange offered.

Bucky kicked off the car. Steve turned and saw himself just feet away, eyes wide and mouth slightly opened. Bucky dropped the cigarette and stepped forward, steps slow, calculated. With five feet between them, Bucky stopped. The other Steve didn’t move.

“We hated the army,” Bucky started; he spread his arms wide, then dropped them to his sides and let them hang limp. “Look at us now.”

“What are you doing here?” the other Steve demanded.

Bucky pointed to the club. “Was in there. Boys wanted fun before we shipped out, I got drug along. Saw you.”

Steve walked around to see both his own expression and Bucky’s. Both of them looked hurt.
“Are you drunk?” the other Steve asked.

Bucky just shook his head. There was a moment’s silence. Steve wondered what was keeping them apart.

“Someone in there saw me watching you,” Bucky said out of nowhere, “said an hour was six hundred.”

Steve looked back at himself, his breath caught in his throat. His counterpart didn’t say anything. His eyes told, though. It had happened again.

“Do you like working there?” Bucky asked.

Steve’s counterpart only shrugged.

“Why do you do it?”

“Pays rent,” the other Steve said quietly.

The silence fell again. Steve looked between the alternate versions of himself and his love, just waiting for them to end the distance between them. He wanted to see them embrace, to at least shake hands. He wanted to know that in any universe, he and Bucky would always find each other.

“You don’t wear it,” Bucky spoke up.

The other Steve reached under his collar. He pulled out a chain, then a ring strung on it.

“It got too small,” he said in a small voice.

Bucky’s eyes got hurt again. Steve wondered, again, what was keeping them apart.
“I’m on a plane to Iraq tomorrow,” Bucky said.

Steve watched the bag on his counterpart’s shoulder slip off. Then Steve stepped back, breathing a sigh of relief, as the other version of him ran to hug Bucky. They embraced and Bucky spun the other Steve off his feet, fingers digging into his back as that world’s Steve fisted his hands in his Bucky’s jacket. Steve exhaled as he stepped away. In any universe, he thought.

“Enough?” Strange asked.

Steve nodded.

Strange touched Steve’s shoulder. The glyphs rose around them and again faded.

Steve expected that dark basement and the squeak of rats. He was startled to see a sunny backyard and patio furniture.

“I don’t remember this,” he said.

“There are a lot of alternate universes!” Strange defended himself. “I might’ve taken a wrong turn…”

Steve heard voices and moved to follow them. Coming around the side of the house and onto a paved driveway in front of a garage, he spotted two people standing around a table, surrounded by sawdust and tools.

“How many layers of stain do you reckon it needs?”

“Depends on what you want the color to come out to be.”

“Steve likes red.”

Steve moved around to see their faces. His jaw fell open.
“No idea what this is,” Strange admitted.

“That’s my dad,” Steve said numbly.

Joseph Rogers shot a smile to Bucky, who was definitely young and fresh-faced and hadn’t seen a day of war. The table they stood around was unsealed and Bucky was smoothing over its surface with sandpaper. It looked like they were building the table. There were unsealed chairs off to the side, inside the shade of the garage, with a wide bedframe and a dresser, all unfinished.

“You want a nice cherry finish, gonna have to get the right kind’a stain,” Joseph told Bucky. “But I think Steve’d like a nice oak finish.”

“Ya think?” Bucky asked, looking concerned.

“Well, he’s your fiancé,” Joseph chuckled.

Steve gaped. He wasn’t sure he could believe what he was seeing.

“Speak of the devil,” Bucky said, breaking into a sudden grin and dropping the sandpaper.

Steve jerked and turned; his counterpart for that world walked out from the shade of the backyard with a tray of tall glasses, iced and with slices of lemons in them. He smiled and walked right up to Joseph and Bucky, putting the tray down on the table. Bucky lifted his arm and the other Steve stepped into him, pressing against his side. Steve searched out his counterpart’s left hand; he was wearing a ring.

“This is sometime in the sixties,” Strange announced. “By their fashion and the cars around us. Also by the radio program I just heard, they were talking about the Apollo missions.”


“So it’s the sixties,” Strange responded, nodding. “Well, it looks like you’re happy.”
“Yeah,” Steve muttered.

“We should keep going,” Strange added.

Steve nodded again. Strange touched his shoulder and the glyphs rose around them; Steve was left with the image of himself handing out glasses of iced tea with a diamond glistening on his finger. He touched his own left hand.

The glyphs faded and again, the dark room and squeak of rats that Steve was expecting was not what he saw. Instead, they stood on the sidewalk of a suburban neighborhood. Steve turned around and spotted himself walking out of a house with a tote bag hanging off his arm, filled with books. His counterpart was wearing sneakers and a tank top and shorts cut so high on his thigh that the pockets stuck out under the legs. Steve was more than a little startled.

The other Steve walked calmly and confidently from his front door onto the sidewalk. He turned at a hedge and immediately was knocked right off his feet by someone zooming by on a skateboard. Both he and the skateboarder shouted in surprise and Steve ran forward to see what was happening.

“OW!” the other Steve yelled.

“Ow,” the skateboarder wheezed.

It was Bucky. Only, this Bucky had pierced ears and a pierced lip and tattoos all down his left arm. Steve was never more stunned to see Bucky looking more like the punk in their relationship.

“Watch where you’re going, dickhead!” the other Steve yelled.

“You watch where you’re –” Bucky started, then stopped. He gawked.

“You ran into me,” the other Steve said angrily. “You hit me. You’re at fault here, I can sue you for damages, et cetera.”

Bucky blinked. Steve couldn’t help but smile; he knew that expression.
“I have no idea what’s happening,” Strange admitted.

“They’ve just met,” Steve guessed. “And Bucky is trying to cope with the fact that he’s being yelled at by a cute boy.”

Strange raised his eyebrows. The other Steve started picking up his books, then looked back at Bucky and resumed glaring.

“Are you going to help me or just stare?” he demanded.

Bucky scrambled up and started picking up books. Steve smiled again.

“Sorry,” Bucky said, handing over the books.

“Thank you,” the other Steve said, sounding not the least bit grateful. “If any of these are damaged, I’m going to hunt you down and make you pay the fee.”

“I’m in that house,” Bucky said immediately, pointing behind him. “Uh, fee?”

“These are library books, moron,” the other Steve snapped, then shoved past him. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

“You really are a sassy kid in this world,” Strange observed.

“I’m pretty sure that’s a universal thing,” Steve admitted readily.

