Where All Roads Lead

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Summary

When Steve Rogers inadvertently touches a relic in the course of a mission gone sideways during WWII, he’s catapulted seventy years into the future. Before he’s even sure where he’s ended up, his search for help puts him in contact with Bucky Barnes, a historian and college professor who has built a career around studying Captain America.

With Bucky’s help, Steve means to find out how exactly he ended up in 2017, and solve the bigger mystery of how to get home. There's just one problem. The closer they get to their goal, the less certain Steve is that he wants to go home.

Notes

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See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

April 23rd, 1944

Skulking through hallways, surrounded by grey stonework that went on and on, it was easy to forget this place had been an abbey. Their footfalls echoed traitorously, and far more effort had gone into concealing their presence from Hydra than admiring the architecture. Steve wondered, as he split off from his team in hopes of flanking the enemy, if the choice to set up here had been an intentional one. To bring a fight to such sacred ground was sacrilege.

The hallway Steve moved through let out into a large, cavernous room. Pillars rose up from the floor and spread outwards like fountains of stone, meeting in ornate arches overhead. This was a hallowed place, the wall sconces bathing everything in a soft, warm glow.

At the far end of the empty room, Steve spotted what might have once been an altar. Now, it was only an empty pedestal, draped in luxurious velvet. There was a book splayed open there. It might have been a Bible, but Steve wasn’t sure. It was hard to imagine anything Hydra would have been reverent enough of to leave untouched, or maybe they just hadn’t gotten here yet. Denmark had long since fallen to Germany, but Hydra had only recently descended on the abbey like the parasites they were.

The abbey wasn’t secure or advantageous to defend. It had no tactical advantage at all. If Hydra had chosen to roost in this place, there was more to it than pettiness or pointless malice.

Steve was mindful of his footsteps, soft shuffles against the stone as he made his way to the pedestal. The wall sconces stretched and softened his shadow, until it looked like a spectre following him across the length of the room. He listened for any sign of commotion, but there was only the gentle cadence of his breathing as he reached the pedestal.

Though he couldn’t hope to read the words, there was no mistaking what he was looking at. The pages of the book were thin as gossamer, words scrawled out in columns across the translucent sheets. It looked as if it might crumble if one laid so much as a finger on it.

In the end, that fragility was a gift. Too reverent to touch the book itself, Steve rested his fingers on the pedestal, his thumb brushing something beneath the swath of velvet under the book. It might have been debris, but as he pressed against the subtle lump marring the otherwise smooth surface, a movement on the wall to his right caught Steve’s attention.

The scrape of a secret door opening in the wall might as well have been a siren. Stone dragged against the rough edges of other stones, the echo deafening against the silence of the abbey. Steve drew closer to the opening compartment, his shield already up, waiting for the enemy to come.

No one came. Steve was alone for the moment, only the dark, gaping maw in the wall breaking up the soft light that bathed the room. His pulse thrummed as he crept across the room, creeping closer to the gap in the stones. From where he stood, it was hard to tell if anything at all was hidden there. It was only when he got closer that he spotted the contents that had been so carefully shielded away. It wasn't a weapon or a power source or anything that Steve could ascertain any tactical value for. The base of the shelf in the wall was piled in more of the luxurious fabric he'd found on the pedestal, and nestled in its plush folds was an artifact. The way it had been concealed, he’d have thought it to be some Christian holy relic at least, but whatever symbolism was depicted was lost on him. A smooth, inky rock made up the pedestal, holding up what appeared to be the carved trunk of a tree. Three women stood at its roots, one delicate and lovely, one old and
decrepit, last inscrutable and featureless. There was not much to tell beyond that, shrouded in hoods and robes as they were.

Cautiously, Steve reached for the statue, thinking it might be a weapon in disguise. Nothing else came to mind that would explain why Hydra put effort into protecting it. He inched forward, but as he was about to touch the figure, the muted rat-a-tat of gunfire cut through the quiet.

It was close, as far as Steve could tell, and in the end, he didn’t have to wait long to find out. He got his shield up just as Hydra agents flooded the room. The statue was forgotten in favor of staying alive as they tried to corner him.

Times like these, Steve moved on automatic, more or less. Steve mowed them down, but true to their motto, it seemed as if two more popped up for each one he knocked down. Soon, he was ducking behind his shield when the gunfire was coming from too many angles. He held his own the way he always did, but seemed as if much of the facility had converged on this point, and wondered if it was about him, or the relic.

Maybe neither, as it turned out. An explosion on the other side of the building was barely muffled by the distance. The whole building trembled, and none of the agents seemed surprised. Steve came to a sickening realization. Hydra hadn’t taken the abbey because it was special. They’d taken it because they found it expendable. There was every likelihood the entire thing had been a trap.

The building trembled all around them, grout and debris shaking loose, crumbling into dust as it hit the tile. The ominous grinding of stone falling in on itself echoed in Steve’s ears. Over their heads, he could see the entrance to the room was blocked off by rubble, and the windows may as well have been miles away. It was a deep wound Hydra was cutting, tearing the place down to its foundations, a brutal suggestion that even God was no match for their war. All this to leave him with no escape routes.

There was no room for mourning a desecrated building. Steve Rogers had never given up on anything in his life, and he didn’t intend to start now. They descended on him, and he fought back even knowing he was unlikely to leave this room. Each step of retreat they wrung from him cost them dearly, but he was driven back against the wall, the building rumbling against his back.

It all happened in an oddly lethargic fashion after that, the seconds stretching out, as if time slowed down all around him. Steve leaned against the wall to balance himself, but his palm found the hole in the wall instead, making him catch himself however he could, and maybe it was dumb luck, or maybe he’d always been going to grab the relic that had been hidden away. As the flat of his hand landed against the carved stone, his fingers automatically closed around the shape of it, but his mind was not on the statue in his hand. It was on the snick of a hammer being pulled back, on the bullet he swore he was watching sail towards him, on a collision course for the space between his eyes.

Then, he was nowhere. The abbey, the agents, even the relic in his fist faded to nothing. The ground gave way to empty space beneath him, but Steve wasn’t falling. There was nowhere to fall in such absence. There were no reference points, his senses stripped away, and Steve wondered if the bullet had hit and he had died there in the rubble. If this was death, he didn’t like it. The idea of being in this nowhere place for even a little while was uncomfortable, but an eternity of nothing promised to drive him mad.

“Hello?” he called out, but only silence reached his ears.

Dread coiled in his belly, a poison that sought to consume him inch by inch. Perhaps he really was dead. Maybe he’d blocked out the trauma of a bullet to the brain.
Only, he couldn’t be dead. He was still distantly aware that he was breathing, and when he touched
the crook of his neck with his fingertips, he found the insistent thump of his pulse. Not dead then,
but lost, and maybe that was worse.

“Hello?” he tried again, but no words came, and nothing answered his silent greeting.

He was still scrambling to figure out where he was when he felt it. Nothing had changed. He had
no senses that could confirm it. Steve was certain anyway, that something was watching him from
the void. It was a foreign sort of feeling, not the gut sense of an enemy slinking in the shadows, but
something else entirely. It was a sensation of being loomed over and judged. He may as well have
been on his knees in shackles, begging for the mercy of an apathetic warden. He was on one end of
the scales, but he had no idea what he was being weighed against.

“Please,” he tried, though he knew nothing would come. All the same, it seemed to be the right
answer. The empty space around him exploded in silence and blinding light, and then everything
faded.

Steve clung to thought as long as he could, even though unconsciousness was sweeping in like a
tidal wave. If this was some sort of purgatory between death and what came after, at least he hadn’t
felt the bullet between his eyes.

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Steve woke to the bleating honk of car horns echoing somewhere far away, cold concrete spread
out beneath him. Somewhere distant, people were talking, but he couldn't make out the words. A
city? He was nowhere near a city. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe this was what came after
nowhere.

Gravel had gotten under the collar of his uniform, the discomfort nudging him back to the present.
He groaned and blinked his eyes open, a cloud-strewn sky flanked by tall buildings and fire
escapes. How fitting, Steve thought, that he'd end up in another alley.

Only, no matter how poetic it was, there was no reason he ought to be in an alley. Maybe he was
dead after all, though he hoped that the afterlife didn’t amount to him sprawled out next to a
dumpster. It was a ludicrous solution, but so was everything else. Curiosity got the better of him,
and he pulled off one of his gloves, pleased to find he was in perfect control of his limbs. That
wasn’t the point, though. The point was to touch the patch of skin between his eyebrows, where
the bullet should have hit, but it seemed to have never reached him.

What he could feel was that the surface he was lying on was terribly uncomfortable, and there was
a muted sort of soreness in his shoulder where he’d wrenched it in the chaos. He probably wasn’t
dead then, though Steve wasn’t sure if that was a comfort or not. It only brought him back to the
mystery of how he’d gotten here.

The wail of a siren coming and going startled Steve from his thoughts. Whatever had happened, he
wasn’t going to sort it out lying in an alley. With his gloved hand, he pushed himself to sit up, and
the world briefly seemed to spin before righting itself.

The architecture that surrounded Steve told him nothing about where he was. The worn brick and
mortar could have belonged in countless cities, so Steve didn’t linger over them long. He pulled
himself to his feet smoothly enough, and dusted the debris from his uniform. Only the fact that he
didn’t know how he’d ended up here kept him from stepping out of the alley right away. Well, that
and the fact that his shield was nowhere to be seen.
Caution was the best tool he had in his arsenal at the moment, so caution was what Steve went with. He scooped up the helmet and cautiously peeked around the corner of the building, eyes going wide as he took in his new surroundings. He rubbed at them with his gloved knuckles, certain he must have been seeing things.

When Steve opened his eyes again, nothing had changed. It was a city, but it wasn’t like anything he’d seen before. The buildings, the clothes, the cars were all recognizable as what they were intended to be, but completely foreign in appearance… it was as if someone had vaguely described the components of a city to an artist who’d never seen one, and this was how the artist had translated it.

The alley had let out onto a quiet street, with cars in all the wrong colors parked all along the curb. Somehow, they managed to be both completely recognizable and utterly foreign. They had bumpers and headlights and tires, all the individual components of a vehicle, while managing not to look anything like he expected. They were sleek and streamlined, with their tires set completely underneath the chassies, and words like Sonata and Fusion emblazoned across the tail end.

Steve wasn’t getting any answers looking at cars. If anything, they only brought up more questions about what would cause such a significant divergence. The most important issue at the moment was that Steve didn’t know where he was, or how to get back to his team. Everything else was just academic.

The stop light changed, and a couple of vehicles passed, their engines eerily quiet. It was as if someone had hired Howard to redesign an entire town’s vehicles, or pulled ideas from some kind of futuristic science fiction novel. The only place he’d ever seen so much so significantly advanced was… Hydra.

Could it be that Hydra had managed to take hold of an entire city under the SSR’s nose? Steve turned to take cover under the overhang of a nearby building, hoping to hide from the enemy while he devised a plan. In the end, he didn’t make it that far before two young women came around the corner.

They wore backpacks on their shoulders, and clothes that were out of place anywhere Steve could think of. They walked together and laughed, and looked nothing at all like a threat. Threats never did, and nothing else made sense about this place either. Steve was sure he could take them if they turned out to be dangerous, and out of other options he approached them. “Excuse me.”

The woman nearest to him smiled, but Steve was distracted by her hair that she wore long and unstyled. She looked him over, a brief sweep of her eyes from head to toe. “Let me guess. You’re looking for Barnes’ class room? You’re like… three blocks off.”

“Barnes?” the other woman asked before Steve could clarify. Her high ponytail bobbed every time she moved her head.

“History… 104, I think? I took it sophomore year. He’s a nut about this stuff, but he’s cute.” The first woman cut herself off after that in favor of rattling off directions for Steve. “It’ll be on the second floor.”

The young women left after that, but at least Steve was no longer empty handed. He had no idea if this Barnes fellow would have the answers he was looking for, but it was a lead. They’d also left him with a puzzle beyond their strange fashion choices. They’d been speaking English, the distinct lack of accent common to some swaths of the United States, but he was very certain he’d been in Denmark.
Steve set off in the direction they’d told him, and hoped Professor Barnes would have the answers he needed.

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“The Howling Commandos all escaped Esrum Abbey, but when they returned with reinforcements, the Abbey had been completely destroyed and Steve Rogers was nowhere to be found. It was his last mission of World War II, and the last anyone would hear of him until a few years later.” Bucky managed to work this lecture into his American History class almost every semester. He’d given it so many times, he knew the whole thing by heart, which was nice. It gave him more time to look out at the crowd. This particular auditorium was well-lit, letting him see who was listening intently, and who was bored, and who was… dressed like Captain America. Mister rent-a-superhero was standing in the doorway of his lecture hall, and was not one of Bucky’s students as far as he could tell.

It was probably one of Sam’s pranks again. Bucky would have thought it would get old the first half a dozen times, but apparently not. Only, even from here, the guy looked rather elaborately dressed for a prank. A reenactor maybe? From a distance, he was pretty convincing.

Speech. Right. He was giving a speech. Bucky shuffled his notes and did not stare. He smiled out at the audience instead. There was something else he was supposed to be saying, but he couldn’t seem to find his place. Sam was going to laugh his ass off about this, Bucky was sure. Between the fact that the guy could have been Steve Rogers’ twin, and that he was staring, Bucky was thoroughly unsettled. The lecture was about over anyway, so he cut it short, hoping no one would notice. “There’s all sorts of speculation about his absence, but if there’s an explanation for his absence, it’s heavily classified. The truth is, we may never know what happened during the years that he went missing.”

He didn’t even remember what he said after that, but the students clapped and filed out the way they usually did from these things, so it must have been a fairly standard thing. The Captain America lookalike stayed, waiting until the lecture hall was empty to approach. If Bucky thought being face to face with the guy would help, it didn’t.

Up close, the resemblance was even more unsettling. Bucky had built a career out of studying Captain America, and while he’d never met the guy in person, he’d seen thousands of pictures. The uniform might as well have been pulled right out of the museum. It was a damned good copy, right down to the dirt and debris collected in the suit’s seams.

Bucky was about to ask what the punch line was of this particular joke, but the reenactor guy beat him to it. He glared at Bucky, the effect far more imposing with the cowl he was wearing all scuffed and dirty. “Are you Professor Barnes? What do you know about the abbey?”

Dumbfounded, he pointed at the last slide of his presentation, the one with his email and twitter and all that. “I thought that was pretty obvious since I just gave a presentation about it. What’s this about?”

“Yes, I saw that. Now, who are you really?” Fake Steve retorted. Bucky wasn’t sure if he was more confused by the accusation or how upset this guy seemed while he was making it.

“I don’t think I follow. You just stood there through part of my lecture-” Bucky started to point out, but that was as far as he got before Fake Steve cut him off.

“Where you lied to a group of students about a current - and classified - mission. You shouldn’t even know that’s going on, so I’ll ask you again. Who are you?” Fake Steve was frowning at him,
and Bucky didn’t know what he possibly could have done to deserve it. The entire exchange was quickly crossing over from comical to alarming. Bucky had thought it had to be a joke. It was always a joke, but never like this. The longer they talked, the more certain Bucky was that this wasn’t one of Sam’s pranks. “Current? What are you talking about? Esrum Abbey was in 1944. It’s been declassified since before I was born.”

“It is 1944.” Fake Steve didn’t so much as crack a smile. The way the guy was still glaring at Bucky like he was some kind of criminal made him appear both unstable and imposing. Bucky wasn’t all that much shorter, but the costume only drew attention to Fake Steve’s broad… everything.

Bucky’s knee jerk reaction was to try to placate the Captain America-shaped tank that was standing between him and the exit. It was too late to play along though, because if he agreed that it was 1944, they’d just go right back to the part where Fake Steve was convinced he was planting classified misinformation. The last thing Bucky needed was to give the guy any reason to think he was a spy or something.

“No.” Bucky’s voice came out more like a question as he backed up a step. If he could just get back to the podium, his cell phone was there. “It’s definitely 2017.”

“That’s not possible. I was there today.” Fake Steve’s jaw clenched and unclenched, the movement accentuated by the strap of his helmet. “What are you playing at?”

Bucky tried taking another step back, but Fake Steve must have caught on to Bucky’s retreat, because he closed some of the newfound distance between them. He really didn’t get paid enough for this. Bucky did his best to strike a balance between arguing and agreeing. “Look around, Steve. It is Steve, right? Does any of this look like 1944 Denmark to you?”

Fake Steve did look around then, at the classroom, and out the door at the students passing by. The helmet hid most of the top half of his face, but Bucky could just make out the confused way Fake Steve’s eyes went tight around the edges, and there was no mistaking the unhappy scrunch at the corners of his mouth. He sounded dubious, but less like he was ready to throttle Bucky when he spoke up again. “You say you’re a professor…”

“I’m a historian. I also happen to teach,” Bucky aimed for conversational and pretended his heart wasn’t ready to hammer right out of his chest. Fake Steve was watching him as Bucky put more space between them, but thankfully didn’t follow.

“None of what you’re saying makes any sense. I was just there.” Fake Steve’s gaze kept moving, like every shadow might be the enemy. As inconvenient as all of this was, it left Bucky feeling sort of sorry for the guy. All the sympathy in the world didn’t make the situation less fraught though.

“Okay. So maybe you got lost,” Bucky soothed, hiding his relief behind a tentative smile as he finally reached his phone. “Is there someone I can call for you?”

“You don’t get lost and misplace seventy years.” Fake Steve’s voice was sharp edged all over again. He stiffened when he saw Bucky’s cell phone, reaching behind his back as if for a shield, though there was none there. Whatever fragile trust Bucky had managed to establish dissipated like mist between his fingers as Fake Steve demanded. “What is that?”

“It’s okay. It’s just a phone.” Was this guy for real? Bucky held the out so Fake Steve could see better, but it didn’t help. The guy was still stiff as a board.
“Like a telephone?” Fake Steve cocked his head to the side, eyeing Bucky’s phone. Somewhere between the distrust and the confusion, his eyes widened a fraction in fascination. Bucky had to admit, it was a pretty convincing mimicry of someone who didn’t know what decade he was in.

“Exactly. Look, pal. I don’t know what the mixup is, but I don’t know how to help you. I’m just calling for someone who might.”

Bucky didn’t give Fake Steve a chance to respond before dialing the number for security. He waited for someone to pick up and forced a friendly smile into place. They had codes for situations like these, not that he ever thought he’d need to use them. “Yes, hello. This is Professor Barnes. Would you mind sending Professor Gray to my lecture hall?”

Bucky’s heart raced as he finished the call, but Fake Steve stood patiently, not seeming to catch on that the help Bucky was calling for wasn’t for him. Unwilling to trust that his luck would hold out, Bucky changed the subject as soon as he hung up. “I gotta ask, how’d you end up here? In my classroom, I mean.”

It worked, sort of. At the very least, he’d succeeded in drawing Fake Steve into a conversation with him. “There were a couple of women outside who said I’d probably find what I was looking for in your lecture hall.”

Bucky had barely enough time to grumble inwardly about whoever had made this his problem when security showed up, two very official looking men. He addressed them instead. “This is him.”

“I thought… What is this?” Fake Steve managed to look utterly betrayed as the guards put themselves between him and Bucky. It shouldn’t have even been his issue to deal with, but Bucky felt terrible for it anyway. To be so out of touch with reality must have been terrifying.

“I’m so sorry. I really can’t help you,” Bucky said in a rush. He hurried out the door, ignoring both Fake Steve and the guard that was probably calling after him. They knew where his office was if they had any lingering questions, and he wasn’t at all keen on waiting to see how this all panned out.

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Usually, Bucky went straight from his last lecture to his office. There was plenty to do before he was done for the day, and ordinarily Bucky was eager to be done. This wasn’t exactly an ordinary day.

The walls of the building felt too stifling, so Bucky wandered the length of the campus, eager to put some space between himself and everything else. In retrospect, the guy had seemed more confused than dangerous, and Bucky couldn’t help wondering if he’d acted a little bit too rashly. Dangerous or not, there was something not quite right, and Bucky wasn’t the person to solve that.

He found his way to the building that housed his office eventually, all the way up on the third floor. Sometimes, that was an annoyance, but today he used it as an excuse to make a stop on the way. This time of day, Sam was probably halfway through his second to last class, and if Bucky was lucky, he’d only have to listen to a couple of minutes of lecture before he could see his friend.

They had a routine, a tradition practically after all the years they’d known each other. Sam interrupted Bucky’s work with some manner of ridiculousness. Bucky interrupted Sam right back, glaring at him from the doorway of the lecture hall. Sam expertly hid his gloating behind a smile and his usual charming tone and cadence while he finished his lecture. Bucky went through the
motions, one last thing to ensure that this wasn’t just an overly elaborate joke.

Tradition didn’t normally involve Sam talking the whole rest of the way through class without even noticing Bucky. To be fair, the way Sam’s class actually paid attention to him, Bucky couldn’t blame his friend for not looking past them. Bucky was lucky if a significant portion of his class got through a lecture without pulling out their phones.

Even once the students started to filter out and Sam spotted him, there was none of the usual gloating. Sam closed the distance between them with a pleased smile, clapping Bucky on the shoulder. “That doesn’t look like a ‘happy to see me’ face.”

“That’s just been a weird day.” Bucky’s ire didn’t draw so much as a smirk out of him, and that answered the questions better than a direct accusation ever would have. “What I really want to know is why you get all the good students?”

That got a smirk out of Sam. “Well, maybe if you specialized in something we actually teach here, you wouldn’t be stuck with American History.”

Bucky crossed his arms. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Oh come on. It’s general ed. People go because they have to. You loved history and you still slept through that class when we were in college,” Sam pointed out, and as much as Bucky wanted to argue, he really couldn’t. It was a chore not falling asleep in class now and he was teaching.

“I’d fall asleep in your class, too,” came Bucky’s petulant reply instead.

“You wouldn’t be in my class.” Sam’s smile broadened, cheeky as ever. “See, my students actually want to be here.”

Bucky made a face. “Well, we can’t all conflate mythology with history.”

Sam laughed, just in time to get an odd look from the first couple of students filtering into the lecture hall for the next class. “Excuse you. Some of us didn’t want to make a career out of being some guy’s number one fanboy.”

“Now, that’s just rude,” Bucky muttered, watching people start to take their seats.

“Hey, it’s not so bad. On the bright side, at least you know your students are as bored out of their minds as you are,” Sam teased, barely ducking out of the way when Bucky tried to smack his arm.

Finally, Bucky remembered why he was there. “Today wasn’t so boring. I had an uninvited guest.”