Bucky jumped onto his skateboard and chased after the other Steve, his gaze very obviously set on his ass. Steve shook his head and turned back to Strange with a smile.

“Take three,” Strange said, lifting his hands.
The glyphs surrounded them. When they fell away, they gave way to darkness. Steve sucked in a breath.

“Shit,” Strange muttered.

Steve turned and saw his counterpart, sprawled on the floor of this damp cellar and nearly lifeless. Steve walked forward and knelt in front of his other self, his smile gone now. His other self looked delirious. There were rats and cockroaches crawling freely over his body. Steve hoped his counterpart couldn’t feel it.

A door nearby banged open. Steve pushed rapidly to his feet and looked up as someone thudded down the stairs into the cellar. Bucky flew out of the stairwell, gasped as he spotted the other Steve, and ran to scoop him off the floor.

“You are not allowed to die!” Bucky yelled. “You’re not allowed to die here, Steve!”

Bucky ran back up the stairs with Steve’s counterpart. Steve, with Strange behind him, followed. Upstairs, men and women in suits with guns drawn were hauling several men out of the small house. Bucky carried the other Steve outside, where an ambulance was waiting with EMTs and a stretcher. Bucky laid the other Steve onto the gurney and the EMTs swarmed.

“I need you to give us some room, sir,” one of the EMTs said.

“The blindfold – Get the blindfold off him!” Bucky called.

Steve neared. His counterpart lay lifeless still, but an EMT strapped an oxygen mask to his face and another waved a penlight in his eyes.

“His pupils aren’t responding. He’s not breathing.”

Bucky surged forward, grabbing the other Steve’s hand. Steve covered his mouth with a hand again.
“Steve! Steve, sweetheart, you gotta hold on, you can’t die on me,” Bucky begged of the lifeless body, “baby, you can’t die, just hold on –”

“Sir, I have to perform CPR, back up, now!”

An EMT pulled Bucky away, another started chest compressions. Bucky still yelled, “Stevie, you can’t leave me! C’mon, I can’t lose you!”

Natasha appeared at their shoulders. “They were feeding him chloroform the whole time they had him,” she reported.

“He needs a hospital,” the EMT who’d done the CPR said.

“He’s alive?” Bucky asked, eyes wide.

“Barely,” the EMT said. “Get in the back, we’ll take him to the emergency room now.”

Steve watched that world’s Bucky follow Steve into the ambulance, then they were left there. Natasha walked away and Steve followed her.

“Take them back to New York,” she ordered, gesturing to the men they’d captured. “Leave them all alive, Barnes will want to deal with them on his own.”

“Prison can’t hold me,” one of the men sneered.

Natasha just raised her eyebrows. “You’re dumber than you look if you really think Barnes is going to let you rot in prison, Garrett.”

“What happens to me?” Steve asked, turning to Strange. “The other me, I mean, the one that just got taken to the hospital.”

Strange shrugged and waved his hands. The glyphs appeared again and when they vanished, he and Strange stood in a hospital room.
His counterpart lay in the bed, a tube wrapped under his nose and hooked up to several monitors and an IV drip. Bucky sat by the bed, Natasha stood at his shoulder, and a doctor stood on the other side of the bed.

“He’s stable,” the doctor said. “We don’t know how long he’ll be asleep.”

“But he’ll wake up?” Bucky demanded. He held the other Steve’s hand, clinging to it desperately. “He will wake up?”

The doctor thinned their lips. “It’s possible he won’t.”

Steve glanced at Strange, who just nodded. The glyphs appeared again and Strange sorted through them.

“Five years from now,” Strange said. “That should be enough.”

The glyphs faded again. Steve looked around, worried, and only saw a bright and airy kitchen. It was unfamiliar and empty.

But even as he looked around, Bucky walked in. Steve turned and took a step back in surprise, struck just by how much this Bucky looked like his own. His beard was thicker and his hair was shorter, but the lines around his eyes and the gray at his temples worried him. Steve glanced at Strange, who only shrugged.

Bucky wasn’t smiling as he entered. He scrubbed at his face with a hand and headed to the door behind Steve and Strange, unlocked and opened it.

“Samson!” he shouted into the yard. “C’mere!”

Steve heard a dog barking. Steve glanced at Strange again.

“Samson!” Bucky yelled. “Come on, I thought you wanted in!”
Steve didn’t hear a dog running, and apparently the dog wasn’t coming, because Bucky sighed and leaned back.

“Honey?” he shouted. “Dog’s not obeying me!”

“Be more Alpha than ‘im!” a distant voice answered.

Bucky prickled. “How the hell am I supposed to be more Alpha?” he demanded, walking back across the kitchen. “He’s your fucking dog, come get him yourself!”

“UGH,” the distant voice replied.

Bucky turned again and headed for the fridge. Steve noted that he was wearing pajamas and slippers and the clock above the stove read half past ten. Steve heard footsteps and an odd thunking and turned again.

Steve, the Steve of this world, walked into the kitchen, wrapped in a pink silk dressing gown and leaning on a cane. Steve let his body sag with relief. The back of his mind questioned the pink dressing gown.

“He doesn’t listen to me,” Bucky insisted.

“You’re not being patient enough,” Steve countered.

“I’m used to instant response,” Bucky claimed.

The other Steve rolled his eyes and limped to the door. He stuck his head out and shouted for the dog again. Steve heard a loud bark and the rattle of a collar and Steve stepped out of the way of the doorway for a massive polar bear of a dog to come bounding in.

“Good boy, Samson!” the other Steve cooed, scratching the dog’s ears. “Good boy, good boy!”
“Woof!” the dog boomed.

“Settle!” the other Steve said. “Go to your cushion!”

The dog barked again, then padded out of the kitchen and into another room. Bucky turned towards Steve with a carton of orange juice in hand and raised his eyebrows.

“Usually it’s me in a bad mood when our mornings get interrupted,” the other Steve commented before Bucky could say anything.

“Yeah, well, usually we get interrupted before and not in the middle of,” Bucky claimed snappishly.

“Aw, poor baby,” the other Steve chuckled. He crossed the kitchen and slipped his arm around Bucky’s waist. “We can just start over.”

“Dog’ll interrupt,” Bucky complained quietly.

“Samson, stay!” the other Steve shouted.

“If that doesn’t work,” Bucky said, putting a hand on Steve’s shoulder, “I’m gonna find a creative way to punish you.”

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy it,” the other Steve said happily, sinking to his knees.

“Okay, happy ending,” Strange said, hastily conjuring the glyphs again. “Moving on!”

Steve blinked rapidly. He wondered if he and his Bucky ought to get a dog.

“Was that even a dog?” Steve muttered.

The glyphs faded again. Steve looked around, seeing a well-lit and open-planned apartment, a kitchen and living area, with a loft above them. He heard keys clattering and turned to see himself entering the apartment from a stairwell going down.

“I’m never doing a full-back tattoo in less than five sittings ever again,” Steve’s counterpart claimed. “I can feel the carpal tunnel forming in my wrists, I swear to God.”

“I’m sorry, doll,” Bucky answered as he followed.

Steve’s counterpart was short and thin, like all the other versions of him had been, but this one had tattoos when none of the others had. And lavender hair. But the version of Bucky that followed him was identical to Steve’s Bucky, from the tired eyes to the gray hairs to the metal arm.

“I just wanna fall into a puddle and die,” the other Steve whined.

Bucky wrapped him in a hug and lifted him off his feet. “How ‘bout you turn into a puddle and I cuddle you, sunshine?” he suggested.

The other Steve broke into a smile, enveloped in Bucky’s arms and seeming delighted to be there. “Okay, Daddy,” he answered readily.

Strange cleared his throat. “Okay, trying again.”

Steve smiled a little but didn’t stop Strange. He was glad for them. They looked truly happy.

The glyphs rose and faded once again. This time, they stood in another kitchen.

“Still not what we’re looking for,” Strange sighed.

“Let’s just wait and see what happens,” Steve offered.
Strange shrugged. “Whatever you want, man.”

A door nearby opened and Steve turned to see who entered. His eyebrows shot up as he recognized his post-serum figure, massive and bulky and broad-shouldered. The other Steve shouldered his way in with armfuls of groceries, way too many bags to carry at one time, and landed them all on the kitchen floor.

“Babe?” Bucky’s voice called from inside.

“Yeah, it’s me!” the other Steve answered.

“Well, duh,” Bucky called back. “If it wasn’t, Stephanie would be freaking out.”

A rather fat bulldog waddled into the kitchen. The other Steve smiled and knelt down to pet the dog.

“Hey, girl,” he said softly. “You been protecting Bucky and Georgie, huh?”

“Steve!” Bucky called again. “Will you make me a sandwich?”

Steve glanced in the direction of his voice, then back to his counterpart. His Bucky had never been the kind of Alpha to ask for a sandwich like that, and he had never been the kind of Omega to actually do it.

But the other Steve straightened up and brushed off his hands. “Yeah,” he said, strangely smiling as he moved back to the mound of groceries. “Peanut butter and bacon?”

“I love you!” Bucky yelled back.

Steve shot a glance to the other Captain America and followed the sound of Bucky’s voice. Through the kitchen, there was a small living room scattered with toys. Steve moved farther in and searched for the source of Bucky’s voice.

Bucky was lying on a sofa, hair tucked into a bun and feet propped up on several pillows. His stomach was swollen and exposed by his shirt riding up his waist. He had stretch marks and a
recognizable scar.

Steve touched his own stomach. That was the scar of a C-section.

The other Steve entered with a plate and Bucky made grabbing gestures at him. Steve’s counterpart smiled and walked up to his side to kneel next to him and kiss his stomach.

“Hi, kiddo,” the other Steve murmured. “You behavin’ for Papa?”

“No, she’s dancing on my spleen,” Bucky complained. “Gimme my sandwich, Rogers, before I expose you to the media.”

“What’re you gonna expose?” the other Steve laughed, but handed over the plate. “I’m pretty sure I have zero secrets left.”

“I’ll tell Fox News that Captain America likes getting his ass eaten,” Bucky claimed.

“I think they know that,” the other Steve said soberly.

Bucky bit into the sandwich. “I’ll give graphic detail,” he said with a full mouth.

“G’head an’ tell ‘em, sugar,” the other Steve said with a grin. “I got no more secrets worth keepin’.”

A little boy then ran up to collide with the other Steve’s chest. “Daddy!” he squealed. “Daddy home!”

“Hey, squirt!” the other Steve laughed. “Didja miss me?”

“Only lots!” the little boy claimed.

“I missed you lots,” the other Steve said, tweaking the boy’s nose. “I always miss you and your pops
when I go away.”

“Go away less,” the boy said immediately.

“That’s the plan,” the other Steve answered.

“Did you get the leave?” Bucky asked, sitting up.


“What?” Bucky gasped.

“Passed the shield to Sam,” the other Steve said with a grin. “Told Fury I couldn’t leave my Omega and son alone so much anymore, ‘specially with Jamie on the way.”

“We’re not naming her Jamie,” Bucky said immediately. “You’re really retired?”

“Really,” the other Steve answered happily.

Bucky twisted off the sofa and he and the other Steve kissed. Steve turned to Strange and just nodded.

“Moving on,” Strange repeated, raising the glyphs once more.

The glyphs fell once more. They then stood in yet another kitchen/living room.

Someone was knocking at the door. Steve stepped towards it, but then he heard footsteps and Bucky, in pajamas and with two flesh hands, exited a hallway, rubbing at his eyes.

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” he snapped. He yanked the door open. “It’s three AM – Oh.”

Steve moved to look through the doorway. This world’s Steve stood on Bucky’s doorstep; fully serumed, massive, wearing the Captain America uniform, and looking like he’d been through hell.
“Could I use your shower?” the other Steve asked numbly.

“Jesus, come in!” Bucky claimed, grabbing Steve’s arms to pull him inside. “What the hell happened to you? I thought the mission was supposed to be recon!”

“Bad intel,” the other Steve said. “Careful, I think my ribs are broken.”

“You think?” Bucky spluttered. “Did you not go to a hospital?”

The other Steve hesitated. Bucky rubbed his face with a hand.

“I might not be a superhero,” Bucky started, “but I am a nurse, and if you have broken ribs, you should see a doctor.”

“They’ll heal by morning,” the other Steve claimed. “There’s no point –”

“No point?” Bucky snapped, sounding shocked and exasperated. “You’re in pain!”

The other Steve crumpled. His gaze dropped and he suddenly looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. Bucky softened.

“Stevie?” he whispered.

“I’ll go,” Steve muttered. “Sorry, I shouldn’t’ve – I’ll just go back to my place –”

Bucky caught his arm before he left. “Hey,” he said gently, “don’t walk out on me here.”

The other Steve just looked at the ground. Bucky reached up and touched his face.
“Let me get you cleaned up,” he offered in a soft voice. “Then take you to the ER and get your ribs looked at. Okay, honey?”