“Wait. That was you?” Sam’s brows rose slightly, his curious expression punctuated by his expectant tone. “I heard there was some commotion in one of the other buildings. Everyone’s okay, right?”

“Some guy thought he was Captain America,” Bucky said a little flatly. It didn’t seem any less ridiculous now than it had at the time.

“That’s my joke!” Sam exclaimed, pulling a face Bucky hadn’t expected. “Tell me they at least got it right.”

“Better than you,” Bucky teased. It was true, of course, but mostly ribbing Sam came to Bucky as easy as breathing. “I mean, he definitely looked the part. Of course, he also spent the whole time trying to tell me it was the 1940s and accusing me of lying about classified data, so that was
“weird.”

“Now *that* was uncalled for.” Sam elbowed Bucky in the side. “Wait, seriously?”

“Yeah. Dead ringer for him too. Well, not him now. Him when he was young.” The class was filling up, and Bucky glanced at the clock on the wall. He still had work to do. “Before he started talking, I thought maybe you went and educated yourself.”

“Pretty sure we only need one Captain America nut at trivia night.” Sam deftly stepped aside to make room as more students filed in.

Bucky wondered if he ought to be embarrassed by the fact that the two of them quibbling in the doorway was so common that Sam’s class barely even noticed. It was a fleeting thought, crowded out by the urge to poke fun at his best friend. “Says the guy whose job is pretty much reading about fairy tales.”

“Speaking of… it’s about that time.” Sam tapped the empty spot on his wrist where a watch would go for good measure. “Don’t you have papers to grade or something?”

Bucky was working on the third essay in the stack when he heard the door to his office creak open. Students came to see him all the time, so he didn’t think much of it, but he looked up anyway, and sucked in a breath. As if one run-in hadn’t been enough, there was Fake Steve Rogers, taking up the entirety of his doorway.

“It’s 2017,” Fake Steve announced, as if this were some sort of revelation.

“You didn’t hurt the security guys did you?” Bucky asked, already reaching for his phone. He really hoped not.

“No. Of *course* not.” Fake Steve scoffed like he was offended by the question. “I just eluded them.”

Bucky was just surprised enough to pause, brows nearly reaching his hairline. Fake Steve was built like a tank. He wasn’t what Bucky would ever have considered to be exactly sneaky. “How?”

Fake Steve crossed his arms, his expression going flat. “I’m pretty sure you lost the right to ask me that about the time you called them in the first place.”

It was a fair point, but Bucky wasn’t nearly mollified. He still hadn’t established whether Fake Steve was confused or actually dangerous. He picked up his phone, but was interrupted by a pleading, “Please wait!”

“So you can insinuate I’m working for the enemy or something again?” Bucky asked, his fingers tightly gripping his pen in one hand, the thumb of the other freezing against the phone screen.

“No. One of the students in your last lecture said you specialize in…” Under the mask, Fake Steve’s expression shifted to something that shouted discomfort. The way he shifted his weight where he stood would have been sort of amusing without their earlier encounter to color it. “…in me.”

“In you? Oh come on. If we’re in agreement about what year it is, than you have to know that it is not physically possible for you to be Steve Rogers.” Bucky’s thumb brushed over the dots on his screen to unlock it. “Please don’t make me call security again.”

“I’ll prove it to you,” Fake Steve got out all in a rush. “Just give me a chance. You’re an expert on
my life, right? Ask me something. Anything.”

It was just curious enough a proposition to get Bucky to play along, at least for the moment. Hoping to catch Fake Steve off guard, Bucky jumped right in. “What school did you major in English at?”

Fake Steve’s eyes narrowed under his helmet and he crossed his arms. “I studied art.”

“Oh huh?” Bucky rested his elbow on his desk, leaning his jaw into his palm.

“Auburndale. I went to Auburndale. Only, I never finished on account of the war.” The look the guy was giving was a spitting image for the vaguely disappointed look Bucky had seen on some sort of stay in school type poster Captain America had done in the ‘60s.

It wasn’t the most common knowledge, but anyone who was up on their American history might have known that. Bucky wasn’t about to let himself be convinced so easily. “What was your first mission?”

“That’s classified,” Fake Steve replied without the slightest hesitation.

Bucky glanced up. “Not since the late ‘60s, pal. Try again.”

That earned Bucky a squinty-eyed look and a frown from Fake Steve. “Prove it.”

“What? That it was declassified?” Bucky had to concede it was a fair thing to ask if Fake Steve was telling the truth. “If it were classified, how would I use it to verify your identity?”

Fake Steve didn't seem swayed. He was still frowning. Honestly, Bucky was starting to wonder if the frown was a permanent fixture. “You could still be a spy.”

The corner of Bucky's mouth pulled up a little before he caught himself. Damn it. This wasn't entertaining. He was supposed to be annoyed. “I thought we already established that the facts of your situation don’t mesh with that.”

He could see Fake Steve's jaw working while he weighed the argument. It must have ended up in Bucky's favor because Steve made a face, and then he spoke up. “Officially?”

It was impossible to tell if he was being difficult or precise, not that it mattered to Bucky either way. “Either... both.”

“When the facility where I was given the serum was sabotaged, I went after the perpetrator. I didn’t even know how to get out of my own way, yet.” Fake Steve Rogers rolled his shoulders and shifted. “It was a pretty long road between that and taking down the Hydra facility at Niederdonau, which would be my official first mission.”

The details around Steve Rogers getting the serum were far from common knowledge. That... that might do it, actually. Bucky had had combed through heavily redacted documents and done an awful lot of guesswork to find out anything beyond the vague details in the papers. “Tell me about that first one.”

Fake Steve frowned - again - but it wasn’t the expression of general displeasure that Bucky had been becoming so well acquainted with. It looked a lot less like annoyance and a lot more like grief. “I don’t know that there’s much to tell when it comes down to it. That was my first encounter with Hydra, not that I knew it yet. I’d never seen tech like the submarine the agent meant to escape in.”
“He was trying to escape in a submarine?” Bucky asked. He’d always sort of wondered what had taken the chase down to the waterfront, but those particular reports, even declassified, had been strangely short on details.

“You didn’t know that.” It wasn’t a question. Fake Steve’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Even declassified, the reports were heavily redacted,” Bucky admitted.

“This isn’t going to work, then. If you may or may not know the whole story and I don’t know if I’m divulging data that isn’t public, this is a useless exercise.” Fake Steve scowled.

“It was your idea,” Bucky huffed. Mostly he was annoyed he’d let himself be drawn into this. Fake Steve could just as easily be an enthusiast with an overly active imagination. Given the impossibility of it all, that was really the more plausible explanation. “What do you propose—”

It was as far as Bucky got before Fake Steve swept right into the office. Bucky didn’t hesitate this time. He reached for his phone and dialed security. Bucky pulled the phone to his ear and listened to it ring as Fake Steve came closer and then… walked right by him. The line picked up right as the man in his office reached his bookcase, a heavy oak affair stuffed to the brim with textbooks and his own publications. Even empty, it had taken Sam’s help to get the bookcase into his office, but Fake Steve grabbed the sides of it and picked the whole thing up, books and all.

“Hello?” Someone’s voice crackled over the line. It was all Bucky heard before the phone slipped from his hand, clattering against the desk. The distant, muted sound of someone talking eventually reached him though, and he scrambled to pick it back up before they assumed the worst.

“Yeah… False alarm. Sorry.” Bucky hung up before the security officer could reply, absently setting his phone on the desk. What he’d just seen shouldn’t have been possible for a normal human being. Unless this guy wasn’t a normal human being.

“You can put that down, now,” Bucky squeaked out. He held a hand up to his mouth, trying to make sense of it. “Holy— You’re Steve Rogers. Like, actually him.”

Steve - and it had to be him when all was said and done - set the bookcase down and turned to face Bucky, his mouth pulling down at the corners. “You really still thought I was lying?”

“Of course I thought you were lying. Steve’s about a hundred years old, and I don’t know if you’ve looked in the mirror lately, but you are… not.” Bucky realized he was babbling and shook his head. “You think I’d have called security on you if I knew you were the real deal?”

“I don’t know you well enough to think anything,” Steve countered acerbically.

“Yeah, okay that’s fair, but come on.” Bucky stared and stared and tried to suss out what any of it meant. He cobbled together enough clarity to ask, “Seriously though… Time travel?”

The cross demeanor that Bucky had been starting to think was permanently etched into Steve’s features finally eased. It might only have been to make space for confusion instead. “It must have been, but I don’t know how I’m meant to get back. I came back because I thought if anyone had a lead, it’d be you.”

“You heard my lecture, Steve. That was all true. I have no idea how you end up getting back. I don’t even know how you went missing. Any reports about it are very firmly under wraps.”

“I might be able to help with that.” Steve sank down in the chair on the other side of Bucky’s desk, usually reserved for student meetings. Bucky was so hung up on the gravity of time travel being a
thing that he didn’t realize he was staring until Steve politely cleared his throat. Before Bucky could point out that Steve had very recently been quite grumpy about the notion of sharing classified data, he was speaking again. “I think the abbey was a trap.”

“What? Like, Hydra trapped you to send you back in time?” Bucky couldn’t see much point in that line of reasoning, but he didn’t argue just yet.

“No. No, If they knew what they had, they wouldn’t have used it to exile me, I don’t think,” Steve countered. It was calm and reasonable and Bucky kept getting side-tracked by the fact that he was talking to the real Steve Rogers, but somehow still the wrong one. “That part had to be an accident, but the whole building was coming down around me when I touched the relic and I was cornered.”

“Excuse me. Relic? You mean like ancient artifact kind of relic?” Bucky pressed, his whole perception of the circumstances upended. “You realize that doesn’t make any sense, right?”

“You realize none of this makes any sense, right?” Steve shot right back. At least the haze of barely restrained irritation that had clouded his expression had lifted. Really, Bucky was a bit grateful. As long as their conversation was all speculation and sharp edges, Bucky never had a chance to be embarrass himself being awestruck.

“I don’t really do archaeology. I don’t even know what era that’s from.” Bucky leaned forward in his seat for a better view. “Do you know what it was made out of?”

“Stone, maybe? I only touched it for a second and I was otherwise engaged at the time.”

Steve unceremoniously shucked his gloves and started scribbling away at something. It was the most genuine thing that Bucky had encountered all day, he was pretty sure. There was an odd sort of incongruity between the tactical uniform and the brisk, practiced movements of Steve sketching out the lines of something. Bucky watched in utter fascination.

The image on the paper took shape before his eyes, three women in robes around the base of a tree. At first glance, their outlines seemed like they should be identical, but the wrinkles of an old crone emerged, set in the face of one. It was countered by the smooth features of a young maiden at the other side. The woman in the center had no face at all, and something about it made Bucky’s insides squirm. Bucky peered as close as he could while Steve fleshed out the details around them. “That’s what did this? Who are they supposed to be?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Steve replied without looking up. He was shading in the folds of the faceless woman’s robe.

“I don’t really do archaeology. I don’t even know what era that’s from.” Bucky leaned forward in his seat for a better view. “Do you know what it was made out of?”

“Stone, maybe? I only touched it for a second and I was otherwise engaged at the time.”

There was nothing to say to that, and for a while, only the quiet scrape of a ballpoint pen over paper broke the silence in the room. Bucky was out of reactions that didn’t include believing Steve, but that belief took everything he believed about science, about his career, about Steve Rogers, and very heavily sat on it all. He’d chased answers for most of his career, never expecting the truth to be quite so bizarre.

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to have the biggest career revelation of my life drop in my lap
and I can’t even do anything it? I mean, in your case, this was just a weird accident, but you get home, so there must be some way to do it intentionally. In the wrong hands, it would be devastating,” Bucky mused, fingers tapping idly against his knee. This was all so big, he had no idea where to even begin. “There aren’t exactly any right hands for time travel though, are there?”

“Is that your way of saying you believe me?” Steve finished his drawing, capped the pen and neatly placed it back in the cup on Bucky’s desk.

Bucky shrugged, because what else could he do? “If you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the solution.”

Steve smiled, some of the overwhelming gravity of him finally lifting. “You read Sherlock Holmes.”

“No. I watch Star Trek.” Bucky looked over the picture yet again. It really was exquisite, despite the mystery that it came with. It put Steve’s artistic skills on display too, one more proof that he was the real deal.

“I don’t know what Star Trek is,” Steve replied, interrupting Bucky’s train of thought.

“Of course you don’t.” Bucky shook his head. He was about to suggest they ought to fix that when he realized that if Steve had just appeared out of nowhere, he probably had bigger problems than missing out on pop culture. “Where are you staying, anyway?”

“It hadn’t been a priority yet. If you would be so kind as to give me a way to contact you, I’ll let you know once I’m settled.” Steve’s jaw set stubbornly, leaving Bucky wondering what he’d said.

“I can do you one better. I’ve got a spare bedroom if you want it.” Bucky hadn’t had a roommate in four years, and didn’t particularly want one, but if there was ever a time to make an exception, this was it.

Steve shook his head. “If it’s not too much an imposition.”

“You’re asking me to figure out time travel and you’re worried that sleeping in my empty spare bed in my empty spare bedroom is too much trouble?” A soft chuckle escaped before Bucky could quite stop himself. He flashed Steve a smile before the man could get the wrong idea about why he was laughing. “It’s fine. Honest.”

“I don’t have any way to repay you.” Somewhere along the way, Steve’s stubborn sourness had given way to something more vulnerable. He rubbed at the back of his neck, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“You’re writing another book?” Steve’s eyes widened a fraction, though Bucky wasn’t sure if it was that was a judgment about how prolific Bucky was, or that he was surprised there was so
much material about *him*.

“I’m always writing another book.” Bucky inclined his head, waiting for Steve to get up and follow. “Come on. Let’s go home.”
Steve was getting the hang of the future, selectively speaking. As much as he’d boggled at the stylistic differences in modern cars, the actual technological updates were logical in a way that Steve followed. The most surprising thing about encountering James’ car was that James opened the passenger door and apologized for the mess. There was only a book and a pair of sunglasses, which James scooped up, leaving Steve wondering if he’d missed some massive shift in etiquette. It had been a long day though, and fatigue had set in just enough to keep Steve from asking for clarification.

“Are you hungry?” James asked, once they were out of the parking lot and presumably on their way home. The sun was sinking towards the horizon, leaving his face cast in a soft, orangey glow. “I desperately need to go grocery shopping, but we could stop for burgers if you want.”

Steve was watching more unfamiliar vehicles and architecture go by. The question was a reminder than he hadn’t eaten since before the mission that had landed him here. He hadn’t had a hamburger in a lot longer than that. James was already doing so much, Steve couldn't bring himself to expect any further charity. "You don't need to do anything special on my account."

"Burgers it is," James insisted. Kind as he was, James was turning out to be one of the most stubborn people Steve had ever met. That it was currently working out in Steve's favor was besides the point.

The drive-thru itself wasn't all that surprising. It seemed like a natural progression. He'd seen drive-in restaurants where they brought the food out to your car. Why not make it simpler for the staff to just hand it out the window instead? What was surprising was their insistence on every item being sized as if they were meant to feed him and not a normal person. The burger was easily twice the size of anything they sold down at Coney Island, and the carton of french fries James pushed on him was absurd. It must have been normal by some measure though, because James didn't bat an eye.

The house James finally pulled up in front of wasn't large, but it was nicer than anywhere Steve had ever lived. He'd bounced from tenement housing to army barracks and when he'd been traveling to sell war bonds, he mostly existed in hotel rooms. This was a real, proper house, with a garden in front and a welcoming walkway lit up with what looked like tiny street lamps shoved into the ground on either side. A set of brick stairs led up to a porch that ran the length of the house backed by so many windows that Steve almost wondered why they'd bothered with a wall at all.

James pulled into the garage alongside the house, pressing a button on the visor of his car. Watching the garage door lift up to reveal a tidy, dimly lit space of concrete flooring and walls lined in shelving, Steve wondered if the fact that technology was turned on something so trivial meant the world had run out of bigger problems to solve. It was a nice thought, even if Steve didn't really buy it.

"Thank you, James... For all of this," Steve said over the low groan of the garage door closing behind them.

"It's Bucky. No one calls me James." James... or Bucky it would seem, flashed a bright smile at Steve. "And it's fine. Honest. I'd be an asshole not to."
There didn't seem to be a whole lot of point in arguing that Bucky hadn't been obligated, so Steve sidestepped that entirely in favor of asking about his new friend's nickname. "Bucky?"

"Yeah. There were too many kids with the same name in first grade, and Buchanan is just a mouthful for a bunch of seven-year-olds, so I got to be Bucky instead. Obviously, it stuck." Bucky shrugged, stepping out of the car to let them into the house. He reached through the doorway to flip a switch, lighting up a kitchen that looked spacious, even from where Steve stood in the garage. "Here we are. Home sweet home."

Everything looked so clean, Steve almost hesitated to step inside. There was still dirt caked in the crevices of his uniform, and he thought his boots might track dirt across the linoleum that seemed meant to resemble pine wood flooring. As soon as the door was closed, Bucky kicked off his sneakers without even bothering to untie them. That was one way to deal with it, Steve supposed, so he leaned against the wall and hoped he wasn’t smearing too much dirt on the pale yellow wall at his back as he bent a leg to start in on the laces of one boot.

"Jesus, I never really thought about it, but getting in and out of all that must be an event," Bucky commented, bustling about the kitchen while Steve tried to be rid of his boots. There was something almost ritualistic to the way he opened a cabinet and pulled out a filter and a small bag that smelled strongly of coffee when Bucky unsealed it.

"It’s sort of late for coffee, isn’t it?" Steve asked, hoping this didn’t mean Bucky planned on a late night. Steve was so tired, he could barely think straight.

"It’s for the morning. I always forget if I don’t set it the night before." Bucky smiled, the expression very much an improvement over the expression he’d mostly fixed on Steve earlier in the day. "If you ever manage to escape those boots, I’ll show you around."

It hadn’t looked all that large from the outside, but the world had changed just enough to keep Steve from assuming anything. Maybe there was a large basement or something. “Am I liable to get lost?”

Bucky huffed out a laugh. “Geez, I hope not. I just thought it’d be rude to leave you guessing where you could sleep.”

Sleep. Fed and no longer running on adrenaline, sleep sounded marvelous, so Steve hummed what he hoped sounded sufficiently like an agreement. One boot fell against the little floor mat with a muted thunk, and without Bucky’s movements distracting him, Steve made short work of the other.

The rest of the house wasn’t all that different from the kitchen. The blinds were all drawn, but there were so many windows, Steve assumed the place must have been brightly lit most of the time. Everything was muted, from the taupe carpet that covered most of the floors to the soft seascape painting hanging above Bucky’s plush, black couch. The whole place had a hushed, peaceful feel to it that put Steve at ease in spite of everything.

They’d made it through the dining room, the living room, and halfway down the hallway before Steve realized with some measure of relief, that he hadn’t seen a shield or anything else red, white, and blue anywhere. Looking at the place, Steve would never have had the slightest inkling what Bucky did for a living. Maybe he could breathe here.

“You’re welcome to anything in my office, but you’ll probably have better luck with the laptop,” Bucky explained. Laptop was an unfamiliar word, so Steve filed it away to ask about later. He stood on the threshold and glanced in at the wall full of bookcases in easy reach of a desk and chair. He almost missed the well-worn recliner tucked away in the corner, its blue fabric faded
Steve turned around to see that Bucky had moved on, swinging open another door. “This is you. There’s a bathroom the next room down the hall with towels in the cabinet.”

Bucky went silent, looking toward, but not really at Steve. His nose was slightly scrunched in thought, and he startled when Steve spoke up. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Just… yeah. Hold on a sec.” Bucky disappeared into a room at the end of the hall with no further explanation, leaving Steve standing at the guest bedroom door. It looked like it had been pulled out of a magazine, lovely and well-kept, and not at all lived in. The bed was covered in an unreasonable number of pillows and a plush comforter, a far cry from the cot Steve had slept in the night before.

Steve barely got a step inside before Bucky came back, his arms laden with clothes. Bucky tilted his head to talk around the pile. “You’re broader than me by… a lot, but I figured you probably don’t want to sleep in the uniform. Maybe something here will work for tonight.”

Bucky herded him towards the bathroom with the entire pile, dumping it all on the sprawling bathroom counter. He said something about tea and disappeared, leaving Steve staring at the door he’d closed behind him. The only sound left was an overhead fan.

As much time as Steve had spent adapting to a world that had run off without him, he was exceedingly grateful to find that bathrooms hadn’t become unrecognizable. The knobs were different, but the shower mechanics were simple enough, and Steve wasted no time stripping down and stepping in.

Steve was pretty sure he could have fallen asleep there under the luxurious, warm spray that fanned out across his shoulders. It soothed aches Steve didn’t even realize he’d had and drowned out all the noise in his head. There would be no getting home tonight, but he’d made steps in the right direction.

He didn’t linger nearly so long as he might have liked. As inviting as the water was, the promise of clean clothes and clean sheets was more enticing. Steve took the time to wash away the grime from seventy years ago in Denmark and reluctantly turned off the water.

‘Work’ turned out to be sort of a subjective word as far as the clothes Bucky brought him went. Bucky was nearly as tall as him, so they were certainly long enough, but even the biggest shirt from the pile stretched taut across his chest and stomach. The fabric was too soft and stretchy to be uncomfortable, but he felt rather on display. The sweatpants were just as bad, just about hitting the floor, but the black fabric looked very much like it had been painted onto his hips. At least it wasn’t tights.

Steve draped his towel over the shower curtain and emerged eventually, wondering if he could talk Bucky out of tea. As soothing as it sounded, exhaustion had crept in and taken up residence. Hoping he wasn’t being rude, he padded out towards the kitchen. “Bucky?”

He only made it as far as the living room. One end of the couch was folded out into a recliner, and Bucky was curled up on the makeshift bed it made. His face was half buried under one of his hands, and his shoulder rose and fell in deep, even breaths. There was no sign he’d ever gotten around to tea after all.

Waking Bucky seemed rude if it wasn’t necessary. It might have been different if Steve were going to be awake, but that was about the last thing he wanted to do. He settled for pulling the soft throw
blanket from the back of the couch and carefully draping it over Bucky’s prone form before finding his way back to the guest room.

It looked just as fake as it had the first time, but Steve didn’t care. He flicked off the overhead light and felt his way to the bed, knocking a couple of decorative pillows aside in his search for the top edge of the blanket. The fabric was wedged under another pillow, and when he peeled it down, the sheets caught like they’d been tucked under the mattress for show. Even in the dark, Steve managed though, sliding between the sheets.