The other Steve just nodded, then surged forward. He swept Bucky into a hug that Bucky returned gingerly but fiercely.

“I just wanted to come home,” the other Steve whispered.

Bucky kissed his dirty hair. “You’re home,” he promised. “You’re home, Omegamine.”

Strange raised his eyebrows at Steve. Steve nodded. The glyphs rose and fell again.

The room they were in was dark. A lamp burned on a nightstand next to a wash basin with a rag hanging off its rim and Steve saw Bucky’s sister curled up in an armchair by the nightstand. Stepping forward, Steve saw himself lying in the bed, shivering, and clutching to a shirt that was visibly too big for him.

“We should fast forward,” Strange suggested. “This you’s pretty deep in heat.”

Steve just stepped closer. “This was the one where I was dying of bondsickness,” he said quietly.

His counterpart was whispering under his breath. Steve read Bucky’s name on his lips.

“Not dying,” Strange observed. “And the bondmark isn’t faded, so he doesn’t have bondsickness.”

Steve just nodded once.

Rebecca seemed to wake up out of nowhere; she looked around, blinking, then picked up the rag and doused it in the water. She wrung it, then got up and went to pat Steve’s forehead.

“Bucky’ll be coming home soon,” she said, mumbling as though from habit. “The boats are coming back from England already; he’ll be here in barely a few weeks.”
The other Steve nodded. “Where’s Jamie?” he asked in a weak voice.

“Asleep,” Rebecca answered. “Do you want me to get him?”

The other Steve shook his head. He smacked his lips and Rebecca picked up a glass of water to offer him. After drinking, Steve fell back and wiped his forehead.

“It’s passing,” he said. “It’s not going to be a strong one.”

“Doctor said that might happen,” Rebecca told him, like she was reminding him. “Since you hadn’t had a heat since we got the news that Bucky went missing, remember?”

The other Steve just nodded again. “I’ll be alright,” he said tiredly. “I just need to sleep.”

“Fast forward?” Strange suggested.

Steve glanced in his direction, then nodded. Strange walked up to him and conjured the glyphs, then let them vanish.

“Just a week,” Strange told him.

They stood at a train station, amongst hundreds of people. Signs around them read *Chicago* and Steve frowned, until he saw his counterpart and Bucky’s family waiting nearby. A boy, eight or nine, was bouncing on the balls of his feet at the other Steve’s side.

“Calm down, Jamie,” the other Steve scolded.

“I can’t!” the boy said happily. “I wanna surprise Pa!”

The other Steve shot Jamie a grin and hugged him. “Just remember to call him *Uncle Bucky* when you first see him,” he said.
“I’ll remember, Ma!” Jamie swore.

Steve walked right up to them. Steve’s counterpart wore a suit and the boy wore his Sunday best. The train station, the surprise –

Then the train arrived. People began clamoring and Steve turned to watch the commuters start to disembark from the train. The first man stepped off and he wore a soldier’s uniform. Steve pushed forward, easily passing through the crowd, as the train emptied.

He saw Dum Dum’s stupid, ugly mustache. Steve broke into a run and skidded to a stop as Bucky and the rest of the Howlies, minus Dernier, Monty, and Pinkie for some reason, stepped off the train. All of them looked at Bucky.

“What’re you lookin’ at me for?” Bucky asked, looking affronted.

“We’re greeting your family,” Gabe said, raising his eyebrows.

“Hey, I’m greetin’ my girl,” Dum Dum claimed with a laugh as he elbowed Bucky. “I’ll be back, Cap!”

“Thanks!” Bucky called sarcastically after him, shaking his head.

Then Steve heard the boy, Jamie, shouting: “Uncle Bucky!”

Steve turned and watched Jamie running up. Bucky dropped his pack and fell to his knees to catch the boy running at him in a tight hug. All of the soldiers were wearing World War 2 uniforms and the fashion was what Steve remembered of 1945.

He remembered vividly that Ohio had legalized same-sex Alpha/Omega marriages just days after the war was declared over.

“I missed you so much, champ!” Bucky said as he hugged the boy.
“I missed you, too, Pa,” Jamie answered.

Bucky pulled back. He looked astounded. Jamie just grinned as Bucky stood up and looked over the boy’s shoulder to see the other Steve walking up. Steve crossed his arms over his chest and smiled a little, shaking his head.

“Guess what?” the other Steve asked Bucky in a soft voice.

Bucky didn’t seem to have an answer. The other Steve just pulled him into a kiss.

The Howlies clapped and Steve couldn’t help but join in. He almost wished that he could’ve had that coming home moment.

“You wanna move on?” Strange asked.

“Just a second,” Steve said quickly as the other Steve and his Bucky broke their kiss.

“We’re getting married,” the other Steve said with a grin.

“What?” Bucky spluttered.

“It’s legal now,” the other Steve told him. “We’re gettin’ married, in August.”

Bucky let out a whoop and lifted the other Steve off his feet to spin him around. Steve turned and nodded to Strange.

Strange conjured the glyphs again as that world’s Bucky shouted for the whole train station to hear: “We’re getting married!”

Steve looked down at his left hand. He wanted a ring now. He’d never really thought about it, but he wanted one.
“This isn’t the right one,” Strange guessed.

Steve looked up. They stood in a fancy parlor, surrounded by expensive furniture with expensive knick-knacks, and an expensive record player sat in the corner next to an expensive radio set, one of the two playing slow Blues Jazz.

“Don’t think so,” Steve said.

Strange stepped out of the parlor, looking around, and Steve followed. There was a hallway, then a kitchen, and Steve headed into the kitchen.

He found his counterpart cooking dinner. This world’s version of Steve wore pumps and a housedress and had pearls strung around his neck. His hair was still short, but his lips were rouged and he had a fat diamond on his left hand. Steve was, again, reminded of the fact that he didn’t have a wedding ring.

“There are a lot of vintage guns in the next room,” Strange said as he entered the kitchen. “And you’re in drag, wonderful.”

“That’s not drag,” Steve said. “It’s just the early 20th century. I wore dresses all the time before I joined the Army.”

Strange lifted his eyebrows. “Fair, but weird,” he said. “The radio just mentioned President Harding, so it’s the early 20s.”

A door banged open. Steve and the other Steve both jumped, then his counterpart ran out and Strange and Steve followed. In the hallway, Dum Dum shouldered his way in with someone draped over his shoulder.

“What the hell happened!” the other Steve gasped.

Dum Dum moved all the way in, proving that the man draped over his shoulder was Bucky. His head was limp and lolling onto his chest and his trousers were soaked in blood at the thigh.
“Deal went south,” Dum Dum said. “Boss said he didn’t need a hospital, he’s got a nurse back home.”

“Where the hell has he been hidin’ a nurse?” Gabe demanded, holding up Bucky’s other side. “Is she pretty?”

“I’m the nurse, dumbass,” the other Steve snapped. “Bring him in here!”

The other Steve moved back into the kitchen. Steve lingered in the hallway, watching the Howlies crowd their way inside; all of them this time, including Monty, Pinky, and Dernier. Dum Dum and Gabe lay Bucky on the kitchen floor and Steve pulled a massive first aid kit from the pantry.

“Since when have you been a nurse?” Morita asked.

“Since 1916,” the other Steve snapped. “I was in the Army.”

“Oh,” Monty said as though he’d just realized something. “That makes sense now.”

The other Steve wasn’t paying attention. He just cut open Bucky’s trousers at the knee with a knife, splitting them up to the hip, and revealed the bullet wound in his thigh. He hissed in a breath through his teeth, then snapped his fingers in the direction of the rest of the Howlies.

“Get whiskey out of the liquor cabinet,” he ordered. “Snappy!”

“Right!” half of them answered, and all of them bumped into each other as they looked for the liquor cabinet. Gabe found it first and handed Steve a bottle, who immediately unscrewed the cap and poured a little over the wound.

Bucky finally seemed to become conscious, as he hissed in pain and jerked his head up, blinking. “Hey, doll,” he muttered in Steve’s direction. He squinted. “Is that my good whiskey?”

“It’s alcohol,” Steve said.
“Isn’t this prohibition times?” Strange muttered.

“That’s my good whiskey!” Bucky spluttered.

“Here, drink some of it,” Steve said with exasperation. “You need stitches.”

Bucky snatched the whiskey bottle and gulped from it, though he still grimaced. “Figured,” he muttered. “Am I gonna live, nurse?”

“If you don’t, I’m gonna resurrect you to kill you myself,” the other Steve said bluntly.

Bucky laughed and shoved himself up to grab the other Steve’s face and tug him into a kiss. Both of them had blood on their hands and neither of them seemed to care. Steve shook his head with a small smile.

“I think these guys are involved with the mafia,” Strange said, re-entering the kitchen again. “Because there’s a distillery in the basement and nobody should have as many guns as they do.”

“It’s Prohibition times,” Steve agreed.

“Ready to keep going?” Strange asked.

Steve cast another glance to the kitchen. The other Steve had shoved Bucky back down and was carefully extracting a bullet from his thigh.

“Yeah,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Strange conjured the glyphs. Once they faded, Steve saw himself and Bucky standing side-by-side by a bowl of yogurt.

Steve moved closer. Strange stayed back.
“I’m spending the summer in France,” Steve heard his counterpart say.

“Oh,” Bucky answered, sounding numb.

Steve walked around. Bucky held a food dish in his hands with the word *KITTEN* displayed on its side and that world’s Steve was staring at it like it was hurting him.

“I guess we could have phone sex if you’re –” the other Steve said, then stopped and sighed. “But I don’t know,” he said, “I’ll be pretty busy over the summer.”

“That’s not –” Bucky said, but then he stopped and sighed, too. “Never mind. Don’t worry about it.”

The other Steve turned away. Bucky put down the dish and followed him out of the kitchen; Steve followed, too. The other Steve walked into a bedroom, grabbed a bag, and opened a drawer to start emptying it. Bucky leaned against the doorframe, Steve lingered just behind him.

“Guess you need all that, huh?” Bucky commented.

The other Steve only glanced over his shoulder. Steve was worried. The other timelines; they had diverged from what he’d seen fairly quickly. This was still following what the witch had shown him.

“It’s not like you really need me anymore,” the other Steve just told Bucky. “You’re fine with touch and all now. You could get an actual boyfriend or girlfriend.”

He stood up. Bucky didn’t say anything.

“I mean, did you expect this to last more than the year?” the other Steve demanded. “It’s not like me and Becca are gonna be roommates again next year, she’s finally starting suppressants. We can do the whole *Oh I’ll call* thing but summer always kills connections.”

Bucky dropped his gaze. “Only if you let it,” he said softly.

The other Steve sighed again. He rubbed at his face and shrugged. “You’re right. We can – We can
try to stay connected."

“How long are you gonna be in France?” Bucky asked without looking up.

“I come back the tenth of August.”

“Jesus,” Bucky suddenly hissed, pushing off the doorway and turning around.

“What’s your problem?” the other Steve called angrily. “I arranged this with my best friend almost a year ago, you can’t expect me to cancel my plans for a fuckbuddy —”

“No, no, you’re right,” Bucky interrupted in a sharp snap, “I couldn’t ask you to do that. But, y’know, some warning would’a been nice!”

“I forgot.”

Bucky shook his head, looking away.

Steve stiffened as his gaze seemed to land directly on him. For a second, this version of Bucky, young and short-haired but without his left arm, made direct eye contact with him. Steve held his breath.

Then Bucky’s gaze slipped on. He just shook his head.

“Jesus,” he muttered again, stepping away from the bedroom.

The other Steve walked out and grabbed another bag from the kitchen, then headed for the door. Bucky got up and called him back.

“What’re you going?”
“Home,” the other Steve just said. “I’ll cancel with Becca, I’ll tell her I got sick.”

“You gotta leave now?” Bucky asked.

The other Steve shrugged again. Steve stepped between them, looking between them, wishing he could intervene and tell them not to waste this moment.

“I mean, not much point in staying anymore, is there?” the other Steve asked.

Bucky stepped closer, but only by a step. Steve held his breath.

“Do you have to?”

The other Steve looked away, his hand on the doorknob. Steve held his breath.

“I mean, you’re going away for the summer and suddenly we can’t be friends anymore?” Bucky asked. “C’mon, Rogers. I thought you liked me.”

“I do like you,” the other Steve confessed quietly. “You’re – You’re probably my best friend other than Peggy. Easily.”

“So stay,” Bucky asked. “Come to dinner at my parent’s place, anyway. I’ll drive you home and hey, when you get back, call me up and we’ll get together. What’s two months?”

The other Steve’s hand remained on the doorknob. Steve knew what would happen if he left, if he walked out that door and didn’t care to look back. He held his breath.