Steve melted into the mattress, nested in plush pillows and warm blankets. It was almost too comfortable, but Steve was far too exhausted to care. He was drifting almost before he closed his eyes. This time, the nothing that enveloped him was entirely welcome.

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Bucky woke to the sharp slant of early morning sunlight through the windows. He squeezed his eyes shut and scowled at the ache in his spine from a night spent tucked at a strange angle. There were couch cushions under him instead of the mattress, and he groaned in protest as he forced himself upright.

It was about thirty seconds before Bucky realized that he had morning classes. Crankiness at waking up like he had gave way to a gnawing sort of panic, and Bucky scrabbled for his phone to check the time. The sick feeling in his stomach ebbed once he established that he was up before his alarm would even have gone off, but Bucky’s heart still raced as he unwound himself and kicked the footrest back into place so he could get up.

Bucky ambled along through his morning routine, mostly like normal except for the part where Steve poked his head into the kitchen while Bucky was leaning against the counter with a bowl of cereal, waiting for his coffee to brew. Even hazy and trying to shake off the last vestiges of sleep, Bucky wasn’t blind. He looked up and dropped his spoon into the bowl with a loud clink of metal against ceramic.

It was the first time Bucky had seen Steve out of uniform. They were really going to have to get Steve his own clothes, because that was definitely one of Bucky’s t-shirts and it was very definitely too small. By some measure, anyway. It hugged Steve’s body, from his chest, all the way down his torso, looking more like paint than fabric. The sleep pants were a little better, but they clung around Steve’s hips in an unexpectedly suggestive fashion.

Aesthetically speaking, Bucky had always acknowledged Steve was good looking, but it was… well, it was a removed sort of thing, like a long dead actress, or a stranger in a black and white photo. He’d never been confronted with it quite so directly before. Steve was lovely, but there was no room for that. None. Bucky knew he shouldn’t be so stuck on the way the fabric of his shirt hugged Steve’s shoulders, or the slightly mussed hair that Bucky had a passing urge to curl his fingers in. He definitely shouldn’t be noticing Steve’s unfairly plush lips, pursed with concern.

Concern. Shit. Bucky caught himself staring right about the time that Steve spoke up. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I forgot I had a houseguest,” Bucky lied because he didn’t have a better answer, hoping Steve would buy it, or at least would be too polite to say so if he didn’t. Not waiting for a response, he shook the box of cereal still sitting on the counter. “Help yourself.”

Steve did, Bucky didn’t stare, and mostly he got through the rest of his morning checklist by just adding ‘and Steve’ to the end of everything. It wasn’t until he was nearly ready to get out the door
that he realized he wasn’t sure what Steve’s plans were.

“Did you want to…” Bucky started calling out, but then Steve emerged from the guest room in his uniform. While it was less likely to cause a car accident in public, it wasn’t exactly generally acceptable day wear. “Are you really planning to go out in that?”

“Did you have a better idea?” Steve asked, and Bucky had to admit that he really didn’t actually.

“Well, what are you planning to do? If you wait, we could pick up something a little less attention grabbing to be out in public in once I’m done at work,” Bucky offered, hoping Steve wouldn’t parse it as charity.

Charity, as it turned out, wasn’t the problem. “I came to you for help, but I’m not expecting you to solve this for me. I’m not going to sit on my thumbs all day.”

That was fair. It also didn’t answer any of what Bucky had asked. “So, what are you doing instead of waiting?”

“Someone has to be alive who would recognize me,” Steve insisted. Bucky braced himself, hoping he was wrong about what was coming next, but there it was. “You said I’m alive. I’ll talk to him. Maybe he can tell me what went wrong and I can get out of your hair.”

“First of all,” Bucky held up a finger to silence Steve. “That is a terrible idea. And second of all, no.”

Steve cocked his head to the side, his expression unimpressed. “You do realize I don’t need your permission, I’m sure.”

“This isn’t about my permission, Steve. You shouldn’t even be considering that as an option. Maybe his timeline went differently from yours, and quite frankly, I’d rather not have any part in pissing off the real, actual Steve Rogers who belongs here again.” That had been a lot of words sort of balled up together, but Bucky was too alarmed to care.

“The fact that his timeline included a disappearance at the same time as mine suggests that isn’t the case,” Steve pointed out, more calm than he had any right to be. Bucky could have just about strangled him for making something as ridiculous as talking to one’s future self sound reasonable, but before he got the chance to say so, Steve piped up again. “Wait, again? Did you have an altercation with future me?”

Bucky grimaced. It was probably a terrible idea to go telling him his own future. More than that, it was embarrassing mostly because years later, he still wasn’t sure what he’d done wrong. Bucky did his best to gloss over his explanation and move on. “He didn’t want to talk about his art. It’s not important. Okay, that’s probably true, but you and I both know you don’t mean to stay here, right?”

“Of course not. I have to get back. There’s a war going on.” Standing there with his arms crossed and his jaw set, Steve looked just like a picture of Captain America Bucky had stowed away in his study.

“Yeah, then you extra can’t go talking to someone who already lived all this. It’s like the first rule of time travel. You don’t mess around with your personal timeline.” That was definitely, probably true, wasn’t it? They already knew this ended up in him getting sort of back to his time. Adding knowledge of future events to the mix couldn’t possibly be good.

“You just spent last night trying to convince me that you don’t know much about time travel,”
Steve retorted. Was Captain America mocking him? Bucky was pretty sure Captain America was mocking him.

“Yeah, well,” Bucky floundered for an answer, gesturing vaguely. “I’ve seen Doctor Who.”

“Doctor What?” Steve’s brows knit in confusion.

“No. Doctor Who.” Bucky shook his head. Right. That came out long after Captain America’s disappearance.

Steve was still staring at him like Bucky was speaking another language. “I don’t understand.”

“We’re going to have to fix that.” Bucky scrubbed his hand over his face. He couldn’t leave as long as this was on Steve’s agenda, and he really needed to get to class. Swallowing his relief when he landed on an alternate idea, Bucky talked as he pulled his shoes on. “That should be like… absolute last resort, but maybe you don’t have to go to him for answers.”

“I’m listening.” Steve pulled on his boots surprisingly briskly given how far they laced up.

“Come with me.” Bucky was out the door with Steve on his heels. “Not to class, of course. I’ll drop you off at the library.”

His heart was in his throat as he waited for an answer, but he got in the car anyway and let Steve settle without pressing. They buckled in and Bucky hit the door button, sunlight filtering into the garage. The door had gone silent over their heads before Steve agreed. “Alright. Let’s go to the library.”

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It turned out that seventy years hadn’t substantially changed the way libraries were set up. Steve walked through the double doors and found pretty much precisely what he’d expected. The librarian was sitting behind the front counter and marble flooring stretched out as far back as Steve could see, interrupted by bookshelves and tables.

If one was in need of information, the library was an excellent place to start. This particular library was sizable, and Steve was confident that if there was something to be found, he’d find it here. All he needed was the card catalog.

In his experience, the drawers that held books call numbers were usually towards the front of the library, easily accessible before delving too far into the shelves. He wandered to the place that made the most sense, but all he found was a round table full of lit up terminals he didn’t recognize. There was nothing like a set of drawers anywhere.

“Can I help you find something?” A woman’s voice, bright and pleasant, interrupted Steve’s line of thought.

Steve smiled as he turned around. “Yes, actually. I was looking for your library’s card catalog.”

“Oh.” The librarian’s face did a funny thing, like it took her a moment to understand what he was talking about. “It’s on the computer.”

Computer? Steve had heard of computers, rooms bigger than a house, full of vacuum tubes and wires. It didn’t describe anything here. His lips pursed as he tried to come up with another way to ask, though it was odd for a librarian not to know what a card catalog was. “I’m not looking for a computer. I’m looking for a set of drawers with the book calling cards.”
The librarian smiled in that strange, patient way he’d seen his mom do when someone said something especially dumb. It might have been insulting if she hadn’t been so painstakingly kind about it. “It sounds like it’s been a while! We updated our database years ago. It’s all digital now. I can show you how to navigate it if you like.”

Steve still wasn’t convinced they were talking about the same thing, but it was possible. The librarian was already motioning him over to one of the terminals, and Steve figured even if what she was showing him wasn’t what he needed, knowing what those screens were for could be useful.

“It’s like this,” she started as Steve took a seat. “In this box, you just type in your query, and then you tick the box for whether your search is an author, book title, or subject. Easy peasy.”

Sure enough, there was what looked to be an updated version of a typewriter keyboard in front of the monitor. It had some extra buttons, and in place of the typebars and ink, the letters popped up as he typed them. It looked a little bit like something he’d seen on Bucky’s desk the night before—quite different from anything he was familiar with, but after sorting out the functionality of Hydra weaponry, this “computer” felt practically like child’s play. Steve nodded, polite as could be. “I think I’ve got it from here, ma’am.”

“Wonderful. If you need anything else, you let us know.” With that, the librarian scurried away, leaving Steve with the distinct impression he was being brushed off. It was a familiar feeling, though not one he’d run into much since the serum.

His first thought was that if he left and got back, maybe someone had written a book about it. Maybe Bucky was just less informed than he thought he was. There could be a blueprint of how to get home right here in these walls. Hoping for the best, Steve typed in his name into the terminal’s search bar, and selected the box labeled “All results”.

The search, as it turned out, wasn’t quite as exact as he’d assumed. Searching for Steve Rogers turned up: The Entrepreneur’s Guide to Finance by Steven Rogers, a collection of music by Kenny Rogers, and a long list of something called e-books that Steve wasn’t even convinced had Steve or Rogers anywhere in them at all. There, nestled among a series of options that meant nothing to Steve was something that looked promising. Unraveling the Mystery of Captain America. Steve sighed through his nose and wondered what he’d gotten himself into when he caught that the author was James Barnes.

All in all, it wasn’t that surprising there’d be a market for such a thing. He’d made plenty of movies to inspire folks to enlist or otherwise support the military. Steve had long since come to terms with becoming an accidental icon. A book was just a matter of time, he supposed.

This computer system was intuitive, at least. He’d figured out the little, corded hand control pretty quickly, and when he clicked the title of the book, it brought up a series of information. Mostly, all Steve cared about was the call number, listed in the right hand corner. There were pencils and scrap paper to write it down, but Steve didn’t bother. He found his way to the proper bookshelf without much trouble at all.

It turned out, the book he’d found on the computer wasn’t the only one on the shelf about him. There were a total of seven about him or the Howling Commandos in some way, shape, or form. Four of them were written by Bucky. Weird as it was to see so much material dedicated to him, Steve promptly scooped all the books off the shelf and made his way to the nearest table. Surely, something in there would tell him now to get back where he belonged.

For being dedicated to his life, the books were remarkably useless. Of the seven, only three did
more than mention his disappearance, and only one went into it in any depth. As far as he could
tell, he missed the tail end of the war entirely, turning up in an undisclosed location in 1947. There
was no mention of how any of it happened at all.

That was completely unacceptable. Steve had left his team in a crumbling Hydra base, and
whatever these books claimed the outcome was, they were counting on him. He couldn’t just go
disappearing. His responsibilities didn’t stop just because he’d been thrown into the future.

“Cool cosplay.” Steve glanced up just in time to see a young woman with long, purple hair taking a
seat across from him. The tables were large and clearly meant to be communal, so Steve wasn’t
that surprised by the company. The hair was strange though. Did people do that a lot these days?
More importantly, he had no idea what she was talking about.

“Excuse me?” Steve asked, hoping when she repeated herself, she might make more sense.

“You’re supposed to be Captain America right? It’s good! Did you do the weathering yourself?”
She smiled quite genuinely, spreading out a textbook and notepad in front of where she was sitting.
“Don’t know why you’re still researching when you’ve got the costume down pat, though.”

Costume? Right. Of course. The him who belonged here was an old man, now. He couldn’t
imagine folks would have any reason to go around dressing like him, but it was probably better not
to try and convince her of the truth. After his run in with Bucky the day before, Steve wasn’t
exactly eager to try his luck again.

“It’s not for the costume,” Steve replied, wondering if her casual familiarity with Captain America
was normal or not. Between that and the books, things were starting to get weird. If she recognized
him, maybe he could rope her into helping, though. “I’m looking for information about one of his
missions.”

“It might not even be there. Wouldn’t it be faster to just look it up on the internet?” The way she
said it strongly suggested Steve should know what that meant. Steve had no idea what that meant.

“Maybe,” Steve conceded, keeping his answer as neutral as possible. “There’s just something
about books, though.”

It wasn’t a helpful answer, but it appeared to be an acceptable one. The girl’s lips tipped up in a
wide smile. “That’s why I spend so much time here. Well, that and I didn’t want to buy this
textbook.”

Under other circumstances, Steve would have been fascinated. Times had clearly changed, and
some part of him wanted to understand that. He was on a mission though, and the longer he
dawdled, the longer it would be before he got back to his team. Steve was just about to resort to
carrying on a conversation to try and discretely suss out what the internet was exactly, when he
noticed a laminated neon green sign labeled “Internet”. It was hanging over a cluster of terminals
that looked pretty much identical to the one the librarian had shown him. Another database, then.
He could work with that.

Of course, it couldn’t possibly be so easy. Steve sat down at an empty terminal, only for it to pop
up with a box insisting he reserve time. He found the control terminal for reserving a machine, but
it asked for a library card. Fifteen minutes, another long suffering smile from the librarian, and a
fake address later, he had a card that he hoped to never use again, and was finally seated at internet
computer number #7. The future was overly complicated.

That this all ended with Steve Rogers sitting in front of a mostly blank screen was awfully
anticlimactic. The word Google was emblazoned across the top in childish font and primary colors. It didn’t look much like the high tech database Steve was hoping for. There was a search box though, and since the books hadn’t panned out, this was the only option he had.

He’d noticed that except for the ones by Bucky, the books didn’t really call him anything but Captain America, so he didn’t bother searching for his given name. If people these days really insisted on treating him like research-worthy subject matter, there was a cold sort of comfort in having been reduced to an icon. At least whatever humanity his current self had might still be his own.

A search for Captain America suggested he’d been turned into three movies and a comic book series in recent history. None of that was helpful, and Steve mostly disregarded it as more of what he’d done during the war. A hero made for powerful propaganda, whatever the current political climate currently was. Steve was two pages and seventeen open tabs into Google’s search results when he finally found something that looked useful. It was a thesis paper on the years he was gone. The title page listed the author as... James Barnes.

He had to hand it to Bucky. He managed to be both consistent in his interests without being overwhelming in his enthusiasm. Bucky had said he didn’t know what had happened, but Steve read anyway. The paper was full of conjecture, but it was well reasoned and humanizing in a way very little of what he’d seen and read was. Steve came out the other side knowing nothing more about how to get home than he had going in, but he thought he had some inkling about how Bucky regarded him.

It turned out the thesis paper was on a repository of some sort entirely dedicated to Bucky’s career. There were buttons labeled with helpful titles like “Publications” and “About”. Steve knew so little about Bucky. If his future was going to be in Bucky’s hands, it wasn’t entirely off-mission to get a little bit better acquainted, at least on a professional level. He tried them out, one at a time.

The more Steve read about Bucky, the harder it was to justify suspicion, though maybe that was the point. He was a prolific writer, and it was hard to imagine between the books and the classes he taught that there was time for anything nefarious. Still, the best covers were the ones like these, busy and mundane.

Bucky’s pool of knowledge still got Steve’s hackles up. The abbey wasn’t the only mission Bucky had a lot of classified data about. There were recaps of quite a few of Steve’s missions, in fact, reminding him of Bucky’s claim about when things were declassified. It didn’t seem like he was a spy, but suspicion was a difficult thing to shake, so Steve opened yet another tab and searched that too.

There had always been the possibility that trusting Bucky had meant stumbling into a trap, but that didn’t seem to be the case. The Department of Justice’s explanation of declassification backed what Bucky had told him, easing a nervous knot in the pit of Steve’s stomach. He found his way to the National Archives next, marveling at just how much was accessible from right here in this seat.

Between that and a far less official-looking page helpfully billing itself as “the largest privately run online repository of declassified government documents anywhere in the world” Steve found reports of nearly every mission he could recall having been on, including the one Bucky had tried to use to confirm his identity. Steve was immediately engrossed.

It was all as heavily redacted as Bucky had suggested. He started with the mission in Denmark, filling in the removed pieces of information with what he knew from personal experience. Even that was a bit of a challenge. That Bucky got enough out of these to piece things together was downright impressive.
Before Steve could get any further into his search, a box popped up, warning him that he only had five more minutes. There were other documents, the dates all marked after he was supposed to have returned home, but Steve didn’t have the time to read them. He reluctantly closed the tab, along with all the others he had opened. He could always come back tomorrow.

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Steve was waiting outside on the steps when Bucky pulled up, his uniform standing out like a sore thumb. They were really going to have to do something about that. He looked like one of those guys that visited sick kids, except a lot more frowny. Bucky rolled down the window and called out from the curb, and Steve looked up, expression melting into something a bit more impassive.

“That good, huh?” Buck asked as Steve slid into the passenger seat. He’d thought, somehow, that it might stop being strange to have Steve Rogers sitting in his car, but it really wasn’t. It was all Bucky could do to quell the urge to ask a thousand questions, but he sat on that for now. There would be time, maybe, once they figured out how to get him home.

“You weren’t lying.” Steve settled into his seat and fastened the seatbelt, and Bucky just stared.

“Lying?” He remembered about then that he was sitting on the curb in a no-parking zone and pulled away before he added, “I wasn’t lying about what?”

“The reports being declassified. I found them on the Google database. Everything.” Bucky couldn’t see Steve’s expression, but he could hear the pensive pinch to his words. “Even the one that got interrupted yesterday.”

“Did you really still think I was lying? I thought we established I wasn’t a spy.” Bucky didn’t think much of it, though. He’d have been more surprised if Steve had taken him at his word.

“You can never be too careful, not when the stakes are this high.” Steve shrugged, turning away to stare out the window. “You write a lot of books.”

Bucky snickered, biting the corner of his lip to stifle the sound. “You found that out at the library? You could have found that out looking at the top shelf of the bookcase you felt the need to pick up in my office yesterday.”

For a few moments, they drove in relative silence, with only the soft music coming from the radio and the rumble of the road to keep them company. It wasn’t tense, but it left Bucky feeling as if he ought to have something helpful to contribute. That he didn’t have any of the answers gnawed at him.

Steve sat in the passenger seat like there was sand under his skin and he was trying to work it free. Maybe he just couldn’t stand the prospect of sitting still. “The mission report didn’t say anything about a relic. Even the redacted parts couldn’t have been referencing it.”

It was nothing Bucky didn’t already know, and he was nodding before Steve even finished. “That’s okay. If this was going to be easy, I think we would be dealing with a very different kind of problem.”

“We seem to have varying definitions of ‘okay’,” Steve muttered, not bothering to look Bucky’s way.

“I didn’t say ‘okay. I guess you’re stuck here’. There are plenty of angles we haven’t tried, and if it’s not in the report, there’s less of a chance it was found by anyone who had any idea what it was. The abbey was the temporary residence of the National Archives, right?” Bucky hadn’t meant to
get into a conversation about it, but now he was thinking less like someone overwhelmed by the circumstances, and more like someone who sussed out answers for a living.

“It was,” Steve agreed, the last word drawn out in a clear question of where Bucky was going with this.

“Right, okay. There were tons of books in there then, and I’d bet none of them were mentioned in that report.” Bucky didn’t take his eyes off the road, but he could see the way Steve’s posture shifted as he followed Bucky’s reasoning.

“No. Of course they weren’t. That was just inventory. I don’t need to know about the mission. I need to know what they did with what was left of the archive.” Steve's frustration had eased at the prospect of another lead. “Would the Google database have that? A list of Denmark’s archive?”

Bucky laughed outright that time, and the perplexed crease between Steve’s brows didn’t help. “It’s not ‘the’ anything, Steve. It’s just Google. And, probably. Only one way to find out.”

“I don’t suppose you have a good workaround for the library only allowing an hour of time on the internet,” Steve asked. “At this rate, it’s going to take forever.”

That was something Bucky could help with. He glanced over, a smile faltering on his lips. Even relaxed, Steve looked far more world-weary than he’d seemed in the photographs Bucky had scene. It made sense, but it tugged at something in Bucky’s chest anyway. “You can use my computer, and I’ve got a whole bookcase full of reference books in my study. Well… half full of reference books, unless you count science fiction. I guess that maybe counts in this case since it’s time travel, right?”

Bucky realized he was rambling and cut himself off, but Steve hardly seemed to mind. “You read science fiction?”

“Only when my life isn’t science-fictiony enough on its own,” Bucky teased. He couldn’t tell if the breath huffed out was amusement or long suffering silence, but at least the guy wasn’t scowling about his circumstances anymore.

This was okay. It was. They had the beginnings of a plan. The need to accomplish something was no longer a sharp knife at Bucky’s back, despite the lack of conversation, they were practically companionable.

Bucky was three blocks from his house before Steve said anything else. “What’s cosplay?”

“It’s…” Bucky started to answer before it occurred to him that it might be good to have some context. “Wait, why?”

“Someone at the library said it. Turns out she thought I was pretending to be Captain America, too,” Steve explained with a thoughtful hum. “Is it a compliment?”

“Oh my god.” Bucky laughed, sorry he’d missed it. He turned the car the opposite way from his house though, determined not to let this get any more ridiculous. “We’re getting you some normal clothes.”
Steve had still been asleep when Bucky had gotten up, so he’d plugged in the laptop and left it on the coffee table. He left a sticky note with the password, and then realized that he’d fallen asleep before telling Steve he could help himself to whatever was in the fridge. There was a sticky note for that too, and then one with instructions to work the coffee machine, and before he knew it, there was an entire pile of blue and purple squares of paper, and he was nearly late to his first class.

It was next to impossible to focus on work, and Bucky honestly wasn’t certain how he slogged through the day. Teaching a history class full of students who didn’t even want to be there felt so insignificant in the face of what he’d agreed to do. He had a full life that he couldn’t exactly drop, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he needed to be somewhere else.

Steve was sitting on the couch when Bucky got home, his head peeking up from behind the top of Bucky’s laptop. The sticky notes were nowhere to be seen, and Steve looked perfectly at home. For someone so far out of time, he’d taken to the future pretty quickly. He greeted Bucky with a wave.

“I tried looking up what was salvaged from Denmark’s National Archive.”

“Yeah?” Bucky asked, shrugging out of his leather jacket and hanging it on a hook by the door. “How did that go?”

Steve’s shoulders sagged. “In my defense, I don’t have a whole lot to go on.”