“I mean,” Bucky continued, clearly pleading with this other Steve to stay, to try again, but the other Steve didn’t seem to hear. “You ‘n’ me don’t have to end ‘less one of us starts goin’ steady with anybody. You ‘n’ me don’t even have to end there, I guess. I mean, sex would –”

The other Steve dropped his bag and took his hand off the doorknob. Steve let out his breath all at once as that world’s Steve and Bucky embraced and kissed. Bucky picked the other Steve off his
feet, turned him around, and carried him back into the bedroom.

“Seen enough?” Strange asked.

Steve glanced back towards the closed bedroom door. “Could you fast forward?” he asked quietly.

Strange shrugged and raised his hands. The glyphs rose, surrounding them, and Strange sorted through them.

“How about a couple years later?” he asks.


The glyphs faded. Steve looked around even before they were clear and came to see a hospital room. His chest gripped with worry and he jerked around again, looking for the occupant, and saw himself lying in a bed. He wore a gown and he was pale. Steve sucked in a breath.

But his counterpart was smiling. Looking down at a bundle in his arms and smiling. Steve moved forward, then covered his mouth with a hand. This world’s Steve smiled down at an infant maybe just an hour old, an infant that had the Barnes cleft chin.

“Papa loves us,” this Steve whispers. “Papa loves you and he loves me.”

“I can’t tell if that baby’s supposed to be your Alpha’s,” Strange interrupted the tender moment.

“It’s Bucky’s,” Steve said firmly. “That’s Bucky’s baby.”

“Cool,” Strange said. “Move on?”

The door behind them opened. Steve looked up and Bucky entered, a wide grin on his face. Bucky’s parents, Becca, a younger girl Steve doesn’t recognize, and Doctor Erskine follow behind him. Their family.
“Doll,” Bucky said, sounding like he was proud to call this Steve his doll, “our friends are messed up.”

“We been knew,” this world’s Steve answered; Steve glanced at Strange, who just shrugged. “What’d they do?” the other Steve asked.

Bucky walked up and bent to kiss the baby’s forehead. The other Steve smiled again, looking down at the baby as well. It was sweet. Steve neared, moving just behind Bucky to the left to see the baby as well. The baby smiled toothlessly up at its parents, then its gaze drifts.

The baby looked right at him. Steve sucked in a breath, feeling an odd sense of premonition. The baby then smiled, lifting a hand.

“Can I hold him?” Bucky’s mother suddenly asked, breaking Steve’s concentration.

“Yeah,” the other Steve said, “for a second.”

Steve’s counterpart passed the baby to Bucky’s ma and the baby looked up at his grandmother. Mrs. Barnes cooed for a moment, smiling down at him, and the baby waved his hands a little, like he was overwhelmed.

“Careful,” the other Steve said quietly.

“Hi, sweetie,” Mrs. Barnes whispered, “I’m your grandma! Hi!”

Steve looked around the room again. Doc was looking at his counterpart by the foot of the bed, a soft smile on his face. Steve’s mother wasn’t there.

Mrs. Barnes passed the baby back to the other Steve. Steve’s counterpart settled the baby in his arms and looked down briefly, then back up to keep talking. Steve got mesmerized by the baby again and moved even closer. The baby stuck his hand in his mouth, looking up at his mother, then his gaze switched to his father, and then back to the left; to Steve.
“He can’t see us, right?” Steve said to Strange.

“Nah,” Strange said. “Oh, wait, the baby?”

“He’s looking right at me,” Steve insisted.

Strange neared. The baby looked from Steve to Strange, then took his hand out of his mouth and bobbed his fist in their direction.

“Okay, so there’s theories,” Strange said.

“What’re you lookin’ at, buddy?” this world’s Bucky murmured to his son. “What’s so interesting?”

“Kids and animals have a sense for the paranormal,” Strange told Steve. “So, yeah. Yeah, he’s looking at us.”

The baby bobbed his fist again. Steve broke into a grin.

“Hey, kiddo,” he murmured. “Can you hear me?”

The baby cooed at him.

“You be good for your momma and pa,” Steve told him. “Treat ‘em right. Love ‘em as hard as you can, ‘cause they worked real hard to make you happen.”

The baby waved his tiny little hand. Steve smiled at him, his hand going to touch his own stomach.

“Make sure you ask for siblings,” he added softly. “Your ma’ll wanna do this all over again, I can guarantee it.”

“Childbirth is incredibly stressful and actually really draining,” Strange piped up.
“Shush,” Steve told him. He gave one last nod to the baby. “Be good, little one.”

The baby’s gaze drifted to his father. Steve looked to Strange and nodded. Strange just lifted his hands. The glyphs surrounded them and when they faded, Steve expected his own kitchen.

Instead, they stood in a dark alley.

“Wait, I wanted to go home!” Steve said quickly. “I didn’t want to see this one!”

“Why not?” Strange asked. “Maybe it goes wildly different than what you saw like all the others.”

“None of them were wildly different!” Steve hissed. “Just one thing happened that changed everything else!”

Strange hesitated. Steve looked around. He saw the drunken and stumbling Bucky, the heavy lump at his side of a gun. His counterpart, lifting his cocky chin.

“Hey, sugar,” Steve heard himself call out. “Lil’ lonely?”

Bucky stopped. Steve braced himself; maybe Strange was right, maybe the silhouette of the gun in Bucky’s jacket would stay just a silhouette.

“Steve?” Bucky said.

The other Steve lost his confidence. “Buck?”

A second passed. Steve covered his mouth with a hand, begging that it would be wildly different.

“Are you whoring yourself?” Bucky demanded.
“No,” Steve whispered.

“So what if I am?” the other Steve returned angrily. “Omega’s gotta earn a livin’ somehow, wiseass.”

Steve wanted to look away as Bucky grabbed the other Steve by the front of his shirt and slammed him against the wall. He couldn’t.

“You’re a whore?” Bucky demanded in a low, sharp tone. “A common slut? Is this what you’ve become?”

The other Steve kicked out. Bucky dropped him and stumbled back, clutching his crotch.

“Fuck!” he hissed. “Fuck, that ain’t playin’ fair!”

“Put your hands on me one more time an’ you’ll see me play dirty!” the other Steve snapped.

“You –!” Bucky snarled, straightening up.

The other Steve drew a gun. Steve blinked. Bucky blinked.

“I dreamed for years what it would be like if you found me,” the other Steve said, his tone completely dead. “You disappoint.”

Bucky drew himself up angrily. “You disappoint,” he snapped. “This is what you’ve done with yourself?”

“You think I enjoy this?” Steve hissed. “You think I *like* this?”

“Maybe you do!” Bucky accused.

“Then what were you doin’ here?” Steve snapped. “Tell me you weren’t lookin’ for a rent Omega, Buck, fucking just lie to me.”
Bucky deflated, but his face was angry. The other Steve just nodded.

“Which one’a us is the whore?” he accused. “You were gonna pay for it. I just get paid.”

Bucky screwed his face up again and knocked the gun out of the other Steve’s hand, catching it easily. The other Steve backed up quickly, but he hit the wall and Bucky pressed the gun into his stomach.

“I wanted to marry you,” Bucky said quietly. “I wanted to find you, come home to you, make you my Omega.”

“You’re a coward,” the other Steve spat in his face. “You never even tried to look for me!”

Bucky jerked the gun up, but though the other Steve flinched, Bucky didn’t hit him with it. He drew it back, then stepped back.

“I wanted to,” Bucky said, “I didn’t ‘cause I thought you didn’t wanna see me. My ma lied to me, said I raped you back then.”

The other Steve fell back against the wall. He softened, even though Bucky still had the gun.

“You didn’t,” he said.

“I know,” Bucky snapped. “She told me the truth just ‘fore I shipped out. I just got back home.”

“What, you want a medal?” the other Steve snapped back.

Bucky jerked the gun back up. The other Steve didn’t even flinch. They stared off for a moment. Bucky’s eyes were wide and showed the veins standing out in them.

“Shoot me,” the other Steve dared at last. “You’d be doin’ me a favor anyway.”
“Why?” Bucky demanded.

“VD’s killing me,” Steve said. “Price’a bein’ a whore.”

The gun dipped. Bucky jerked it back up, setting his jaw. The other Steve walked right up to it and put it against his forehead.

“Do it,” he challenged. “You wanna be a big strong Alpha, huh? That it, Buck? You wanna prove you can bring your Omega back in line?”

Bucky’s jaw tensed, then he cocked the gun. “That ain’t it,” he growled.

“You can’t have me, nobody can?” Steve demanded. “What do you want? You want me to burst into tears and fall into your arms?”

“Maybe,” Bucky muttered. “I never stopped loving you.”

“Ain’t gonna happen,” the other Steve said with finality. “I ain’t got any love left in me. So shoot me. End my miserable fucking life.”

Bucky didn’t move.

“DO IT!” the other Steve screamed.

Steve jerked back, flinching. Strange just shook his head.

But Bucky pulled the gun back and uncocked it. The other Steve was left standing there, panting.

“You’re fucked up,” Bucky said.
“You’re tellin’ me,” the other Steve growled. “You’re a drunk.”

“So neither’a us is pretty,” Bucky snapped. “Don’t make me a murderer.”

“Gimme back my gun,” Steve demanded.

Bucky stepped back. “No.”

The other Steve lunged. Bucky jerked back. The other Steve got his hands on the gun and they tussled for a second. The alley was filled with a sudden bang and Steve jerked back, flinching again.

The other Steve stumbled a step away. He looked down at himself, his eyes wide, as blood began to blossom on his stomach. He staggered and Bucky caught him, easing him to the ground.

“Jesus,” Bucky was hissing, “Jesus, Stevie, what the fuck was that for!”

“Didn’t hurt that bad,” the other Steve wheezed. “Thought’d be worse.”

“You were trying t’a get yourself killed?” Bucky demanded.

The other Steve coughed. “Not especially,” he said. “But – Was already dyin’.”

“Fuck,” Bucky whispered.

“Did me a favor,” the other Steve said, his voice fading. “I didn’t even know it was loaded. Thought I had to buy the bullets.”

“Shit!” Bucky gasped. “Stevie – Shit!”

“You should get outta here,” the other Steve said. “Cops… Cops’re…”
He didn’t finish. Bucky had blood all over him and the gun in his hands was bloody. Steve stepped closer, but his counterpart was limp. He was almost smiling.

“I might’ve been wrong,” Strange said quietly.

Bucky looked at the gun. He looked at the Omega in his arms, then at the gun. He popped the chamber. He reached into his pocket, and it seemed he just carried bullets. He loaded the gun again and flipped the drum back in. Steve covered his mouth. Bucky looked down at his Steve lying dead, then raised the gun to his own head.

“Come on,” Strange said hastily, grabbing Steve’s shoulder.

The glyphs rose, but Steve still heard the gunshot. At the last second, there was a gap in the glyphs and Steve saw Bucky slumped over Steve’s body. He felt numb, but a little voice in the back of his head whispered *at least they were together.*

The glyphs cleared and Steve was back in his kitchen. He turned to the right and met Bucky’s eyes. Bucky quickly ducked in and kissed his lips.

“Hi,” Steve whispered.

Bucky pressed their foreheads together. “Hey, baby,” he murmured.

Strange pushed off the stool. “There’s not much else I can do for you,” he said. “I hope you found out what you needed to know.”

Steve just nodded. Strange conjured a portal and went through it. Steve leaned into Bucky.

“What did you see?” Bucky asked quietly.

Steve thought about it for a second. Then he slipped off the stool and took Bucky’s hand, leading him back into their room. He pulled Bucky onto the bed and brought their lips together. Bucky
kissed him tenderly, sweetly, lovingly.

“We find each other,” Steve murmured. “Every time. We find each other.”

Bucky tangled his hand with Steve’s. “Makes sense,” he answered softly. “Love I got for you’s strong enough t’a go across every universe.”

Steve brushed through Bucky’s hair with a hand. “Yanno what we should do?” he said quietly.

“What?”

“Have a real wedding.”

Bucky smiled. He kissed Steve again, then lifted his left hand and kissed his ring finger.

“That’s the best idea you ever had,” he said quietly.

Steve pulled Bucky into another kiss. He could get into everything he’d seen in therapy. It didn’t really matter just then.

The next morning, Tony lent Bucky an emergency suit; which clearly was already Bucky’s size and since Tony was nowhere near that size, Steve wasn’t sure why Tony insisted that Bucky was just borrowing it. They dressed in their Sunday best and headed to Brooklyn. Bucky drove, not Steve. Steve didn’t need that sense of control that morning.

It was cold out but Steve barely felt it. St. Michael’s was just the same as he remembered it.

The congregation was larger, however, so he and Bucky didn’t stick out in the crowd. They took a pew near the back and got away with Bucky taking the aisle seat. No one noticed them during the service.

After, they slipped away to find the confessional booths. Steve knew the way. There were more now than there’d been when he’d been younger and even then, there was a queue. Steve took a seat and
Bucky remained standing at his shoulder, his hand on his shoulder.

Eventually, Steve’s turn came. He stood and shot one last glance in Bucky’s direction before slipping into the confessional. He shut the door and sat down on the bench with a shaking breath.