Bucky huffed out a laugh, kicking his shoes off by the door, and padding into the living room. “In my defense’ doesn’t sound very promising, Steve.”

“There were some books, but not much else recorded, so I looked up what I knew about the relic.” Steve tilted his head back against the couch cushions and huffed out an exasperated sigh as Bucky rounded the coffee table and plopped down next to him. “Turns out Relic is also a watch brand.”

“Is it? Good to know.” Bucky peeked at Steve’s screen. The search bar said “three women” and the screen was full of various pictures of smiling, laughing women, mostly with their arms slung around each other. He sucked his bottom lip between his teeth until the urge to chuckle passed.

“Congratulations. You’ve discovered stock photos.”

“Well, that’s helpful,” Steve replied dryly, still staring at the ceiling. “Is there some nuance to this that I’m not getting?”

Bucky loosened his tie and dropped it on the glass top of the coffee table. “What? To Google? The only nuance is figuring out a query that’s specific enough to get the kind of results you want, and general enough to turn up anything at all. Do you know anything about what or who the women were?”

Steve’s mouth slanted downward. “If I knew, I wouldn’t have been searching for “three women” I don’t imagine.”

“Okay. That’s a fair point.” Bucky cradled his jaw in his hand, thumbing at the stubble there. “Maybe search by the purpose of the relic instead of what it looked like?”

Steve groaned like Bucky had told him the most terrible joke. “I tried that.”
Bucky really did laugh then. “That is not the sound of a fruitful search.”

“Four pages of novels and movies.” Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, and Bucky idly wondered how long he’d been at this. All day, if Bucky knew him at all. “And some kind of message board full of conspiracy theories and rumors.”

“That’s a hell of an introduction to the internet. Maybe you could use a break? Dunno about you, but I’m starving.” Bucky held his hands out for the laptop, and after a dubious look, Steve handed the sleek machine over.

“I thought you were hungry,” Steve said, drawing Bucky’s attention. It was the first time Bucky had looked, really looked at Steve since getting home. Getting Steve his own clothes should have helped, but it just meant that a different color of fabric was stretched across Steve’s broad chest and shoulders.

Bucky told himself it was purely academic that he was noticing at all. This was Captain America, after all. Of course he’d be impressive. It was just that without the helmet hiding his thick, blond hair and half his face away, Steve was also quite... striking.

“Bucky?” Steve’s brows were knit with concern.

“I’m fine!” Bucky said in a rush, hoping the way he could feel his cheeks heating wasn’t too outwardly obvious. He’d very definitely been staring, and he didn’t have the fact that it was early in the morning to hide behind this time.

“Yeah, that’s… that’s good,” Steve replied, his head tilting as he regarded Bucky. “I was just asking what taking the laptop had to do with dinner.”

Bucky deflated. Maybe he hadn’t been caught out, or at least Steve was polite enough to pretend not to notice. Either way, Bucky was more than happy to move on. “Sorry. I was going to order delivery.”

Steve was quiet for a second, and Bucky could practically see the wheels turning. He was excellent at pulling from experience to guess at things he wouldn’t have encountered where he came from. His nose scrunched ever so slightly as he finally caved. “Delivery of what?”

“Pizza,” Bucky replied brightly, grateful to have something to do that didn’t require looking at Steve.

“You can get pizza delivered? As in, they bring it to your house?” It was a clarifying question rather than a befuddled one.

“Yup. It starts to catch on a few years after you get home. You’ll see.” Bucky worked his way through the site with the sort of efficiency that came with maybe too much practice. “Do you like pepperoni?”

“It seems like a lot of extra work for someone when we could just go get it,” Steve pointed out. He leaned closer to look at Bucky’s screen, smelling of Bucky’s shampoo and aftershave. It was a nice, familiar sort of thing.

Luckily, Bucky had managed to write off his momentary lapse of good judgment. He playfully nudged at Steve’s shoulder. “Would you rather go get pizza or would you rather spend the time we’d waste on that trying to find this relic?”

Bucky watched Steve’s internal debate about whether to argue splashed across his face. “I guess
you have a fair point.”

“I always have a fair point.” Bucky spared Steve a broad, cheeky smile before returning to his order. “Now do you want pepperoni or not?”

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“Well?” Bucky pressed between bites. They had settled in at opposite ends of the couch, the pizza box on the cushion between them. Just about every book Bucky could think of that might be remotely useful was strewn across the coffee table, or the back of the couch, or the floor when he’d run out of room. “How do you like it?”

“It’s not quite what I was expecting…” Steve ventured. Bucky must have made a face because Steve was quick to add, “It’s good though!”

“Best pizza in town,” Bucky said absently. He was doing his best to balance a slice in one hand, far away from the arm of the couch where he was trying to both hold down a book and turn its pages with one hand. He’d been reading the same line off and on for the last ten minutes, and he wasn’t making an inch of headway. Giving up on holding the book open, Bucky rubbed at his tired eyes with his knuckles instead. “Any chance you’re up for a break? I’m about useless.”

Steve’s lips pressed together in a silent confession of how overwhelmed he must have been. It left Bucky immediately sorry he’d suggested a break at all. Even with all his research, Bucky had only ever really known about the side of Steve that was a beacon for everyone else, so the lost expression that flicked across Steve’s features caught him unaware. It was there and gone, and everything shuttered, hidden behind a tight smile.

Bucky wanted to say something, but what was there to say? The longer this took, the longer Steve was stuck, decades away from everything he knew. Bucky didn’t begin to know how to empathize with that. Before he could gather together a string of words that might strike the balance between compassion and distance, Steve was answering him. “Of course. Don’t run yourself ragged over it. We’re not going to find the answer tonight.”

“No, but we are going to find it. We already have the benefit of knowing how this story ends.” Bucky finished off his pizza and carefully wiped his fingers with a napkin before migrating the books into a stack on the coffee table. Better to have something to focus on that wasn’t Steve.

He still caught a slight movement from the corner of his eye, when Steve finally accepted Bucky’s attempt to ease his worries and relaxed. There was a terse nod. “We do.”

Somehow, the agreement made it worse. Bucky couldn’t quite shake the feeling he was letting Steve down in a sense, just by being human. Despite having suggested a break, it was Bucky who started to reach for the books again. He’d just laid his fingers on the book he’d been reading before when Steve’s palm covered his knuckles. “I thought we were taking a break.”

“Yeah…” Bucky shrugged, flashing Steve a quick smile. “You know, I think I’m okay.”

It spoke volumes to the kind of person Steve was that he didn’t take the excuse Bucky gave. As far as Bucky could tell, he was the sort of man who weighed being lost with no clear way home against something as mundane as a little fatigue, and chose to pull the book Bucky had been reading out from under Bucky’s hand without even hesitating. Bucky watched him tuck it away on the side of the couch where he was sitting.

“It’ll be there tomorrow,” Steve murmured, as if it were as simple as that. Whatever distress Bucky
had caught a glimpse of before was carefully tucked away behind the man’s usual air of confidence. “So, what is it you do to wind down in 2018?”

Guilt forgotten, Bucky navigated around discarded couch pillows and stacks of books until he found the remote. “I have an idea or two.”

“Such as?” Steve asked expectantly. He’d settled into his seat on the couch, his powder blue t-shirt and pale skin a stark contrast to the plush black cushions. Sans the uniform and holding a slice of pizza instead of his shield, Steve looked like he belonged there.

Bucky couldn’t resist the urge to surreptitiously watch Steve’s face when he turned on the television. Steve tended to regard technological advancement with open interest. It wasn’t befuddlement or anything like that. Quite the contrary. Bucky hadn’t found anything yet that Steve didn’t get the hang of almost immediately. It was just unabashed fascination. Given how much Bucky had come to take things for granted, it was a refreshing - and maybe a little bit endearing - point of view.

“They’re in color now,” Steve commented, the response significantly more muted than Bucky had hoped. He didn’t get much time to pout about that though, because Steve arched an eyebrow at him, gaze flicking between the remote Bucky was holding and the television. “You do know it’s less than fifteen feet to the couch, right?”

“Yes. I also know that I’m very comfortable.” Bucky’s nose scrunched and he wriggled in his seat slightly to prove his point. “...and I have a remote.”

“I’m just saying.” Steve’s tone was light, one corner of his mouth pulling up a fraction.

“Excuse you. I’m making use the wonders of modern technology.” Bucky waved the remote for good measure and tried not to laugh. “But you’re welcome to walk over there and do it yourself.”

Steve smiled openly, far more relaxed now than he’d been when he was researching. It was nice, human in a way that that Steve wasn’t often portrayed, which was a travesty as far as Bucky was concerned. Humanity was the soul of who Steve was, and the way he so effortlessly built a rapport under pressure, it was no wonder he’d managed to get a group like the Howling Commandos to follow him.

“Bucky?” Steve was watching him strangely, his smile muted, but not gone.

“Sorry! I was thinking. Did you say something?” Bucky sort of wanted to melt into the cushions. That was the second time he’d done that tonight. At least this one wasn’t about Steve Rogers being pretty.

“Not yet I hadn’t. You looked like that wall was really interesting.” If Steve was bothered by the hiccup in their conversation, he didn’t show it. “Does 21st century relaxing involve watching something, or were you just trying to impress me with color television?”

“Yeah, yeah. Hold your horses.” Bucky stuck his tongue out and fiddled with the remote to start up a show. The title screen popped up, and Bucky let out the recliner on his end of the couch. “It’s come to my attention that you have a serious gap in your pop culture knowledge.”

Steve wasn’t looking at Bucky anymore. He was watching the swirls of color on the screen as the TARDIS sailed through the time vortex and the title of the series spun into view. “Oh! Doctor Who is a television show. I’d sort of wondered, but there wasn’t a good opportunity to ask.”

“It’s a show. Guy travels through all of time and space in a phone box. It’s not really a phone box.
He’s not really a guy, either. I mean—” Bucky realized he was babbling a little bit and clicked his jaw shut. “Anyway, just… call it research.”

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They settled into a routine of sorts. Bucky came and went. He seemed eager to help when he was there, and happy to leave Steve with his laptop and an office full of books when he wasn’t. Not that Steve took much advantage of the latter. Bucky had been so quick to share anything he might need that Steve wasn’t even sure the guy would tell him if he overstepped. An office was such a private space to encroach upon, and he barely knew Bucky, even if Bucky apparently knew just about everything about him.

Curiosity and practicality got the better of him eventually, though. Bucky was good company, whether he had the answers Steve needed or not. He was clever and funny and eased some of the sharp edges of Steve’s accidental exile. Surely, if he had to be stuck, there was nothing wrong with making a friend. When he realized that Bucky’s having camped out in his office instead of the living room was probably a sneaky attempt at an invitation, Steve gave in, coming as far as the threshold of the room.

Bucky was hunched over a copy of some old manuscript that Steve wasn’t even sure was related to his problem. It was oddly fitting. Bucky’s hair hung down, obscuring his face a little, but his body language - from the pencil he was chewing on to the tension down his spine - screamed focus. Steve almost hated to break it.

“Wouldn’t it be simpler to just ask how I did it?” he cut in. There wasn’t time to be stuck here watching Bucky read if he had a more practical way home.

“What? Ask your older self? You can’t do that,” Bucky replied, idly tapping his eraser against his desk. “If you only get home because the version of you that already did it told you how, that’s a paradox. It could break something.”

“It could also be how this always happened.” Steve had to admit, there might be some merit to Bucky’s worries, but he also wondered, not for the first time, if he really ought to have come to a historian with a science problem.

“No offense, but I’m pretty sure my theory is more sound.” Bucky’s tone was a little uneven, soft with distraction as his eyes flicked over lines of text.

Steve huffed out a laugh in spite of himself. “Says who?”

“Pretty much every time travel story ever. You should read more.” Bucky didn’t look up, but he waved vaguely towards a shelf on the bookcase, lined with old, well-read paperbacks.

“They’re fiction,” Steve murmured as he read the titles. *The Time Machine, All You Zombies, Strange Attractors*… not a one of them sounded familiar.

“Are you willing to bet getting home on me being wrong?” For such a serious question, Bucky didn’t sound terribly concerned. Steve couldn’t help but wonder if it was one of those uncomfortable times where his strange friend had spent so much time wading through Steve’s history, that he just knew him. It was better not to speculate, so Steve came further into the room, and focused very intently on the bookcase instead. Above the shelf of old science fiction novels were newer books, all written by Bucky. There were so many, Steve wondered how Bucky had any time to do anything other than write.
“You said you wrote a few books,” Steve commented, fingers dragging along the bindings as he read the list of titles on Bucky’s bookcase.

“Yeah?” Bucky didn’t look up from the text he was poring over.

“Bucky. The library had a few of them, but this is an entire shelf and nine of them are about me. Nine. Where do you even get nine books of material?” It should have been uncomfortable. Scratch that. It was uncomfortable if he thought about it too long, to have some historian prodding at his life the way that scientists and reporters and politicians did in the year where he belonged. Only, it wasn’t the same at all, because the motives seemed so vastly different. Despite the publications, Bucky didn’t seem to see Steve as a science experiment or a payday or a freak of nature. Bucky very genuinely appeared to just find Steve Rogers, the human being, to be interesting.

“Excuse you. Those aren’t all about you.” Bucky did look up then, a funny, lopsided smile tugging at his lips. “Besides, you say that like I was gonna stop at nine.”

Steve let out a completely exasperated sigh. “What else could you possibly have to write about? I hate to break it to you, but no one cares what I do on Sunday afternoons, or what I like to have for breakfast.”

“Clearly, you haven’t read any of those gossip magazines, if you really believe that,” Bucky retorted. He shrugged, a slight rise and fall of his shoulders before looking back at his reading. “I care. People would care if they got the chance to.”

Bucky sounded so sure of that, Steve almost could have believed it, even though his lived experience said otherwise. “I don’t know about that. I represent something to people, maybe, but there’s not always a lot of humanity in that.”

“Huh.” Bucky turned around to straddle his chair, arms resting on the back of it. Steve wasn’t sure what he’d said that could possibly have gotten Bucky listening with such rapt attention, but it didn’t remain a mystery for long. “I think that might be the most honest thing you’ve said to me since I met you.”

Were they existing in the same universe? Steve thought he knew, but that was such a strange thing to say. “I haven’t lied to you.”

“Nah, I don’t mean like that. You have this way of talking to me without ever saying anything that really matters. People aren’t their favorite breakfast or their Sunday afternoons.” There was that smile again. It seemed like it meant something, but Steve hadn’t the foggiest idea what. “They’re what’s going on underneath all that.”

Steve hummed in reluctant agreement. It wasn’t an intentional habit. It was just a side effect of trying to keep something of Steve Rogers amidst everything that was Captain America. It was simpler to fall back on the banter that came so easily between them than to allow for any real vulnerability though. “Well, I just assumed you knew everything about me, already.”

“Well…” Bucky slowly unfolded his limbs from where he’d settled to turn back to him book. “I’m working on it.”

Effortlessly, Bucky threw himself back into his reading. As casual as he looked, there was an intensity about him that made Steve itch for something to draw on. Leaving his fate in someone else’s hands left Steve feeling rather helpless and impotent, but if there was anyone who could
puzzle this out, it seemed likely that Bucky could. The effortless way he picked things and people apart, Steve was honestly surprised Bucky didn’t already have this sorted.

“You didn’t know it was time travel when you did your thesis paper on the time I was missing,” Steve said suddenly. There was one thing that didn’t quite add up, but until now he hadn’t quite nailed down who Bucky was enough to put his finger on it. “Why didn’t you just ask?”

Bucky laughed, a soft chuckle that picked up at the end, barely stifled behind his palm. “Oh believe me. I tried.”

“Are you trying to suggest that the me that exists now won’t have a conversation?” Steve pressed. He’d tried very hard not to ask too much about the version of him that belonged in this year, but curiosity got the better of him.

“No...” The word was drawn out, and at first Steve thought Bucky was mocking him somehow, but it turned out he was just buying time. “The official answer on this is that it’s too sensitive to be declassified, but... it’s more that he just won’t have a conversation with me. I thought he got annoyed that I was so persistent, but I guess it could be I’m gonna piss you off before you go.”

One of the first things Steve had noticed about Bucky was how emotive he was. He smiled brightly and laughed loudly, and the scowl he got when he picked something ridiculous to be put out over was downright comical. Steve had never seen Bucky nervous before, but he picked it out right away. It left him wanting to reassure Bucky, but Steve had never been one for false platitudes, and there was no way to know what was coming. He fell back on humor instead, his lips twisting up at the corners. “I’m gonna guess it was the former. You’re very persistent.”

That softened the edges of Bucky’s troubled expression. His shoulders sagged minutely as he relaxed, and a sly smile creased his lips. “Oh, you have no idea.”

“I’m starting to get one.”

Bucky fell silent in favor of reading, and Steve was sure he was going to go mad if he had to stand around and watch. The internet was useless without any leads to start from, and the only thing in the room that had much chance of offering up a lead was in Bucky’s hands.

Grasping for something to preoccupy himself with, Steve’s eyes fell on Bucky’s bookshelf. Maybe there was something to all his friend’s theories about time travel in fiction bearing some relation to the real deal. Steve never got as far as any of that. _The Return of an Icon_ by James Barnes was right at eye level, and Steve reached for that instead. Bucky had written it never suspecting that this was a possibility. Maybe there was something in there that would read differently in light of recent events.

It was a large, hardcover book, emblazoned with a photograph that Steve was sure hadn’t been taken yet in his timeline. The uniform was a touch more subtle, less like a theater costume and more like tactical gear. If that was what he had to look forward to, then the future wasn’t all bad. Steve couldn’t quite help noticing the somber expression his future self wore. Did he always look like that?

He barely got a chance to crack the book open before Bucky’s hand shot out, palm warm over Steve’s knuckles. Steve thought it was going to be another of Bucky’s dramatic, impending doom sort of lectures about paradoxes, but the historian looked what? Sad? Bucky smiled, but it was a lying, politician’s sort of smile. “You don’t wanna do that, pal.”

“Why? There could be a clue in here. You didn’t know why I went missing when you wrote this.
You don’t have all the context.” That Bucky was so adamant only made Steve want more to know what was inside.

“Geez, Steve. Because it’s your life. You don’t skip to the end of a book to see how it turns out, do you?” Bucky’s argument was so reasonable, Steve wished he could buy that that’s all there was to it. “Why would you wanna spoil what you’ve got to look forward to when it’s your own future? It takes all the fun out of it.”

Whatever lurked beneath Bucky’s surface reasoning, Steve had to admit he had a point. Knowing the future could be complicated. What if he screwed it up? What if it tempted him to want to change it? In his hands, that book could be as much a trap as a tool.

*But think of all the good that could come from knowing. Think of what you could fix.* It was hubris that whispered to him, and even though the temptation was there, Steve knew better. Honestly, he did. Reluctantly, Steve closed the book again and placed it back on the shelf. He did not think about how helpful those pages might be, and he definitely didn’t think about how the warmth of Bucky’s hand against his lingered.

Sighing in resignation, Steve picked up *The Time Machine* and plunked himself down in the recliner in Bucky’s office to read.

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Bucky wasn’t sure if he’d call anything they’d done so far progress. At least, not in terms of getting Steve home. They’d learned plenty about what the relic wasn’t, and pretty much nothing about what it was. Every resource Bucky searched seemed more ludicrous and unreliable than the last, but still there was nothing, not even a peep, about any time traveling statues.

It wasn’t entirely a wash, though. They’d gotten through four seasons of Doctor Who when they were too tired to research anymore, though Bucky was starting to think it was more when Steve thought Bucky was too tired. It was an unexpectedly endearing thing, if an unnecessary one.

Steve had also taken up pretty much permanent residence in the old blue recliner in the office when Bucky was there. It had always been a very solitary place, but Bucky was finding he sort of liked the company in this context. Steve rarely said much. He read or drew or acquainted himself with various corners of the internet, but he was there all the same.

He hadn’t been so quiet the last couple of days, insisting that it wasn’t fair to expect Bucky to drop his own projects altogether. Bucky had mentioned helping with his book as a joke to ease Steve’s worries about accepting his charity, but apparently Steve hadn’t forgotten about it. They’d been cohabitating for a month, and as much as Bucky surprised himself by how much he’d come to enjoy having a roommate, he could have done without Steve’s perpetual stubbornness. “Fine,” Bucky agreed, after what must have been the fiftieth time Steve had said something about the book. Bucky hadn’t touched it since before Steve had shown up at his lecture, and hadn’t expected to pick it up again until after they got him home.

“All right, you’re going to let me help?” Steve asked, pulling the chair lever until the footrest sprang violently out to prop his legs up. There was an expectant look, sly and cheeky. “Or fine, you’re going to agree and then pretend this conversation never happened?”

Bucky opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came. It was funny, really. He’d built a career around knowing who Steve was, but a few weeks in close quarters and Steve had him pegged, like they’d known each other all their lives. Mostly out of spite, Bucky found himself conceding. “Fine. Tell me something I don’t know.”
Steve chuckled, soft and closed-lipped. He pressed against the back of the chair until it gave, tipping his face towards the ceiling. “Well, what kind of book is it? You seem to know everything about me already.”

Bucky rubbed at the back of his neck as he turned in his seat to face Steve. It was strangely vulnerable, even though Steve already knew what he did. All the distance that had made Steve an enigma to be studied was gone when they were sitting in the same room, teasing like old friends. “It’s about before. You know. Before the serum.”

Steve lifted his head, watching Bucky curiously. “Not many people care about who I was.”

The way he said it, soft and resigned, like it was the only truth he’d ever known, broke Bucky’s heart. How alone had he been before the serum made people see him? Well, that was their mistake, because whatever Steve looked like, whatever he was capable of, who he’d been had always been there. Nudging at the footrest of the recliner, Bucky disagreed. “They might. You never know if I don’t give them the chance.”

Steve shifted like his seat was full of needles. “There’s not even much of a story to tell. My ma died. I did a lot of scraping by. I didn’t have any real friends even, I don’t think, until Dr. Erskine. Nothing story-worthy happened until I became Captain America.”

Bucky didn’t begin to know how to parse any of that. No one should have had to exist with that much loneliness. That Steve had come out the other side so good and compassionate only made it more of a travesty that he’d suffered to begin with. It dredged up something sorrowful and unexpectedly protective in Bucky. He didn’t think his sympathy would be very much appreciated in the moment, but he had to say something. “Captain America was just the inevitable conclusion of who was already there. I’m not writing about what the serum made more apparent.”