“Good morning, my son,” Father Elliot’s worn and reassuring voice greeted him.

“Good morning,” Steve said quietly. Then cleared his throat. “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been seventy-three years since my last confession.”

For a second, there was silence across the screen. Steve almost panicked and regretted behind honest; wishing he’d told a lie in the confessional. He winced.

But then Father Elliot laughed softly.

“I knew you’d come back,” Father Elliot murmured. “It is good to hear your voice, Steven.”

Steve let out a breath. He swallowed the lump in his throat and brushed away the sudden tears threatening to spill from his eyes.

“It’s good to come back,” Steve admitted. “I – I wasn’t sure I wanted to, for a while.”

“But you’re here,” Father Elliot said gently. “Tell me what you have come to say, my son.”

Steve let out his breath. It came easier already.

“Since my last confession, I have committed mortal sins,” he began. “I have taken lives, I have lied, I have –”

Steve faltered, looking down.
“I have committed adultery and fornication in prostitution,” he confessed softly. “But… but you know about that, Father.”

Father Elliot didn’t answer, clearly waiting for Steve to finish.

“I’ve doubted God,” Steve admitted.

“Do you still doubt?” Father Elliot asked.

Steve shook his head. “No,” he said aloud. “I – I experienced a small miracle the day before yesterday,” he said, his hand going to his stomach.

The cut that he’d made was still visible on his stomach. Steve had thought about bringing a doctor’s attention to it, because any other cut like that would have vanished within 24 hours, but this was just a scar. He didn’t mind having that scar to remind him.

JARVIS had never found an explanation for the door opening just in time for Steve to drop the knife, after all.

“Do you turn your back on these sins?” Father Elliot asked.

“Yes,” Steve answered easily. He even smiled. “It’s been 73 years since I found that door you were telling me about, Father,” he said. “The day after I last came to confession, I met Doctor Erskine.”

“And the Lord used you,” Father Elliot answered, his voice sounding like a smile.

“He did,” Steve replied. “I found my Alpha.”

“And what did he say?”

“He didn’t consider it something that needed to be forgiven,” Steve confessed with a smile. “He was glad that I didn’t starve to death on the streets.”
“As I said you would find,” Father Elliot said. “I am so very glad to know that you have found happiness, Steven.”

“You know I’m talking about Bucky, right?” Steve continued quickly. “Sergeant Barnes?”

“I remember,” Father Elliot answered, his voice soft and kind.

“Well, we got married during the war,” Steve said. “We didn’t have a proper ceremony, we couldn’t, but we said vows, and we got a certificate filed in France.”

“That’s wonderful,” Father Elliot said with genuine gladness in his voice.

Steve let both of his hands fall to his stomach. “We’re expecting twins,” he said at last.

He heard Father Elliot laugh softly. “Twins,” he chuckled. “They’ll have the best parents they could hope for.”

Steve gave a nod, lacing his fingers together. “I used to question why – why everything that happened happened,” he said. “But I think I know now.”

“Do you?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah,” he said readily. “And I’m glad that it happened, too.”

“I am happy to hear this, my son.”

Steve took a breath and let it out. It came easy.

“Today is the day you receive absolution,” Father Elliot told him. “And it’s a long time coming, too.”
Steve laughed softly with him.

“My son, I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Steve smiled again. Those words, those few words, might not have meant much, but he’d waited seventy years to hear them.

“Go forth and sin no more,” Father Elliot bade him. “And consider naming one of your twins after me.”

“I think I will,” Steve answered, standing. “Thank you, Father.”

“Thank you,” Father Elliot replied. “I have waited seventy years to tell you that. I may die in peace now.”

Steve set his hand on the door for a second. “Say hi to my ma, would you?” he requested.

“I will,” Father Elliot said happily.

Steve stepped out of the booth. He took a breath and felt his lungs expand easily. Bucky was still standing where he’d left him and as Steve walked up, he held out his hand. Steve took it and squeezed it. Bucky pulled him close and pressed a kiss to his left ring finger.

“Let’s go home,” Steve said quietly.

“Whatever you want, Omegamine,” Bucky answered in a murmur.

* *

Steven Grant Rogers was born on July 4th, 1918, in a small inn in Dublin, Ireland. Attending his birth was the innkeeper’s wife and a local midwife, neither of whom knew Steven’s mother longer than the day she’d spent at the inn before going into labor. Sarah stayed at the inn for two months
following the birth before boarding a steamship to New York, newborn in her arms. The man that had begotten her child was never mentioned, but Sarah wore a ring and kept a locket with a clip of hair close to her heart at all times. All assumed that the father was long since dead. And they were correct.

James Buchanan Greene was born on March 10th, 1917, at home with no one to attend his birth. His mother nearly lost him, and though she tried to take him to a doctor, she was turned away for having given birth to the son of a Beta. Her neighbor, George Barnes, bought her the medicine she needed that her partner was unable to purchase legally. And when her partner turned on her and her son, George Barnes helped her escape to New York.

The two boys arrived in New York the same day. They moved into their neighboring row houses within weeks of each other. And when Winifred went to introduce herself to Sarah, James lingered on her skirt and Steven stopped his constant wailing at the sight of him.

“A miracle,” Sarah had breathed out in limited English. “Must be fate,” Winifred had agreed.

On November 30th, 2014, Father Franklin Elliot, Sr., passed away quietly at his son’s home. His illegitimate son, as it should be said, for even priests have their own confessions.

On November 30th, 2014, James bought the ring he’d promised Steven when they were both too young to understand what marriage was and they filed an official marriage certificate with the State of New York. The New York Office of Marriages was referred to the records filed in Besançon, France, for their original marriage certificate. Thus, New York declared them wed since November 9th, 1943.

They set the date for the public retaking of their vows for November 9th, 2015. With plenty of time for the birth of their twins in between.
that's it! that's the fic! omg! this was a wild af ride. closing thoughts? the reality-hopping strange and steve did was 100% real, yes that means all the cameos of my other fics are spoilers (ish?) and those other cameos are things that i might write. i thought about including the magic fic but it just didn't fit, soz.
what does this mean for the future? there is a part 3 coming up and i can promise you, steve’s pearls and the art that chaos has done will feature again. when is part 3 coming? i’m gonna take some time to really get it banked, so may 1st. that’s a friendly neighborhood angst queen guarantee.

but for now, this is your friendly neighborhood angst queen and disaster bi signing off. long-bean!steve and confused-grandpa!bucky will return.

End Notes

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