The way Steve leaned back again, Bucky couldn’t see his expression anymore. There was just his chin and the long line of his throat as Steve stared at the ceiling. Bucky realized after the fact that he might have overstepped, but he didn’t have it in him to apologize. Even when they’d been strangers, Bucky hadn’t gone into this because he wanted to know Captain America. It was Steve Rogers he was interested in. The shield and uniform… the heroism and propaganda, it was all just window dressing. It was clutter that obscured the real person underneath. Anyone could analyze that.

Steve was quiet though, and if Bucky wasn’t sorry for his point of view, he was sorry for that. It was probably silence out of discomfort, when Bucky had only meant to express that he cared. Maybe a little more than he had the right to. “Sorry. I think maybe I—”

“Bucky, wait. I don’t want you to be sorry.” Steve sat up in one smooth motion, quieting Bucky with a shake of his head. Steve’s tongue darted out to wet his lips, but otherwise, his expression was inscrutable. “What do you want to know?”

Bucky felt like he could finally breathe again. He brightened considerably, pleased to find that Steve’s expression softened in response. “All of it. I want to know why you tried to enlist so many times and why you liked the Cyclone and…”

“I hated the Cyclone.” Steve’s expression screwed up in obvious distaste. “It always made me sick.”

“What? No. That’s in print. It’s in a book.” Bucky crossed his arms. “You told a reporter that. Do you know how much digging I had to do to even find that interview?”
The response was immediate, an annoyed huff as Steve seemed to forget all about whatever tension had lingered between the two of them in favor of a new issue. “There is a war on, and the guy wanted to talk about Coney Island. If I’d said I just liked to go on the boardwalk, he’d want to know what I did there, and then it would have turned into a conversation about sitting on a bench drawing pictures. One of us had to have some priorities, and it wasn’t going to be him.”

Bucky had thought he’d known everything there was to know about Steve, just about. This was new and sort of endearing, and Bucky couldn’t help laughing. “You lied to a reporter… about a roller coaster? Couldn’t you have just called the interview off?”,

Steve looked at him like he’d grown an extra head. “That would have been rude.”

“And lying isn’t?” Bucky pressed, teeth working over his bottom lip to stifle his amusement.

“I didn’t expect anyone to be writing a book about my amusement park preferences,” Steve replied lightly. A playful smirk creased Steve’s lips, and Bucky was more than happy to do the work to keep it there. After the hand Steve had been dealt, he deserved something to be happy about. “Any other misconceptions you’ve been perpetuating that I need to clear up?”,

“I don’t know. I can’t even trust your own word on the record,” Bucky teased. “I guess… you’re just gonna have to start from the beginning.”
“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Bucky whined. He sat on the edge of one of the couch cushions, tying his sneaker laces. His voice was still a little thick with sleep. “This is the worst idea I have ever been party to.”

“You make it sound like I’m marching you off a gangplank or something. It’s just a jog.” Steve bit his lip and very resolutely did not laugh at the beleaguered sound Bucky made.

“It’s Sunday. I could be sleeping.” Bucky made an attempt at glaring, not that it was very effective. A weekend’s worth of scruff framed the lower half of his face, and his lips were more of a pout than a scowl. The longish bangs that Bucky normally had combed back drooped in his face, and his hair was too short for the weight to keep it down without brushing, so bits of it stuck out at odd angles.

Steve had nearly reached out to run his fingers through it when he realized what he was doing. What was he doing, actually? Friends was one thing, but this particular impulse wasn’t exactly what he’d characterize as friendly. Coughing to hide his nerves, he replied, “You don’t have to come.”

“Oh no you don’t. I’m awake now,” Bucky grumbled as he finishing tying his sneakers. “My shoes are on. I’m going.”

“You’re going to complain the entire time, aren’t you?” Steve relaxed by the front door, thumbs hooked in his sweatpants pockets as he watched Bucky groggily lurch to his feet.

“Well.” There was a pop to the last letter, and it was probably meant to sound annoyed. Mostly it was cute, and oh... oh no. Bucky could be smart and companionable. He could be a good friend that Steve was lucky to have met, but cute really shouldn’t be on the table.

“Good thing I’ll be miles ahead of you,” he heard himself teasing, relieved that their easy back and forth came practically instinctively. He was more relieved that Bucky was still too sleepy to catch on that something was off.

“Excuse you. What part of ‘Hey Bucky. Do you want to go for a jog with me?’ involves you leaving me all by my lonesome?” Bucky finally carded his fingers through his hair to smooth it out. He was more relieved that Bucky was still too sleepy to catch on that something was off.

Steve yanked the door open and hid his nerves behind a wide smile. “You’re welcome to try and keep up.”

Even tired and comically grumpy, it turned out that Bucky was in excellent shape for how much he lived at one desk or another. He set out at a steady clip that would have easily kept up with anyone who wasn’t Steve. They’d set a precedent though, and it mostly involved ribbing each other every chance they got. The first time Steve lapped Bucky around the block, he was just being cheeky.

“Oh come on,” Bucky complained when Steve passed him. He huffed as he tried to catch up, though they both knew it wasn’t going to happen. Steve had to admire that he tried anyway.

Steve pulled out ahead and zipped around the block, smiling to himself when Bucky’s back came into view. Bucky had fallen back to a slow jog, and he gave Steve a sour look once they were
shoulder to shoulder.

Steve was going to say something witty. He was. He just couldn’t seem to remember quite what that something was. Instinct refused to save him this time. Bucky’s hair was matted to his forehead, and when his frown smoothed away, his lips remained slightly parted in an expression Steve would have parsed as utterly debauched in another setting. Whatever Steve meant to say came out as a sort of distressed squeak. “Hi.”

“No,” Bucky replied flatly. He resolutely turned his head forward, staring at the road in front of them. Steve spared a glance at Bucky’s face in profile, all soft features framed by unruly bits of hair. “You don’t get to say hi. You abandoned me.”

Steve laughed, Bucky’s acerbic wit dispelling some of his uneasiness. “Abandoned you? Bucky. This is your neighborhood.”

“Yeah, and?” Bucky glanced his way, just for a second. “If not for you waking me up, I wouldn’t be out running around in it.”

There was a playful bent to Bucky’s complaint, something that tangled in Steve’s stomach. It was an accusation, but it felt like a dare, the kind of dare Steve didn’t quite dare rise to. He hummed in agreement instead. “You weren’t kidding about complaining the entire time were you?”

That pulled a short snicker from Bucky, along with a smirk Steve could just make out in his periphery. “Absolutely not. How do you think I’m passing the time when you run off on me?”

Steve nudged his arm against Bucky’s bare shoulder, and found himself drawn in unexpectedly by the sensation. It was a mistake, of course. Whatever this was would have to go away, if he didn’t feed it. There was some measure of safety in their dynamic, so he put a little bit of distance between them on the sidewalk and leaned hard on what he could. “Thinking of things to complain about? If I’d realized, I would have expected better from you.”

“Excuse me? I haven’t even had my coffee yet,” Bucky protested. The corners of his mouth kept twitching with amusement he clearly couldn’t quite quell. He looked at Steve, fierce and wicked, and whatever it meant, it tingled down Steve’s spine and left his throat a little dry. “Come over here and say that again.”

Of all the bad ideas Steve had had as of late, closing the distance between them was the very worst one. Nothing good could possibly come from it. Reluctantly, Steve came up with any reason he could think of not to do exactly that. The playful smile he flashed at Bucky was genuine, slipping into place like a puzzle piece. “I don’t think so. Better luck next time around.”

He didn’t listen for an answer as he sped away, mostly because he didn’t dare do anything that might involve looking at Bucky. There was an appeal to his friend that Steve had managed to barely take note of, but like a cork in a wine bottle, once he’d acknowledged his quickly developing attraction, it was impossible to seal away again.

Once Steve was out of sight, he slowed his pace. It wasn’t because he didn’t want to be back around the block by Bucky’s side, but more because he did, and he couldn’t. Bucky was kind and clever, and managed to be pretty with sweat-matted hair in his face. He deserved better than half measures.

Steve had to come back eventually, and it was asking entirely too much for Bucky not to notice his absence. No sooner had Steve gotten within ten yards, than Bucky called over his shoulder. “I was starting to think you’d gotten lost. What’d you do, jog an extra few miles before coming back?”
He didn’t look at Bucky, didn’t dare. He only slowed down long enough to answer. “I took the scenic route.”

Bucky snorted, but didn’t call him out on the fib. “You’re the worst jogging buddy. Do you know that?”

“It’s not my fault you’re so slow.” Staying felt like a remarkably bad idea, so Steve kept going.

“Oh come on.” Despite the way his insides felt like jelly, Steve laughed as Bucky shouted after him.

When Steve found his way back, Bucky’s house was in view again. Bucky had stopped running at some point and held a phone to his ear instead.

“Please? You owe me,” Bucky said to someone on the other end. Whatever conversation he was having didn’t stop him from sticking his tongue out when Steve fell into step beside him.

“Trust me. I am very aware of what time it is,” Bucky said into his phone, giving Steve a meaningful look while the person on the other end spoke. Steve wanted to ask, but if it was important enough to call this early, he didn’t think it’d be good form to interrupt. Plus, there was every possibility that it was absolutely none of his business.

Bucky climbed the steps to his porch and unlocked the door, waving Steve inside. “No. There’s no heavy lifting this time. Yes, there will be coffee. Okay hanging up now. See you soon!”

Bucky followed Steve inside, kicking off his shoes by the door. “You should probably take a shower. We’ve got company.”

“Company? What’s the occasion?” Steve followed suit, taking the time to loosen his laces before taking his shoes off.

“You, actually. Specifically your time travel problem. I know someone who might be able to figure out what we’re looking for,” Bucky explained as he headed for the bedroom, not really looking to see if Steve had followed. “I’d have asked you first, but you abandoned me.”

It was the first real lead they’d had, and Steve’s head spun a little at the prospect of finally getting to get back where he belonged. Whoever ultimately found the answer, there would be no getting to it without Bucky. Steve should have been grateful, and he was, but something muddied the feeling. He didn’t know what to say about it, so he took the simpler route and stuck to conversation that mattered the least. “I’m never going to stop hearing about that, am I?”

Bucky grinned over his shoulder. “Ehhh. I’m sure you’ll give me something else to complain about sooner or later.”

With that, Bucky disappeared into his room and shut the door to get cleaned up. Steve stared at the closed door for a second longer than strictly necessary before realizing he ought to follow suit.

Dramatic as Bucky had been, Steve did feel a teensy bit bad for waking him up. Steve had long since figured out the coffee maker, and wasted no time getting it started. With the machine gurgling and two empty mugs sitting on the counter, Steve went to take a quick shower so that he’d at least be presentable for whatever company was coming.

The water was still running in the other bathroom when Steve finished, much to Steve’s delight. He’d watched Bucky fix up his coffee most mornings since he’d gotten here, and only realized halfway through spooning sugar into it that maybe it was strange he’d commit such a thing to
He was just stirring it all together when he heard the creak of Bucky’s footsteps against the kitchen flooring. Steve looked up and immediately wished he hadn’t, because like this, wide awake and fresh out of the shower, Bucky was stunning. Realizing he was staring and not sure what to say to cover for himself, Steve did the only thing he could think to and held out the mug he’d just fixed up out to Bucky.

Bucky laughed, light and mirthful, as Steve pressed the mug into his hands. His damp hair hung in his face in a way that made Steve itch to tuck it back behind his ear. “Next time, could the coffee come before the running?”

“Is that you saying you want to do it again?” Steve busied himself pouring a second mug, if only to occupy his hands.

“What I’m saying is that I’d probably complain less if this came first.” Bucky set his cup down on counter, and Steve watched him reach for the door of the fridge, getting only halfway there. He squinted at his mug and then abandoned his quest for the fridge in favor of trying a sip. “When did you learn how I liked my coffee?”

He’d gotten it right, then. Something pleasant fizzed in his chest as Bucky leaned against the kitchen counter, eyes fluttering shut as he took a sip. Steve couldn’t have this, not any of it, but maybe he could enjoy the view.

“You know practically everything about me,” Steve pointed out, because the question made him realize how much time he had to be spending watching Bucky to pick up the background details like that. He’d be damned if he admitted it.

“Right… and?” Bucky had lowered the mug a little. He regarded Steve curiously, his head cocked to the side, thumb skimming up and down the handle of his mug. Steve knew that bit because the motion kept pulling his attention.

“And I thought I should know a thing or two about you,” Steve finished. It was a lame excuse, even before the words made it off his tongue.

“Huh…” Bucky’s coffee cup hid most of the sweet, lopsided smile that pulled at his lips. His eyes crinkled at the corners, half hidden behind the strands of hair that framed them. The unexpected fondness of his expression stood out, unremarkable on its own, but utterly incongruous with their playful teasing.

Steve couldn’t remember the last time someone had looked at him like that. Maybe never. Maybe he was seeing things. It felt like an embrace anyway, something warm and hopeful nestled in the center of his chest, though Steve knew he had no right to it.

No matter how much being around Bucky was beginning to feel like the relentless pull of gravity, this was never going to be more than wishful thinking. Steve smiled back anyway, and when the way Bucky shifted his stance brought him closer, Steve froze entirely. The coffee mug Steve was holding was the only armor he had, and he gripped it so tightly, he worried he might break the porcelain.

“Is that okay?” Steve asked, hiding how stupidly, selfishly enamored he was behind a cheeky grin.

“You planning to write a book about me too?” Bucky retorted. He paused to take a sip of his
coffee, and looked like he meant to say something else, but then someone was knocking on the door.

Steve didn’t realize how close they were until Bucky slipped away to answer it. The absence was palpable, like a cold draft leaking into a warm room. Steve gulped down half of his coffee and tried to shrug the feeling off. He took a breath and headed out to the living room just as Bucky was letting his guest in.

Bucky greeted the man on the doorstep with the same playfully sharp-edged humor he so often turned on Steve. It wasn’t anything specific to them, Steve realized, hating himself for the sinking feeling that came with knowing. That was just Bucky.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” the man commented as he took off his shoes, taking in the books and empty takeout containers left on the coffee table from the night before.

It seemed rude to Steve, but Bucky laughed and elbowed him. “Shut up. It was a late night.”

“Yeah.” The man grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. “I’ll bet it was.”

“Sam. God. Not like that.” A bright flush splashed across Bucky’s cheeks even as he refuted Sam’s suggestion. He slung his arm casually around Sam’s shoulders anyway, herding him over to Steve. The sinking feeling only became more of a weight. How could he have been so stupid?

“Sam, this is my friend Steve.” Bucky let go of Sam once they were all in close proximity, directing his attention to Steve. “This is Sam. If anyone I know knows what that relic is—”

“Oh no you don’t. I distinctly remember you promising coffee. No academics until I’ve had caffeine,” Sam cut Bucky off, but he was smiling, like this was some private joke between the two of them.

“Yeah, yeah. Hang on.” Bucky let out a theatrically put-upon sigh, but he slipped away, leaving Steve in the foyer with Sam.

“He must be really interested in whatever this project is about,” Sam commented as he headed into the living room. He seemed so confident about it, Steve couldn’t help wondering how close the two of them were.

“Why do you say that?” Steve asked, hoping he wasn’t going to hate the answer.

“Have you seen the state of this living room?” Sam snorted in amusement, though Steve wasn’t sure at what. Outside of the coffee table and a rumpled blanket that had tumbled off the couch, the room was as pristine as always. “Bucky is the neatest person I’ve ever met. It’s absurd. The only way he’d ever let this fly was if he got wrapped up in something really interesting.”

Steve had gathered that, more or less, but it still felt strange to have someone else tell him what Bucky was like. Not just any someone, but someone who had more insight than Steve could ever hope to glean in the small window of time he got with Bucky. It was a stupid question, and it skirted around what he really wanted to know, but Steve asked anyway, “Have you two known each other long?”

“What? Oh yeah. We go back a ways. We were roommates in college, and my condolences to you, because he is insufferable. We ended up teaching at the same college, so I guess now I’m just stuck with him forever.” Sam talked like they were siblings and Steve felt like an absolute idiot. Enough that Sam caught him entirely off guard. “So, how do you know Bucky?”
Sam had known Bucky too long for a lie to work well, so Steve thought on his feet, drawing on a variation of the truth. “Actually, I came to him for help with a project, and then I guess I just… stuck around.”

“He has that effect on people,” Sam replied wryly. Pausing long enough to give Steve a considering look, Sam leaned in, his voice hushed as he added. “You know, if you happened to be trying to get in his good graces, he probably won’t say it, but if you straighten this up, he will notice.”

Steve’s lips pursed in confusion. Good graces? Wait, did Sam think he’d stuck around to woo Bucky? Steve wasn’t sure if Sam was terribly perceptive or if he was terribly obvious. “Oh, it’s not. I’m not… I wasn’t…”

“Relax. I’m just sayin’,” Sam shrugged. “And now I’m going to go hurry him up.”

With that, Sam was gone, off to the kitchen. Steve wasn’t trying to woo Bucky. He wasn’t. He took one look at the coffee table and quickly got to work on straightening it up anyway.

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“You didn’t tell me this was going to be a group project.”

Bucky jumped, looking up from the coffee pot that was percolating its second batch for the day. “Yeah… It’s sort of complicated.”

Sam swept into the kitchen with an ease born of familiarity, moving to stand next to Bucky and reaching to pull a mug from the cabinet. “You didn’t tell me you met someone.”

It wasn’t an accusation, but Sam’s expectant look made Bucky feel guilty anyway. He’d known when Sam was proposing to Natasha three weeks before she did. They told each other everything. He winced and fumbled to explain. “It’s not like that.”

“Excuse you. Do you really think, as well as I know you, that that’s going to fly with me? I do have eyes.” Sam’s expression was flat and utterly unimpressed, and Bucky knew he was caught. “It’s not like that. He’s just staying with me for a little while is all,” Bucky protested, not entirely thinking it through because he’d never done much lying to Sam. It just wasn’t their way.

“Staying with you? You’ve progressed to roommate and I haven’t heard about it? How long have you known this guy?” Sam pressed, crossing his arms. Bucky knew the real question, whether Sam said it or not. How long had Bucky neglected to tell him about this?

“About a month and a half.” There was an uptick in his voice at the end, making the whole thing sound more like a question. When Sam frowned, Bucky scrambled to add. “He’s good people. I swear he is, and I was going to tell you but—”

“Let me guess. It’s complicated.” Sam wasn’t looking at Bucky anymore, busying himself with pouring a cup of coffee.

“No. I mean, it is, but that’s not what I was going to say.” Bucky chewed the inside of his cheek and fidgeted where he stood. “This whole thing sounds so crazy. I’m not sure you’d believe me if I told you.”

“Seriously?” The hurt softened its way out of Sam’s expression, replaced by a faintly amused smirk as he stirred a couple of spoonfuls of sugar into his mug. “I have backed up every ridiculous
thing you’ve done, and you think I’m going to stop now?”

Sam had a point, and it had never been that Bucky didn’t want to tell him. He hesitated anyway. “It’s not exactly my story to tell.”

Bucky looked up to see Steve in the doorway with the empty takeout boxes from the table. It was a sweet gesture, not that Bucky had any businesses describing things Steve did as sweet. He must have heard at least some of their conversation, because he spoke up as he dumped the boxes in the trash can. “It’s alright. If you trust him, so do I. Besides, it’s not fair to ask someone to help who doesn’t have all the facts.”

“I’m not quite sure where to start,” Bucky admitted.

Sam clapped Bucky on the shoulder. “I don’t know, man. Maybe at the beginning?”

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“You want to tell me you’re Steve Rogers - the Steve Rogers - and you turned up here because time travel?” Sam asked when Steve was done.

Maybe this had been a bad idea. Sam was scratching his head, and didn’t exactly seem like he believed a word of this. Words hadn’t been enough to convince Bucky, and Bucky had had significantly more context. Not to mention, he was the kind of person who would ultimately want to believe it was true. Steve wasn’t sure that was a trait Sam shared. Determined to prove himself, Steve stood up.

Bucky was on to him as soon as he got out of his seat. “I swear to god, if you carry my bookcase out here to prove a point…”

Bucky didn’t finish, but he didn’t have to to get his point across. Okay, not the office bookcase then. That was fine. He had a better idea anyway. He turned around, and hoisted up the couch, Bucky and all.

Bucky yelped in surprise. The effort was worth it just for that. More importantly, Sam was staring, wide-eyed, at him as he set the couch back down. “So, that’s a thing that’s happening.”

Before Steve could reply, Bucky cut in, resituating himself on the couch. “You missed the part where he abandoned me on our jog this morning because he runs so damned fast.”

“Sorry. I got stuck on the part where he managed to convince you to get out of bed in the first place,” Sam teased. His gaze drifted between Bucky and where Steve had sat down on the couch beside him. “And you believe this is the real deal?”

“We wouldn’t be sitting here if I didn’t.” Bucky’s sass earned him a slightly sour look from Sam that was hard not to laugh at despite the circumstances.

“Wow. This is…” Sam started.

Bucky finished before Sam could. “Complicated?”

“Yeah, alright, you got me there,” Sam agreed. “Time travel. Complicated is definitely a word for it.”

It almost felt like an intrusion, cutting into Sam and Bucky’s conversation. “I don’t think I have to ask this but I’d really appreciate your discretion.”
“About the time travel or about how Captain America moved in with my best friend?” Sam cracked a smile. “You’re right. You don’t have to ask. Your weird and improbable-sounding secret is safe with me.”

Steve finally relaxed, just a little bit sorry that Bucky hadn’t introduced them before. Sam was good company, if embarrassingly perceptive about everything. “Thanks.”

“Wait.” Sam’s teeth scraped across his bottom lip in a poor attempt to stifle a laugh. “Oh, hang on a sec. Bucky. You finally solved the last big mystery of your career, and you can’t even tell anyone about it.”

Bucky huffed, hunched over next to Steve on the couch to fiddle with his mug on the coffee table. “I mean, I could write about it.”

“Really? You’re gonna tell the whole world that you solved the disappearance of Captain America and it’s time travel?” Sam leaned back in his armchair and laughed. “You can’t do that. They’ll laugh you right out of the university and turn you into a meme or something like that aliens guy with the crazy hair.”

“What? I’m not… it’s not…” Bucky started to argue. Finally, he made a face at Sam, shoulders slumping. “Fine. You’re right. I can’t write it. Are you happy?”

Sam grinned, the expression laced with familiarity. “Oh, very.”

“Good.” Bucky rolled his eyes. “Because if you don’t help me get Steve home, there won’t be anything to write about in the first place.”

“I was starting to think you just dragged me over here to introduce me.” Sam leaned into the arm of his recliner, resting his cheek against the palm of his hand.

“I have more sense of self-preservation than that.” Bucky paused, his expression inscrutable. “It’s just, science didn’t do this. Not any science I can make sense of anyway. It was some kind of relic.”

“Given the amount of shit you give me about it, I’m pretty sure you know I’m not an archeologist,” Sam pointed out. Steve assumed it was some joke he wasn’t in on.

Steve frowned, trying to work out how Sam’s being there helped. “I don’t think we need an archeologist. Anyone who found this probably didn’t know what they had.”

“I don’t know an archeologist I can take this to, anyway. It was a statue, and I thought maybe it’s got some kind of cultural significance…” Bucky said, his face crinkling in distaste, though Steve couldn’t think for the life of him why.

Sam, on the other hand, looked delighted. “Oh. Like mythology?”

There was a strange, not quite tense silence while Sam grinned at Bucky and Bucky made a comically grouchy face at Sam. When Bucky finally answered, it was reluctant mutter, as if the words had been wrenched free. “Yes. Like mythology.”

Steve had very definitely missed something, but the chagrined scrunch of Bucky’s nose made it hard to care. Sam laughed, a light, pleased sound, contagious enough that Steve’s mouth curled up at the edges in response. “Yeah, alright. I’ll give it a shot. Don’t get your hopes too high. Even if it’s a myth, a lot of cultures share variations on the same ideas. This might take a while. You’re gonna have to tell me what it looks like.”
The rush of hope wasn’t so heady as it had been the first few times Steve had thought they had a lead, but it defied Sam’s caution and showed up all the same. It washed in like the tide, a suggestion that maybe this was going to lead him home. If the thought of leaving prickled painfully around the edges, he staunchly ignored that. It wasn’t as if he was ever going to stay.

Steve sprang to his feet to grab the sketch he’d drawn to show Bucky the day they’d met. “I’ll do better than tell you what it looks like. I can show you.”

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For not having had a roommate in ages, Bucky took to sharing space with Steve with unnerving ease. He didn’t even think anymore about how he just expected Steve sitting on the left-hand side of the couch with a book or the laptop or sometimes a sketchpad.

It was a sketchpad this time around, Bucky noted as he scribbled down ideas for the book he was working on. The tip of Steve’s tongue poked out between his lips in obvious concentration. Even though Bucky couldn’t see what Steve was drawing, the scrawl of lead against paper and the measured movements of Steve’s fingers were utterly enthralling.

That was about the time Steve’s eyes flicked up again, directly at Bucky. It wasn’t a gaze that suggested intent to engage so much as observation, and Steve froze when Bucky met his eye. Tilting his head to the side, Bucky asked, “Are you drawing me?”

Steve huffed out a breath, his cheeks turning faintly pink. “There’s… kind of limited subject matter in here.”

“I can’t tell if you’re suggesting my house is boring or that I’m the prettiest thing in the room,” Bucky blurted out. It had been meant to be a joke, but then he realized how it sounded, and the way Steve’s eyes went wide and opened his mouth to backtrack.

“Well, I’m not blind.” Steve retorted. Bucky had just enough time to freeze and try to work out if Steve was flirting with him before Steve’s mouth gaped in horror. “That… umm…”

Okay, either Steve was embarrassed because he hadn’t meant to be flirting, or because he had, and Bucky wasn’t actually sure which possible answer was worse. The best thing for everyone, he decided, was to carry on as if he hadn’t even considered that might be the case, so when Steve started to close his sketchbook, Bucky was quick to try and blunder his way on like he just hadn’t noticed.

“Hey wait! Don’t I get to see it? I think if I’m the subject matter, I should get to see it.” Bucky got up from the chair on the other side of the living room, walked across the carpet, and plopped down on the couch beside Steve.

“What? No.” Steve winced, tilting the drawing pad just a little bit away. “It’s a really rough sketch.”

“Have you seen my drawing skills? I can draw a stick figure. Your ‘rough sketch’ is miles ahead of anything I’d be doing, so relax,” Bucky coaxed, leaning so close that the front of his shoulder was pressed against Steve’s arm. It was hard to remember what he’d even been doing because Steve turned his head. Bucky’s nose was all of about six inches from Steve’s, and for a single, stupid second, Bucky thought about closing the distance. It was a feeling that had been creeping up on him for a while, but somehow that desire still took Bucky utterly by surprise. Steve’s eyes were so wide and blue and locked on Bucky’s, his expression not remotely helping.
It was a completely stupid idea, of course, and Bucky was quick to break eye contact before he said something foolish. He glanced down, spotting the pencil sketch Steve had been working on. Bucky was focused, a book in one hand, his jaw cradled in the other. With his breath catching so sharply it stopped up his throat, it was a second before Bucky managed to choke out. “Holy shit. I’ve seen this.”

“What do you mean, you’ve seen it?” Steve’s expression had gone from surprised to suspicious in the few seconds it took Bucky to speak. His mouth pulled down at the corners, but at least he wasn’t trying to hide the drawing anymore.

“What I mean is that I saw it years ago in a museum. There was a whole exhibit about you, and
“There were some drawings.” Bucky shrugged. “That’s what got me interested in all of this…”

“Wait. You started a career because you saw I’d drawn a picture that looked like you?” Steve was outright scowling now, and if he didn’t pull away, it was only because there was nowhere to go.

Bucky sucked in a breath, kicking himself for not thinking that through better. That hadn’t come out at all like he’d meant. He sat back on the cushion at the other end of the couch. “No. Oh god, no. I meant the exhibit. I just thought the drawings were a coincidence.”

Steve didn’t exactly look mollified. Of course he didn’t and why should be. Bucky realized in retrospect how absurd and creepy that all sounded. Holding up his hands in surrender, he kept going, trying to explain. “What I meant was that exhibit was the first suggestion I’d seen anywhere that Captain America was more than an… an icon.”

Though Steve didn’t say anything at first, his expression softened a fraction. His frown and the disapproving dip of his eyebrows eased up, much to Bucky’s relief. The quiet that hung between them was nerve-wracking, but Bucky didn’t dare keep trying to fill it. He let out a breath he hadn’t even realized he was holding when Steve finally spoke up. “How do you mean?”

“You’ve got a comic book series. You know that? Movies too,” Bucky started, hoping that even though this was coming out of left field, that Steve would stay with him. There was a minute nod from Steve, which Bucky took as a sign to keep going. “They all say Captain America and you’re in them, but they’re not about you, not really.”

“I’m not sure I follow.” Steve was watching Bucky with interest, and that was a welcome change after the disaster Bucky had just blundered his way into.

“What I mean is they’re about a guy in a uniform who spouts off about a few qualities people have decided to equate with Captain America. It’s like… they distilled you down to some stereotype, and of course, people gobble that up because it’s all in the name of an exciting story or propaganda, but it’s not real. That exhibit was the first time I saw any sign of where Captain America the imaginary person ended and Steve Rogers started and I just…” Bucky hadn’t realized how animated he’d gotten until then. Steve was giving him just about the same look that his professors had when he was proposing his dissertation. Bucky’s cheeks blossomed red. He could feel it, and he clamped his mouth shut.

“I…” Steve’s mouth kept opening and closing, and the way he looked at Bucky, it was hard to say if he was surprised or upset. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything,” Bucky groaned, wishing he could gather back everything he’d said in the last five minutes and melt into the couch cushions. “Please don’t say anything.”

Of all the times for Steve to listen to him, maybe that wasn’t the best one. They were both quiet and still at opposite ends of the couch, and now that they had silence, Bucky couldn’t figure out how to break it without making things worse. Somehow, getting up seemed like an even more disastrous option, like they were right at the edge of something, and one wrong move would ruin it all.

“So…” Steve finally started, smooth as a pinecone. “Do I live up to the hype? No, I guess that’s them.”

“Them? Steve, what on earth are you talking about?” Bucky’s face scrunched up as he tried to figure out what Steve was referring to.
“Them. The people who do all the comic books and that nonsense. That’s all hype. What I meant was…” Steve was watching him, teeth scraping across his bottom lip. “Was it worth all this?”

Finally, finally it felt like Bucky could breathe. He laughed and and leaned in, and didn’t realize he had reached out until his palm had settled on Steve’s forearm. “Were you worth all this, you mean? Damn right you were.”

Steve’s chest rose and fell and the tension smoothed out of his features. “You called me Steve.”

“Well… that’s your name.” Bucky noticed peripherally that Steve hadn’t pulled away. He didn’t dare look in case that changed. Of course, that was about the time Bucky realized he didn’t want that to change, and oh god, he had a massive problem because he was Steve’s friend. He was Steve’s friend and they were going to get Steve home. They could only ever be temporary. Worse than that, at some point he was going to do something so upsetting that the Steve who actually belonged in this year wouldn’t even be willing to meet with his younger self. Bucky had thought he was resigned to that, but now it had gone and gotten complicated.

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“Not just now. In the books. In your lectures. I thought at first it was some kind of fan… thing, but it never was, was it? You went looking for-” Steve swallowed and didn’t finish. He’d leaned in a little too, and Bucky’s stomach flopped in anticipation.

“For you.” Bucky’s heart was in his throat, and as close as they were, the realization that this was a terrible idea was crowded out by the soft cadence of Steve’s breathing. Bucky smiled and hoped it was more charming than dopey. “And here you are.”

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“Well…” Bucky tried to cut in because whatever worries he had, he didn’t want Steve fretting. Not about this. Not with his whole future already at stake.

Steve didn’t seem to be listening. “That wasn’t at all appropriate-”

“Steve.” Bucky’s mouth quirked up just a little. It was hard to stress about what was coming when Steve, right here and now, was so ridiculously endearing.

“I’m sorry Buck-” Steve was saying, and that was about the time Bucky decided he’d had enough. Impulsively, he followed the tilt of Steve’s body right into the corner of the couch.
This time was far less gentle. They were on borrowed time. If they were doing this - and it seemed like they were - Bucky had no intention of doing anything by half measures. He crushed his mouth against Steve’s, eager and artless. Bucky was sure he was usually better at this, but they were all teeth clinking together and breathless laughter, and then Steve’s fingers were in his hair and Bucky’s world completely upended. He forgot he’d been going to say anything until it was long past the point where the retort would have been witty. Bucky said it anyway. “Don’t be sorry. Please don’t be sorry.”
Steve was so quiet that Bucky thought, for just a second, he’d gotten this all wrong again. Damn it. He really had to learn when to keep his mouth shut. He was about to apologize himself when he caught Steve’s eye. More importantly, he caught the fond smile that had found its way to Steve’s lips. “It’s hard to be sorry for that, honestly.”

There was still the edge of something, as if whatever they had found here might crumble if they stopped to think. Bucky resolved not to give himself the opportunity. The knowledge that he couldn’t keep this bubbled under the surface, but if Steve was always going to be leaving, there didn’t seem to be much reason not to enjoy what time they got.

“Good.” Bucky made it his mission to chase away whatever worries either of them harbored. He slid his fingers through Steve’s hair, enjoying the silken drag of it between his fingers almost as much as the pleasant shiver it dragged from Steve. Everything beyond this moment seemed very far away when Bucky leaned in, lips brushing a delicate caress over Steve’s. “My thoughts exactly.”
Chapter 5

Chapter by DrowningByDegrees

Steve rolled over and peered at the alarm clock for what must have been the twentieth time. 3:27 a.m. He’d been lying there for the better part of three hours, but that was his own fault. Steve could have kicked himself for letting things get so out of hand. He could justify it, and say that it had only been kissing, but he knew better. He’d muddled everything, and there was no taking it back.

The worst part was how much his treacherous heart wanted to be happy about how the evening had gone. It had been so easy to ignore the reality of the situation when Bucky was there in the room. Steve had allowed himself to be overwhelmed by the idea that Bucky saw him, not because it was useful or lucrative, but just because he’d wanted to. He’d been so enthralled with everything about Bucky already that taking “Don’t be sorry” at face value had been wonderfully simple.

It was simple, at least in the moment. Steve had drifted on the high of Bucky’s arms around him and Bucky’s lips against his, and nothing else had felt terribly important. It hadn’t been until Bucky left him with a lopsided smile and a quiet “good night” that Steve stopped to think about the consequences. There had been good reasons not to get involved, and by the time Steve had crawled into bed, the high he’d been floating on felt more like an anchor pulling him down.

In the normally comforting darkness of the bedroom, nothing felt so simple anymore. As far as Steve was concerned, he didn’t have anything to offer. He wasn’t leaving today or tomorrow, but he was leaving. Every scrap of progress they made towards that goal was also towards the end of this thing they’d only just begun.

There was no fair way to proceed with this. Bucky had only been helpful and kind, and come to think of it, maybe that was some of the trouble. Maybe, knowing how it had to end, Bucky had still decided that just for now was better than not at all. It was equally possible though that this was another extension of all the ways Bucky tried to help.

Clearly, he wasn’t getting any sleep tonight. Steve sighed and crawled back out of bed, slipping out of his room and down the hall to the kitchen. Bucky’s bedroom door was cracked, so Steve moved as quietly as he could. There was no reason they both had to be up just because Steve was feeling guilty.

Maybe he just needed something to settle his nerves. The cabinet with the tea bags in it always squeaked, so he pressed his fingers against the hinge to stifle the sound. It was one of those things he’d learned because Bucky had welcomed him in and made this place as much a home for him as possible, and that just made everything worse. You didn’t repay someone’s kindness by asking for more.

They’d have to talk about it in the morning. Steve would apologize and give Bucky as wide a berth as he could, and wait for the whole thing to blow over. If the next however long was awkward and uncomfortable while he tried to find a way home, Steve thought he probably deserved that for the position he’d put Bucky in.

Steve knew Bucky’s kitchen so well, he operated on automatic. The kettle was too loud, so he boiled water in a pot. The ceramic mug clinked a little too loudly against the counter for his liking, but he managed to finish without waking Bucky. That was something at least.

Tea wasn’t any more comforting than tossing and turning in bed, as it turned out. Steve sat on the
couch and took a sip, but the warmth of it going down did nothing to stave off his worries. His poor
decisions still hung over him like a spectre, clamoring at the back of his mind. At least no one was
around to see if he happened to be brooding.

He dozed off eventually, tucked into the corner of the couch. His tea was barely touched, gone
cold on the coffee table. Rest was a fitful thing, but more than he’d managed in bed.

Steve wasn’t sure how long he’d been out for when he felt something warm being draped over
him. Too high strung to find it soothing, Steve bolted upright, rubbing his face. When he looked
up, Bucky was hovering over him, weakly backlit by a light down the hall somewhere. The house
was otherwise still dark, so it couldn’t have been very late in the morning. “Sorry. Did I wake
you?”

“No. You looked cold is all,” Bucky murmured, his voice still thick with sleep. A shadow of a
smile creased his lips. “You know, there’s a perfectly serviceable bed for sleeping in.”

“Yeah, I…” Whatever lie Steve was hoping to cobble together died in his throat. He wouldn’t add
dishonesty this mess. “Couldn’t sleep is all.”

Bucky’s mouth pursed in obvious concern. The timing was rather awkwardly obvious, after all. “Is
everything alright?”

There was no dodging this, much as he wanted to, and heavens, he wanted to. Even troubled,
Bucky cut a lovely figure all ruffled with sleep. His hair stuck out every which way, and only the
fact that they were having a conversation seemed to be keeping his eyes open. Steve would have
much rather have herded Bucky to bed and maybe crawl in after him than have this conversation
right now.

“I made a mistake.” Steve sucked a breath in through his teeth and braced himself.

“A mistake?” Bucky’s voice came a little more clearly. He hadn’t moved from where he was
standing, but he hugged his arms around himself and squinted as if trying to focus. “Which part?”

“All of it. It wasn’t fair.” It was just as important to Steve for Bucky not to think he was being
blamed for anything. Bucky may have followed through, but Steve was convinced he’d been the
one to start all this. “I don’t have any right to ask more of you than the help you’re already giving
me.”

Bucky’s eyes widened, enough to draw Steve’s attention, even in the near dark. “You’re not being
fair. That’s what you’re worried about?”

Steve sort of hated the way Bucky parroted it back so casually, like the whole thing was simple.
He pressed on, determined to get them on the same page. “We both know I’m here on borrowed
time. It’s not like there’s a future…”

“Exactly.” Bucky huffed and stepped around the coffee table to the couch, immediately pushing at
Steve’s shoulder. It was rather insistent, and the moment Steve moved, Bucky sank onto the
cushion next to him, unceremoniously tugging at the blanket until it was wrapped around them
both. “For being so smart, you’re an idiot.”

“What? I don’t understand…” Steve started, but Bucky apparently wasn’t done.

“Yeah, I know you don’t. Here I was, worried that I’d done something dumb, that you thought you
owed me something because I’m helping you, and this is the problem?” Bucky’s voice had risen
slightly in annoyance, but there was something just a bit fond in his expression. “You said it
yourself. We both know what's coming."

"Which is why this isn't fair…" Steve frowned. If Bucky knew why this couldn't end well, why weren't they coming to the same conclusion?

"Which is why we make the most of what we've got while we can," Bucky countered. He shook his head, leaning into Steve until Steve didn't have many comfortable options but to wrap an arm around him. It seemed to be what Bucky wanted, because he tipped his head back against Steve’s shoulder, closing his eyes. "Lemme ask you something."

"What?" They fit nicely like this, and it made Steve’s heart hurt because right this second, he mostly wanted to stay put and forget everything else.

"Is it something you want?" Bucky cracked an eye open, holding up a finger before Steve could answer. "I’m not asking if it’s fair. I’m not asking if it ends well. I’m just asking, is it something you did because you wanted to?"

It felt like a trick question. Steve hedged for a moment, but he nodded his head when the words wouldn’t quite come. Saying it out loud was a kind of surrender, a step farther than he could bear to take.

Bucky tilted his head until his forehead rested against Steve’s jaw, and there was that ache again. The one that didn’t want to let go even though Steve knew he had to. "Good. Me too."

"Bucky. Listen to me-" That was as far as Steve got before Bucky’s hand gently clamped over his mouth.

"Nope." Steve couldn’t see the way Bucky was smiling, but he could hear it, a warmth rounding out the edges of the word. Despite how sure he was that this was a mistake, it eased something that had been tight and uncomfortable in Steve’s chest. "You listen. I know how this ends, and I’m not asking for forever, Steve. I’m asking for right now."

Steve shuffled a little, hunkering down until he could hold Bucky properly. Bucky’s nose nudged against the crook of Steve’s neck, his breathing soft and even. Heaven help him. This was going to hurt when it was over. Nodding once, Steve gave in with a whisper. "Right now."

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Bucky flicked an eye open and was greeted by the hazy darkness that came with street lamps and moonlight through the curtains. The fuzzy outlines of the television and a couple of standing lamps let him know that he was in the living room, though it took a little bit longer to recall exactly why.

Steve shifted on the couch, a warm, solid reminder of why, exactly, Bucky had nodded off on the couch and was not comfortably in bed. There was a muscular forearm curled around Bucky's back, pulling him flush against Steve, as if he was liable to fall over just sitting there. A faint smile curled up at the corners of Bucky's mouth, even though sleeping sitting up was anything but comfortable. The blanket Bucky had tugged around them had slipped away, and everything ached, but Steve looked so peaceful that it was hard to move.

He tried to move as little as possible, just enough to pull the blankets back up. His efforts were met with a sleepy, questioning noise, and Steve's nose nuzzling against his temple. "What's wrong?"

It was a welcome shift from… however long ago he’d come out here and found Steve on the couch. Bucky tilted his head enough to brush his lips against Steve’s jaw, tracing the line of it with lazy kisses from Steve's chin to his ear. He kind of hurt, but he mostly didn't want to give this up.
"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

Steve tilted his head with a soft sigh that sounded so blissful, Bucky wanted to commit it to memory. They couldn't all be soft moments, but he meant to enjoy whatever time he had. He tucked his forehead back against the side of Steve's neck, so close he could feel the vibration as Steve spoke, "This was a terrible idea."

"What?" Bucky asked very carefully. His stomach felt like he'd swallowed a boulder. They'd gotten past this, he'd thought. There were plenty of things to worry about, but he'd hoped whatever was beginning between them wasn't one of them. Swallowing thickly, Bucky sat up, trying to keep the hurt from showing too openly in his expression.

Steve's eyes weren't open anyway. He was utterly oblivious to Bucky's distress. When Bucky started to pull away though, Steve's fingers curled in the fabric of his shirt, punctuating a groggy explanation. "This is an awful way to try and sleep."

Bucky was so relieved, he couldn't quite stifle a short, huffed out laugh. Steve opened one eye to look at him, lips parting on what was probably about to be a question. Bucky staved it off, reaching to lace his fingers with Steve's, and giving them a little tug. "I think you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who likes sleeping sitting up. C'mon."

“C’mon where?” Steve was sleepy and pliant though, following when Bucky got up and tried to urge him to his feet.

“To bed,” Bucky said, not really sure why that was a question. It wasn’t light out yet. Where the heck else were they going to go? Granted, Steve was always awake absurdly early. Maybe he didn’t see the merits of going back to sleep with the prospect of waking a little more comfortably.

Steve froze, and even half asleep, Bucky was struck by how strong he was. As much care as Steve put into everything he did, it was easy to forget that. Even now, refusing to budge, his expression was gentle. “That seems a little… abrupt.”

“Abrupt?” Bucky’s expression scrunched in confusion before it finally hit him what Steve thought he was suggesting. He grinned and shook his head. “Oh geez. I meant to sleep.”

“Oh.” Steve immediately relaxed, shooting only a passing glance at the guest room as he followed Bucky. “Not that I don’t want to. Just-”

There was probably a time and place for that conversation, but it wasn’t half asleep and not even sunrise yet. Bucky held a finger to Steve’s lips to stop him. “Just that we can talk about it tomorrow.”

Steve opened his mouth to argue, like being contrary was just instinct, but he seemed to realize eventually that they were in agreement this time around. His expression went soft, sleepiness creeping back in. “Yeah, alright.”

Bucky had sort of expected some kind of hesitation, when it came down to it, but there was none. Steve slid under the covers to one side of the bed, like he’d decided he belonged there. He was already settled when Bucky followed him under the covers.

It was a little more intentional than the way they’d nodded off on the couch. Steve had absconded with Bucky’s pillow, but he made a perfectly good substitute as far as Bucky was concerned. They fit well together, with Steve stretched out on his back with an arm around Bucky, who was tucked against his side.
Bucky lifted his head and pressed his lips against the ridge of Steve’s cheekbone, pleased by the happy sigh it pulled from Steve. They were good like this, even if it was just for a little while. Pressing one last kiss to Steve’s cheek, Bucky settled in his embrace, his head resting near enough to hear the steady thrum of Steve’s heartbeat. He was lulled back to sleep to the sound of it, Steve’s fingers dragging idly through his hair.

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Nothing changed. Life went on with Bucky coming and going and Steve spending the days on his own, searching for answers that no one had. He trusted Sam, but he wasn’t about to do nothing while he waited. In the evenings, Bucky helped, or else worked on his book. For such an unbelievable situation, the day to day of it was terribly mundane.

Only, everything changed. All the carefully arranged space Steve kept between Bucky and himself vanished. The guest room was all but forgotten, and Steve, who had never woken up with someone else in bed with him in as long as he could remember, learned to look forward to the prospect. Bed meant Bucky’s head tucked against his chest and a pleasant tangle of limbs that Steve stubbornly chose not think about what it was going to feel like to lose. Nights that would have once seen them at opposite ends of the couch now had Bucky sprawled out on the couch sitting up with his back pressed against Steve. Proximity stopped being a strange thing almost immediately.

“No one ever talks about Hydra. Not even during the war,” Steve commented, scrolling through a Wikipedia article about one of his more well-known missions. It seemed so strange that they existed in a time where people had all the knowledge in the world right there at their fingertips, but still missed so much.

“Hmm?” Bucky tilted his head back, to look up at Steve. His fingers sprawled out against the pages of the book he was reading. The Martian. Steve hadn’t heard of that one. “Oh, that’s… I mean, everything that came out about your work during the war was so sanitized, that’s not really surprising. Besides, secret organization led by a guy that can take his face off? No one is buying that. It only ever got any traction on those conspiracy theory forums.”

“Conspiracy what?” That sounded like something they’d talked about before, but Steve had encountered so much here, he honestly couldn’t remember.

“You know, where people talk about how their neighbor is secretly an alien or they saw Jesus on their toast. It’s all very surreal.” Bucky sat up, and Steve was a bit sorry for the slight distance it put between them. “It’s just… sometimes they accidentally get something right.”

“How did you know, though?” In the beginning, that kind of realization would have made Steve wary of Bucky, but it wasn’t even a blip on his radar now. Bucky was unreasonably resourceful, and Steve was more curious than suspicious.

“They didn’t do a good enough job.” Bucky shrugged, oddly alert as he watched Steve. “They scrubbed everything directly involving you, sure, but the echoes are there, if you look hard enough.”

It wasn’t quite the answer Steve was hoping for. Bucky was impressive, but if he’d puzzled this out, it meant there wasn’t a resource Steve was missing. “You never wrote about it.”

“No, I like my job, as it turns out. Besides, it only mattered to me in as much as it pertained to you. I’ve only ever had a notion of what Hydra was.” Bucky’s hand found its way to Steve’s, palm
sliding over his knuckles. Their fingers slotted easily together, and Bucky gently squeezed. “Hey, what’s this about?”

“I just wondered, is all. I expected they’d win the war without me. They never needed me for that.” When Bucky leaned in, Steve followed suit, their heads tilting in until they touched. “If there’s nothing concrete about Hydra, I have no way of knowing what happened.”

“Are you worried they’re still around? I mean current you retired. That’s a good sign, right?” Bucky asked, his thumb sliding along the outside edge of Steve’s. It was subtly soothing, a whisper that he wasn’t on his own with this, and Steve loathed himself for how much it helped.

“Of course I retired. The me that belongs here is pushing a hundred. Serum or not, he’s probably more likely to break a hip than take down the bad guys at this point.” Steve sucked in a breath and let it out, wishing he knew how to articulate what he felt, but words escaped him.

Bucky leaned forward, turning his head to look at Steve. His eyes narrowed, more thoughtful than accusatory. “Are you concerned you’re not important? That doesn’t sound much like you.”

“What? No. It’s nothing like that.” Steve shook his head vigorously. Ego had never figured into this. Not when he’d gotten himself enlisted and certainly not now. Maybe that was it though, in a roundabout way. If he wasn’t important, did it matter so much if he existed then or now? He could never tell Bucky, of course. Bucky was glued to a set of rules about how one dealt with time travel. They seemed sort of arbitrary, cobbled together out of fiction, but they made sense (as much as anything made sense about this). They definitely did not leave room for completely changing the timeline. Hoping Bucky wouldn’t catch the lie, he replied, “But it would be helpful to know what I’m walking back into.”

“Well that” – Bucky leaned in, lips brushing against Steve’s jaw, sweeping kisses along the sharp line of it. It was so hard to hold onto the tension he felt when Bucky captivated him just by existing in the same space. It was downright impossible when Bucky was such a warm presence, nuzzling close and mumbling into the crook of Steve’s neck - “sounds like a problem for future Steve.”

Steve’s fingers found their way to Bucky’s hair, soft strands of it slipping between his knuckles. It pulled a soft hum from Bucky that rumbled against the side of Steve’s neck. How long, Steve wondered, before he wouldn’t even quite remember what that felt like anymore? He couldn’t dwell on that though, not right now. Instead, he cradled the back of Bucky’s head, murmuring against his temple. “How do you do that?”

“Mmm?” Bucky breathed out, warm air puffing across Steve’s skin, but he didn’t look up.

“Just be in the moment. About… everything.” Steve regretted the question the minute it escaped his lips because Bucky pulled away then, sitting up to look at Steve properly.

“Look. You turn up where you turn up. Worrying about what’s coming doesn’t magically change that, does it?” Bucky’s smile was teasing, but there was an undercurrent that left Steve’s heart aching, that he didn’t think he wanted to ask about.

It was a fair point though, whatever anxiety still lingered. “No. Suppose not.”

“Then why bother with it?” Bucky reached for Steve, draping his forearms across the tops of Steve’s shoulders. His nails scritched lazily at the nape of Steve’s neck. It was casually affectionate despite their current subject matter. There was just enough space between them that Steve could still see the obstinately calm expression on Bucky’s face. “Besides. I stay in this moment because this moment is what we have, and I don’t want to spend it on secret evil organizations.”
Steve had quickly discovered that Bucky was difficult to resist, and this was no exception. Before he knew it, his arms were around Bucky, palms resting against the small of his back. “Did you have a better idea?”

“Of course I have a better idea.” A wicked smile graced Bucky’s lips, but Steve only caught a glimpse before he leaned closer. The kiss Bucky pressed to Steve’s mouth was perfectly chaste and strangely at odds with his words. “I have loads of ideas.”

Whatever they did, Bucky had a point. If they only had a little bit of time together, worrying over Hydra wasn’t the most satisfying way to spend it. There was a sense of urgency that came with knowing they were on borrowed time, and when Bucky pulled back, Steve followed. “You want to tell me about them?”

“Oh, I don’t know…” One of Bucky’s hands slipped from the nape of Steve’s neck to the side of it, keeping him close. The careful tenderness of Bucky’s thumb grazing Steve’s skin was at odds with the blatant suggestion of teeth nipping at his lips. “I might rather show you.”

For just a second, Steve worried about manners and too soon. Bucky’s mouth closed against his bottom lip, tongue swiping across it, and Steve barely noticed the hitch in his own breathing. It planted him firmly in the moment though, and what if this moment was the only one they ever got? Feeling a little bit unmoored, he fisted his hands in the back of Bucky’s shirt. “Show me, then.”

“Whatever you say.” Bucky crawled into Steve’s lap. They’d been this close before, every night lately. Bucky straddled Steve’s thighs, his own knees pressed into the backs of the couch cushions until they were pressed mostly flush. They’d kissed more times than Steve could count, delicately chaste sometimes and barely restrained others. Usually these things didn’t happen in tandem though, so Steve couldn’t quite help the sound he made when he found his cheeks cradled in Bucky’s palms and their mouths pressed every bit as close as the rest of them. It was sweet and fleeting and Bucky pulled away with an utterly pleased grin. “It’s not too… abrupt is it?”

“Aw, come on. I was half asleep and we’d barely even gotten–” Steve found his protest muffled by the way Bucky’s lips fit against his, more purposeful this time.

“Yeah, exactly.” Bucky pulled back enough to flash a mirthful grin at Steve. “It’s not my fault you took a perfectly innocent invitation to sleep and assumed I was trying to get you naked.”

“You’re never letting me live that down, are you?” Steve asked, trying and failing fend off a smile.

“Absolutely not.” Bucky crowded into Steve’s space again. Soft presses of Bucky’s lips to his jaw were punctuated by the playful scrape of teeth against skin that made Steve’s toes curl against the carpet. “Where would be the fun in that?”

“I might get to hang onto my dignity.” Steve laughed at that, though the sound quickly dissolved into a breathless moan when Bucky bit down over his pulse.

“No. I really don’t think so.” Bucky’s voice came out in a puff of air against Steve’s throat that made him shudder. Steve’s hands fist in the fabric of Bucky’s shirt, meant to be an anchor. Bucky’s mouth was sharp and sweet down the hollow of his neck though, and Steve felt rather more like he was clinging to thin air.

“I don’t know if anyone’s told you–” Steve started. That was right about the time Bucky rolled his hips and Steve saw stars, hissing out a breath at the unexpected friction.

The way Bucky nuzzled against the crook of Steve’s shoulder would have been sweet if not for
how thoroughly his body language had shifted from affectionate to eager. There were too many
clothes between them, and Bucky’s tongue flicking against the delicate patch of skin behind
Steve’s ear sent a jolt of electricity right down to his groin. Steve relinquished the hold he had on
Bucky’s shirt in favor of dragging at Bucky’s hips instead. He shuddered as Bucky whispered in
his ear. “Told me what?”

“You’re… Oh…” Steve groaned, arching off the back of the couch. He could barely think around
the desire to be closer. “…Impossible.”

Bucky chuckled, a thick, needy sound close to Steve’s ear. “Sorry. Am I?”

“Entirely,” Steve retorted, eyes snapping open as he found his lap empty. Bucky stood over Steve
and grinned positively wickedly.

“That sounded like a problem. It’s only right that I fix it,” Bucky explained in mock seriousness,
inclining his head.

Steve wanted far too much to be embarrassed about the way he reached out for Bucky, who deftly
sidestepped just out of his grasp. “No, come back.”

“No. I don’t think I will. I think I’m just going to be impossible over here. Or… maybe that way.”
Bucky inclined his head towards the hallway and backed up a couple of steps in that direction. The
explanation came with a comical little wiggle of Bucky’s eyebrows, unabashedly ridiculous, but
enticing all the same.

Steve was off the couch almost before he realized, closing the distance between them. Bucky was
very close all of a sudden - or maybe it was him that had done that - so much so that Steve could
see the dark rings edging the soft blueish-grey of his eyes. Now that he was here, it was almost
instinctive to let his hands settle at Bucky’s hips, drawing him in.

“Oh good. You’re coming too.” Bucky seemed to melt effortlessly into Steve’s grasp. For a
second, they stood there in the hallway, Bucky’s fingers linked behind the nape of Steve’s neck,
the shadows obscuring his expression. The lack of light did nothing to hide the plush press of
Bucky’s lips to the corner of Steve’s mouth, a strangely sweet gesture in the midst of everything.

“It would have been rude not to,” Steve murmured, turning his head just enough to kiss Bucky
properly. There was a tenderness to it that he had no right to, but couldn’t help taking anyway.
Desire simmered in the background, like white noise, and for a second, Steve forgot they’d been
headed somewhere.

Bucky didn’t seem to have forgotten though. He shuffled blindly towards the bedroom, and Steve
followed, adjusting his grip as he went. It brought one of his hands under the hem of Bucky’s shirt,
and it only seemed natural to keep on, fingertips tracing along the waistband at the small of
Bucky’s back.

It was as if he’d flipped a switch. Bucky responded with his whole body. His breathing hitched
quietly and his belly and hips strained closer. Bucky’s fingers clenched in Steve’s hair until Steve
gasped at the unexpected pleasure of it. They were a circuit of sorts, so wrapped up in each other
that Steve wasn’t sure how they made it through the bedroom door.

In his eagerness, all Steve’s serum-gifted reflexes went right out the window. His fingers fumbled
at the buttons of Bucky’s shirt between clumsy, biting kisses. Steve sucked in a breath at the
unexpected intimacy of Bucky’s palms over his knuckles, helping him along.
“I had that,” Steve pointed out as Bucky rolled his shoulders and let the shirt drop to the floor.

“By some definition. I wanted to get out of it before I died of old age though,” Bucky retorted, his tone so warm that Steve couldn’t find it in him to be affronted. That Bucky distracted Steve by tugging at his t-shirt probably helped. “I could use some assistance with this though. I’m not entirely convinced you don’t just paint these on.”

“I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or if you’re making fun of me.” Steve hooked his fingers in the hem of his shirt anyway, pulling it up and over his head.

“Oh, it’s a compliment,” Bucky insisted. Steve freed himself from the shirt and tossed it to the side, only then noticing the way Bucky’s gaze hungrily raked over his chest and shoulders. “Definitely a compliment.”

From anyone else, that kind of scrutiny would have been discomfiting. Bucky wasn’t anyone else. He was also quick to turn his attention to shimmying out of the rest of his clothes. His pants and boxers crept down inch by inch, clinging briefly at Bucky’s hips before he shoved them away entirely to collapse in a heap at his feet.

Steve was very suddenly confronted with the fact that, stripped down to nothing, Bucky was gorgeous. He was all lean muscle and subtle definition that was easy enough to overlook in Bucky’s usual button-downs and jackets, but impossible to miss just now. He opened his mouth to articulate something, anything, but everything seemed too crude or not enough and all that came out was “Oh wow.”

“You’re not going to tell me this is the first time you’ve done this or something, are you?” Bucky asked, a sly grin creasing his lips. He slung his arms around Steve’s shoulders, very close, and very naked as he walked them towards the bed.

“No. I… No.” Steve’s hands found their way almost automatically to Bucky’s flanks, his skin enticingly warm under Steve’s palms. When Bucky tipped his chin up, Steve was all too happy to catch his lips in an eager kiss before finishing. “Just no one like you.”

“Like me? How do you mean?” Bucky asked, his fingers deftly working Steve’s trousers open. His nails dragged along Steve’s length through his boxers, and whatever answer Steve meant to give just came out in a moan.

How was he even supposed to answer? Important like Bucky? He could never say that. This could never be serious. Steve relished Bucky’s thumbs easing his boxers past his hips and palm around the base of his cock, both for the pleasure of it and for the precious seconds it bought him.

“Well… anatomically speaking…” Steve winced inwardly as he fumbled his way through an explanation, but Bucky seemed satisfied.

“Oh. Well, that.” Buck cradled Steve’s hips and herded him to step out of the last of his clothes. Not that doing anything was easy when Bucky was also mouthing at the side of his neck. “That is easily remedied.”

“Yeah, I thought that’s what we were do–” Steve sucked in a breath as Bucky’s fingers circled the nub of one of his nipples. They were there and gone and then Bucky was too. He sprawled back on the bed sheets, flushed and gorgeous and, flashing a wolfish smile as he crooked his fingers for Steve to follow.

“Damn right we are. C’mere,” Bucky insisted. Steve crawled onto the bed, and while he was
physically much stronger than Bucky, he was just surprised enough not to fight being pushed onto
his back.

“What are you doing?” he managed to ask before Bucky’s mouth crushed against his.

“I think,” Bucky murmured, nosing Steve’s jaw to the side to suck at the junction where it met his
neck. “That I’m remediating a gap in your breadth of experience.”

Bucky’s enthusiasm was so contagious, it didn’t occur to Steve to be anything but at ease. By the
time he realized what Bucky’s nips and kisses down his chest and stomach were a preface to, Steve
was arching into Bucky’s tongue lapping at the divot of his hip. He glanced down and sucked in a
breath because he didn’t quite have the words for how Bucky looked just then.

Bucky must have known though, because he lifted his head, met Steve’s eye, and smirked. His hair
hung in his face, flushed skin framing eyes gone dark with want. Even his voice seemed different
here, a siren call that left Steve biting his lip. “There’s a bottle in that side table drawer. Grab it for
me, would you?”

It was impossible to be anything but thoroughly aware of everything. The dip of the mattress where
Bucky’s hand rested next to his knee, the soft rustle of sheets as they moved. It all held Steve
helplessly captive. Bucky’s teeth and tongue dragged a moan from Steve that reverberated through
his chest. He might have been embarrassed by the low chuckle he got from Bucky, except that it
was punctuated by splayed fingers up his thigh that had him too busy squirming instead.

“I…” Steve tried to suss out how Bucky intended the mechanics of this to go as he grabbed the
bottle and handed it off. Not that it mattered. Not that he minded.

Bucky smiled more genuinely at that, pressing a kiss to Steve’s hip. “You nothing. I’ve got this.”

Bucky did, indeed, have it. Before Steve could get a word in, Bucky’s mouth closed around the
head of his cock, all heat and pressure sinking down around him without warning. Bucky’s gaze
was still on him when Steve lifted his head to look, though it had gone a little bit unfocused and
utterly debauched.

Steve was swept up in the riptide that was Bucky Barnes, the way he maybe had been on some
level from the beginning. He had never been going to escape the current… didn’t want to, if he was
being honest. Bucky was alive and warm and humming some wordless encouragement when
Steve’s fingers slipped into his hair. The vibration of it around Steve’s cock made him shiver all
over.

Very quickly, Steve learned a couple of things, the most overwhelming of which was that when
Bucky lowered his head, pulling all of him in, he couldn’t quite help the way his fingers clutched at
the hair they were buried in. This was immediately followed by the realization that Bucky’s tongue
pressing roughly against his cock and the whimper that came with it were out of pleasure rather
than annoyance. Bucky bobbed up and down the length of him, and Steve cobbled together just
enough awareness to do it again.

Everything distilled down to Bucky settled between his thighs, relentlessly working him over.
Steve wanted to watch, but every time he lifted his head, Bucky sucked that much harder, and all
Steve could do was let his head fall back on the pillows again. There was just the two of them, and
even the bed could have dissolved away for all Steve cared.

Distantly, Steve was aware of Bucky moving, of the quiet click of a bottle cap. Like this, then.
Steve found he didn’t mind the idea in the slightest. He tilted his thighs further apart in invitation
and wondered if he ought to suggest Bucky slow down, because the pace they were going already had him half unraveled.

“Buck… I can’t-” Steve started breathlessly, searching for words that his lust-addled brain refused to put together. “You’ve gotta stop.”

Immediately, Bucky did exactly that. He pulled off of Steve’s cock with a wet-sounding little pop, concern etching his features. “Is everything okay?”

“What?” It took a second for Steve to realize his mistake. One hand abandoned it’s resting place on Bucky’s hair in favor of hiding his face. “It’s fine. Better than fine. Oh god, I didn’t mean like that. I just…”

Steve didn’t have to look to know Bucky had figured out what the problem was. He could practically hear the wicked little grin that would be curling across Bucky’s lips about now. There was a languid, open mouthed kiss to the crease of his thigh, and then another. “Just?”

“Didn’t want it to be over yet,” Steve replied eventually, the end of it squeaked out when Bucky’s teeth sunk playfully into the inside of his thigh.

“No one wants that,” Bucky agreed, pressing a kiss where his teeth had been. With that, he flicked open the bottle again, coating his fingers.

Nothing happened at all the way Steve expected it to, after that. Bucky lavished attention on Steve, torturously close to his cock, but never quite there. There was a desperate little whine somewhere close by, and Steve was so far gone, he didn’t realize immediately that it was Bucky rather than him. Steve couldn’t quite see what Bucky was up to, but it was easy to guess when he lifted his head to look.

Bucky had reached between his own legs, and his breathing went harsh and ragged. He pressed his cheek against Steve’s thigh, teeth working frantically over his bottom lip. Steve had never seen Bucky look anything less than pretty, but like this he was gorgeous, an image that promised to linger in Steve’s dreams long after the reality of it was over.

“Bucky.” The name came out reverently, like a prayer, and somewhere between the glassy eyes and panting breaths, Bucky looked at him like he was already taking Steve apart in his head. Steve’s toes curled in anticipation, and he reached out almost on automatic, eager to have Bucky close enough to hold.

Bucky chuckled, low and indulgent, and pressed a kiss to Steve’s hip. He must have done something particularly good about then, because it was punctuated by a pleasured gasp. Steve could feel Bucky’s fingers clutch at the blankets between his thighs, and found himself dragging his hands over Bucky’s back and shoulders, wherever he could reach, trying to urge them closer.

“Impatient?” Bucky teased, even as he eased his fingers free and let Steve coax him back up the bed. He crawled up the length of Steve’s body, so close that Steve could feel the heat rolling off his skin in the scant space between them.

“Jealous,” Steve bantered right back, hungrily catching Bucky’s lips as soon as he could. He wound an arm around Bucky’s back, and cradled the back of his head with the other, mumbling between kisses, “I thought I was supposed to be the one making you look like that.”

“Lucky for you, the night is still young.” Bucky laughed as he said it, but that was about the time Steve tilted his head to the side to mouth at Bucky’s neck instead. Laughter died away into an
encouraging sigh. “See? That’s a hell of a start.”

Bucky was so easy to want to please, in part because it was so rewarding. Steve’s lips to the shell of Bucky’s ear netted a pleading little whimper. Steve’s nails down his spine elicited a hiss and Bucky’s hips jerking forward. Even his body language was unreservedly expressive, from the way he shivered when Steve nipped at his collarbone to the clutch of his fingers at Steve’s shoulders to keep his balance.

Steve’s hands almost automatically slipped to Bucky’s hips. It was meant to be a steadying gesture as Bucky tried to sit up. Bucky sitting up, however, was accompanied by the slow drag of his still slick palm along the length of Steve’s cock behind him. Steve could barely think beyond it, and his nails dug hard enough into Bucky’s skin that they left little crescent-shaped dents behind.

“Come back,” Steve coaxed, because he’d liked the way they felt together, and Bucky kept getting further away.

“You keep saying that like I’m gonna leave you hanging.” Bucky’s tongue stuck out in a brief moment of concentration as he balanced on his knees. Steve was barely lined up before Bucky sank back down with a hitching sort of moan.

If Steve meant to respond, he didn’t have the words for it. Lovely as Bucky’s mouth on him had been, this was almost overwhelming before they even got started. Steve focused on keeping still, on not giving in to the urge to move. The whole world felt like it had narrowed to the two of them, to the warm bedroom light washed over Bucky’s pale skin, to his half-closed eyes, thick lashes fanned out like a veil. Mostly, to the way Bucky was drawn tightly around him from inside out. Even Bucky’s thighs clutched at Steve’s flanks.

An eternity slipped by in a matter of seconds, and the second time Bucky lifted up just to sink down on Steve, he was sure this was going to be the end of him. There was heat and friction, but most of all, there was Bucky, flushed and beautiful, his head tipping back in pleasure.

They found their way along so easily that it was hard to know where he ended and Bucky began. There was nothing practiced about them, but they were clumsy together, laughing their way through a stilted, disjointed cadence until Bucky accidently slipped and the angle shifted. Steve rolled his hips home, and Bucky keened, fingers clenching at Steve’s shoulders.

“Bucky? I’m sorry,” Steve whispered, forcing himself to keep still.

He frantically shifted his grip to hold, to soothe, but Bucky was having none of it. Bucky kissed the heel of Steve’s hand when it cradled his face, and he was rocking, trying to compensate for the fact that Steve had gone still. “Nonono. Don’t stop. Do it again.”

That was all the encouragement Steve needed. He did it again and again and again, grasping at Bucky’s hips for leverage. There was nothing except for their harsh breathing and Steve’s heart hammering away in his chest.

Much as Steve wanted it to last, the sensation was so new and overwhelming that he could already feel himself fraying at the edges. Steve rolled his hips over and over, hoping that the stuttered moans that spilled off Bucky’s lips meant he was just as caught up. Steve watched, utterly enthralled, as Bucky fisted his own cock, jerking faster and more frantically even than Steve was moving.

“Oh fu-” Bucky grated out, teeth digging hard into his bottom lip. Steve could feel Bucky’s body draw bowstring-taut as he kept thrusting his hips. Then Bucky was coming in white hot streaks
across Steve’s stomach to a litany of curses and endearments.

He knew where they were going, but orgasm snuck up on Steve anyway. Bucky slumped over, his breath coming in sharp, hot gasps against Steve’s ear. It was a lucky thing really, letting Steve wind his arms around Bucky the way he desperately wanted to. Steve kissed Bucky’s cheek, his jaw, anywhere within reach, using the change in position to his advantage. It was easier to piston his hips, hard and fast, and when Bucky bit down at the side of Steve’s neck, everything upended.

He couldn’t think, could scarcely breathe for the way it hit him. The universe wound down to the two of them, to the sensation of something spilling over and the weight of Bucky over him, unraveling hopelessly until all he knew was rapture.

Quiet, drowsy moments stretched out between them afterwards. At some point, Bucky rolled off of him, looking dazed and happy, even more so when Steve followed. Steve wasn’t sure he had words for anything, but it was alright. He didn’t need them to ignore the mess in favor of folding his arm around Bucky, snuggling close until they were a tangle of limbs.

They lay there, side by side with Bucky tucked comfortably in Steve’s arms long after the initial euphoria subsided. Steve closed his eyes, pleasantly blank aside from the steady rise and fall of Bucky’s back under Steve’s palms. He mumbled something into Steve’s shoulder, too garbled to catch.

“Hmm?” Steve asked, tenderly threading his fingers through Bucky’s hair.

Bucky rolled onto his back, and smiled impishly at Steve. “That was all you. Just... you know, in case you weren’t aware.”

Steve groaned and shoved a pillow in Bucky’s face, not that it did anything to muffle the laughter. “Oh my god. I’m sorry I asked.”

“What? It was a compliment,” Bucky protested, making absolutely no move to pull the pillow off of his face. He did, however, give a rather satisfying yelp when Steve poked him in the side.

“You’re definitely making fun of me now.” Steve couldn’t glare at Bucky, so he glared at the large puff of stuffing and fabric that was there instead, and pretended not to hear Bucky snickering underneath it.

“Ehhhhh.” Bucky stuck a hand up towards nothing in particular, holding his finger and thumb a tiny bit apart in a gesture that suggested he was a little bit. He turned his head, grey eyes bright and mirthful as he added, “But it was also a compliment?”

Steve snorted before he quite managed to quell his amusement. “Are you always this insufferable?”

“It’s pillow talk.” Bucky poked the rest of his face out from under the pillow, leaving it at a strange angle where one end of it tipped and landed on the bed.

Steve’s brows knit in confusion. It was hard to know, in moments like these, if Bucky was messing with him or not. “I’m pretty sure that doesn’t answer my question.”

“Don’t you know?” Bucky needled, wriggling closer to Steve, and not at all subtle about it. “Insufferable is practically a requirement.”

Steve shifted to lay his head on his arm, leaving him nose to nose with Bucky. “I must have missed that lesson.”
“Not enough on-the-job experience?” Bucky asked, and from someone else it might have been mocking, but Steve didn’t think that for a second. It maybe helped that the question came with splayed fingers sneaking up his spine beneath the sheets.

“Not exactly. I…” Steve started, and watched Bucky’s eyebrows lift in surprise. It hadn’t been a question he was meant to answer then, but now he was here, so Steve barrelled on, trying to recover. “Haven’t even had time for a proper date, let alone pillow talk.”

Bucky’s surprise dissolved into something else that Steve couldn’t quite suss out. Bucky’s tone didn’t clarify the emotion either, teetering somewhere between sympathy and something unnamable. “Did you just say you’ve never been on a date?”

“There’s a war going on,” Steve protested, though it was hard to be anything but utterly calm with Bucky’s hand skimming the small of his back.

“I don’t know if you missed this, but there were a lot of years before the war, and you were alive for some of them.”

For a second, Steve’s stomach felt full of rocks. Life hadn’t been very kind to him in any capacity before the war, and dating had been no different. “You’re writing a book about me before the war. I think you probably have a good idea of what I was like.”

“Yeah, so?” Bucky looked so genuinely perplexed, Steve just wanted to kiss him. Whether Bucky was so good-hearted that he really only ever saw Steve’s worth, or whether his compassion was out of spite for everyone who had written Steve off didn’t matter. It was earnest either way, and Steve was sure that just then, he’d have believed anything that came out of Bucky’s mouth. It was fortunate maybe, that what came was innocuous. “If they couldn’t see you back then, they didn’t deserve you anyway.”

Steve swallowed thickly and squeezed his arms around Bucky, gathering him in. There were no right words, but maybe they didn’t need them. That particular hurt might as well have been ancient history, and there was Bucky, treating it like it was still brand new. Love couldn’t be on the table, but if it could, it would have come so easily.

Without Bucky’s conversation to keep him engaged, Steve’s eyes slid shut. Sleep was already beginning to creep in, riding the coattails of Bucky’s lazy kisses scattered across his jaw. They were good like this, however long they had it.

“We’re fixing that,” Bucky said. It came out in a soft, purring rumble of appreciation for the fact that Steve was gently scratching at his scalp. Shamelessly, he leaned into it, and Steve could feel the smile pull into place when he nuzzled close enough to kiss Bucky’s cheek.

“Fixing what?” Steve asked, basking in the peace they’d found. His eyelids drooped, and when he blinked it was hard to open his eyes again.

“I’m taking you on a date before you leave,” Bucky murmured, the words sticking together like they’d been coated in honey. “Deal?”

Inches from sleep, Steve’s fingers stilled in Bucky’s hair. He cradled the back of Bucky’s head, willing everything beyond the blankets they were shrouded in to drop away. “Deal.”
Most of the time, Bucky was cognizant of their situation. Whatever they did here and now, it ended the same. Steve turned back up in 1947 and Bucky was a footnote in a chapter that never saw the light of day. That was okay. He'd written himself into the narrative with his eyes wide open. He was so convinced of his own ability to brush this off, Bucky didn’t bother to consider what it might mean if he couldn’t.

Bucky woke to a mop of blond hair in his face where Steve had curled in close and stayed put through the night. Still muzzy with sleep, Bucky tucked Steve's hair behind his ear, pressing a kiss to the patch of his forehead that had been revealed. Something teetered, right at the edges of his mind, a calamity just waiting for him if he ever realized.

All Bucky knew in the moment was that he wanted this. Steve was a warm, solid presence, his broad shoulders blocking the alarm clock from view, much to Bucky's delight. One of Bucky's ankles had found its way between Steve's, the two of them always gravitating closer, drawn like magnets. Steve's arm was folded around Bucky, a gentle tether that kept them close, even in slumber. Caught up in the blankets and each other, and not quite sensing the danger, Bucky let himself imagine for a second that this could be the rest of their lives and not just for now.

The whole world screeched to a halt. Bucky froze, didn’t even breathe as he realized his error. Wanting only magnified what it felt like to know that one day, probably one day soon, he’d wake up with cold sheets and empty arms.

Careful not to wake Steve, Bucky let out a quiet breath. He shuffled just a little, just enough that Steve’s head was tucked under his chin. There was no hope at all if he had to look Steve in the eye right now.

This must have been it, Bucky realized, and heavens he’d been so stupid. He’d been so sure that he was going to do something to make Steve in the future hate him, but maybe it hadn’t been hate at all. Maybe they’d just broken each other’s hearts.

The worst part though… the stupidest most ludicrous part of it all was that he wasn’t even sorry. His chest felt like a rake had been dragged over his heart, but right now the sun was filtering through the curtains, and the blankets were cocooned around their shoulders. All the agony Bucky knew he was in for was worth Steve’s breath across his bare chest, the way Steve snuggled closer in his sleep.

It all hurt. Bucky was already picturing the empty spaces Steve was going to leave behind, but he did his best to swallow down the sadness of it all. The last thing Steve needed was his sorrow, so Bucky squeezed his eyes shut until they stopped watering and put away the gravity of it all. It was going to end, and it was going to rip his heart out, but right now they were okay.

“Hey you.” Steve’s lips moved against Bucky’s skin, a reminder of his presence that Bucky reveled in. This was not the end. It was just today.

Bucky hummed, a tuneless sound as he cradled Steve’s head. He rubbed gentle circles against Steve’s scalp through his hair, and wondered if it was for Steve’s benefit or his own.

Steve rolled back just enough to smile at Bucky, his eyes half closed, voice still thick with sleep.
“How am I supposed to get up with you doing that?”

“You’re not. Shut up and go back to sleep,” Bucky murmured, nuzzling against the top of Steve’s head. He’d give this up when he had to, and not a moment before.

“But I was gonna…” Steve trailed off when the pad of Bucky’s thumb reached his temple, tracing gentle circles at his hairline.

“If you say ‘go for a run’ I am going to smother you with a pillow.” Any bite in Bucky’s words was probably ruined by the lazy affection he offered. His hand drifted from Steve’s hair, but only so that Bucky’s fingertips could sweep a tender caress down Steve’s spine instead.

Steve tipped his head up so abruptly that Bucky only barely had time to get his expression under control. He smiled, a politician’s smile that masked the truth of what was on his mind. If he’d had to hold it, the jig might have been up, but Steve had only been trying to kiss him.

It was easy to forget the whole damned disaster while Steve was kissing him. Bucky melted into Steve like butter on a hotplate, their mouths soft and open, easily slotting together. The arm Steve had slung over Bucky skimmed across his skin, learning the terrain as Steve kissed him. Nimble fingers brushed up Bucky’s arm and down his flank, settling at the knob of his naked hip. The end of this was going to kill him, Bucky was pretty sure, but oh what a way to go.

Steve’s mouth was unfairly enticing against Bucky’s lips, his jaw, down the side of his neck. Steve nudged at Bucky’s hip and Bucky rolled onto his back without the slightest hesitation, toes curling as Steve’s teeth scraped lightly against his throat. If this was what forgetting felt like, Bucky wanted to drown in it.

Bucky’s luck was never that great though, and this was no exception. Steve settled above him, scattering indulgent kisses down the hollow of Bucky’s neck. Instinctively, Bucky tipped his head back, but the press of Steve’s teeth against the delicate flesh he’d bared was interrupted by the unwelcome ring of his phone. Sighing, Bucky lifted his head, only to let it thump back against the pillow and scowled as it rang.

“You want to get that?” Steve asked, still hovering, naked over Bucky. What Bucky wanted was to reach out and pretend he had the upper body strength to drag Steve closer.

“No,” Bucky complained, but he rolled over as best he could under Steve, and snagged his phone off the bedside table. His heart clenched painfully in his chest when he looked at the name.

Sam. There was only one reason Same would be calling this time of day. Selfishly, it was the very, very last thing Bucky wanted. He answered anyway forcing himself to speak. "Hi, pal.”

“Hey. Sorry man. I probably woke you up.” Sam sounded remarkably awake for… whatever o’clock in the morning it was.

“Eh,” Bucky replied noncommittally because no amount of friendship meant he was going to own up to what he’d been up to when the phone rang. “What’s up?”

“I thought you might want to come over. I’m pretty sure I found your relic.”

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Found, as it turned out, was not the same as had, and Bucky knew it was awful of him to be just a little bit grateful for that. Steve needed to get home and the last thing Bucky had any business doing was celebrating a slight delay in getting him there. It wasn’t as if a few extra days would
The images Sam had pulled up were striking, the relic itself beautifully ornate and well cared for despite its age. The base appeared to have been carved of some sort of black marble, and the tree sitting on top looked as if it had taken root in the stone itself. Around the base of the tree stood three women in robes, and, if Bucky squinted, there seemed to be a bucket sitting on the ground between two of them.

"That's it," Steve murmured, his expression inscrutable. "I'd know that statue anywhere."

"Maidens of Urðr," Sam explained, excitement lacing his tone, and honestly, Bucky couldn't blame him. Mythology was exactly Sam's purview, and here this relic was, probably steeped in mysticism and real in a way these things just never were. If not for the loss the statue represented, Bucky probably would have found his enthusiasm catching.

"What is that?" Bucky asked. "Urðr, I mean."

"Fate. The name could be talking about one of the Norns." Sam pointed at one of the images. In it, the woman on display was eerily featureless beneath her hood. "But since the bucket is there, I'm guessing it's a reference to the Well of Fate. Legend has it, the three Norns pictured here would draw water from the well of Urðr to keep Yggdrasil alive."

"Yggdrasil?" Mythology had never been Bucky's forte, but it felt even less so now that it was so important.

"It's a... a big tree that connects the nine realms in Norse mythology." That meant nothing to Bucky of course, and he was barely listening anyway. He found himself staring at Urðr, and swore for a second that she was staring right back, her lack of features doing nothing to deter the way she bored into his soul. It was a silly thing, of course. She was only a photograph.

"Who are the other two Norns?" Steve crowded in next to Bucky as he pointed to pictures further down the screen. One was young, with the shroud doing little to hide her delicate, beautiful features. The other appeared to be an old woman, wrinkles cut deeply into her face.

"Verðandi represents the present." Sam's mouse hovered briefly over the young Norn before he flicked to the other, "and that one is Skuld. She stands for the future."

"I guess the time manipulation gig makes sense when you put it like that," Bucky conceded. He scrubbed subtly at his eyes, but when he looked again, he still swore Urðr was watching him without an eyeball to her name.

Steve reached for the mouse, hovering a little bit above Sam's hand before he stopped to ask, "May I?"

With a wry smile, Sam slipped his hand out from under Steve's and gestured an invitation. "Be my guest."

The article was remarkably bland for a time traveling artifact. It sounded more like a museum description than a testament to something unbelievably powerful. There was no mention at all that it might be anything more than a beautiful carving. Bucky left off reading in favor of watching Steve, whose expression was crumpled slightly in concentration. Steve got all the way to the end before he let go of the mouse and looked at Sam. "So, where is it?"

"Yeah, about that. It might be a problem," Sam conceded, sucking a breath through his teeth. "The most recent record of it I can find is that it's in a private collection."
That... was possibly a problem, Bucky conceded internally. He did his best to hold off worrying while he asked, "Whose collection?"

"Tony Stark's." Sam made a face like he was expecting there to be some yelling. Bucky sort of wanted to do some yelling, but he stifled the urge.

His brows shot up, though, taking in the potentially serious issue with this. "Do you mean like Stark Industries Tony Stark?"

Steve cut in, and they barely even had the facts, but Bucky could practically see the wheels starting to turn on a plan. "Any relation to Howard? That might be useful."

"Howard's son, and no. Not useful. The fact that he is almost certain to recognize you is the opposite of useful. We can't start pulling people into this who might actually realize who you are," Bucky insisted. The last person he wanted knowing that time travel was even a real possibility was the self-professed Iron Man.

Sam rubbed thoughtfully at his chin. "Maybe this isn't how Steve gets home."

Steve was already shaking his head. "There's no other way."

"We know. Believe me. We've looked." Bucky tapped idly on the desk, debating how they were supposed to begin to proceed. The relic was probably priceless, so buying it off Tony was out of the question. Risking him learning the truth about it, even more so. Tony Stark might have been a completely honorable human being, but the possibility of time travel was a lot more temptation than Bucky wanted to put in front of anyone, no matter who they were.

"Well, how are you going to get it, then?" Sam pressed, unmoved by Bucky's insistence. "Just walk into Stark Tower and ask?"

Bucky hedged, trying to buy time in hopes that he wouldn't have to admit he didn't have even the first threads of an idea. "I mean..."

Sam crossed his arms, and even sitting, looking up at Bucky, it made Bucky wince. He knew the 'you're being a god damned idiot, Barnes’ body language, and if the situation hadn't been so dire, he might have laughed at what came next. "Because I know you're not going to steal it."

Bucky froze. Would he go that far? He'd promised to get Steve home and they were running out of options. "If that's what I have to do. We have to have it."

Sam was sitting there with his mouth half open on a retort when Steve's palm rested heavily against Bucky's shoulder. "You've done more than enough, Buck. This isn't your responsibility."

"Maybe not, but I promised I'd get you home." It took everything Bucky had not to lean into Steve's grip on him.

"Bucky. It's your career. When Steve goes, he gets to go home, but if you get wrapped up in something stupid, I don't think knowing I'm in your corner is gonna get you off the hook," Sam pointed out, voice laced with distress on the tail end.
"I..." Bucky deflated a little. There was some truth to that. Sam always backed him up, but that wouldn't keep him out of jail if he got caught.

"I won't endanger you." Steve adjusted his stance until he could meet Bucky's eyes. "Besides. Maybe I don't even need to steal it. If I can replicate what I did during the war, then the relic doesn’t even have to leave Stark Tower or... wherever Mr. Stark is keeping it these days."

The very idea of Steve going in there alone, snuffing himself out of existence with no one to even see him go was like a one-two punch to Bucky’s gut. He shook his head, hardly noticing the way his voice rose. "I should be with you."

Steve’s eyes widened, just a fraction, the only hint he gave that he might understand what Bucky was saying. Steve turned his head a little, long enough to share a look with Sam that Bucky didn’t quite understand. "I can do this on my own."

“I know that!” Bucky took a moment to breathe, embarrassed by the way his voice had cracked on the last word. He couldn’t stomach the idea of not knowing when Steve was gone. Sam and Steve were both looking at him, expressions tight with concern as Bucky sucked in a shaky breath and let it out. When he spoke again, his voice was hardly more than a whisper. “I know you can. I don’t want you to is all.”

“Oh,” Steve murmured, and Bucky knew he’d made a terrible mistake. It was a secret he’d meant to carry in silence, a burden he hadn’t planned to share with anyone. Steve, least of all.

He’d expected distance. Steve couldn’t afford distractions, and Bucky was clearly not being objective anymore. What Bucky didn’t expect was the way Steve’s hand slipped from his shoulder, down his arm, until their fingers were tangled together. Bucky glanced at Steve and immediately wished he hadn’t. Steve was easily the strongest person Bucky knew, an unstoppable force, but there was a fragile quality to his expression now, as if his strong jaw and steady gaze were cobbled together out of fractured glass.

Steve squeezed Bucky’s hand and the moment passed. The brittle pieces Bucky had seen were buried again and Steve just looked determined. It was such a strange look to come with the concession he made. “Only as a backup plan, then. Alright?"

Bucky still hated to think about it, but it wasn’t his choice to make. There were more important things than clinging to a few extra, precious moments when it was always going to end the same. “Okay.”

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Four days and thirteen phone calls to Stark Tower later, they were no closer to the relic than they had been when Sam showed them the pictures. Steve honestly wasn’t sure whether to be frustrated or grateful. The relic’s existence somewhere out of reach was the last excuse he had to stick around.

He was always going to be leaving. He knew that. Bucky knew that. It was just that, without the constraints of time, he couldn’t help wondering in the dead of night, when the bedroom was silent save for the hushed cadence of Bucky’s breathing, if he could stay just a few more days. It wouldn’t make the going easier, but it would be a handful of extra memories to hang on to when all he had left of Bucky was an echo.

It was an hour before Bucky was supposed to be home, and Steve was trying to straighten up the house. It wasn’t that the house particularly needed it so much as that Bucky liked it that way, and
Steve didn’t know what else he could leave Bucky with. He couldn’t soothe any of the hurt, and he didn’t have the right words, but he could do this.

Steve barely caught the sharp rap of a knock at the door over the sound of the vacuum. He answered the door ready to fight off an intruder, but it was only the postal delivery. They pushed a huge box into his arms almost as soon as he opened the door and demanded a signature, never bothering to ask if he was the James Buchanan Barnes the box was addressed to.

Bemoaning the fact that he’d just cleaned the table, Steve set the box on it. It was nothing extraordinary, just brown cardboard and copious amounts of packaging tape. There was a warning on the top and sides that the contents were fragile. Steve had no reason to think anything dangerous was in there, but sharing space with it made him uneasy anyway.

With no solution that wasn’t rude, and desperately in search of a distraction, Steve finished vacuuming.

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Bucky got home eventually, greeting Steve as he shucked off his jacket. “Any luck with Stark?”

“No. They didn’t even answer the last few times,” Steve admitted. He watched Bucky’s routine, from hanging up his jacket to kicking off his shoes. It was such a mundane, domestic thing, but Steve committed it to memory anyway. Even if Bucky didn’t seem to understand the concept of untying his laces first, or maybe especially because of that. The details felt important. They reminded Steve that this was all real. Bucky was already in the living room before Steve remembered to add, “A package came for you.”

“I didn’t order anything.” Bucky’s brows scrunched in the middle and he kept walking, right through the living room into the kitchen. “And I guess keep trying? I could call from my office at work.”

“Maybe I should try just telling them who I am next time I call,” Steve suggested while Bucky grabbed a knife from the kitchen drawer.

“No. We already agreed that that was a bad idea,” Bucky protested. He eyeballed the box when he reached the table, fingers brushing over the thick, black marker lettering that spelled out ‘FRAGILE’ on the top.

“We didn’t agree. You said, and I didn’t mind going along with it…” Steve replied as Bucky carefully cut into the tape around the box and pried up the flaps closing it. “But we can’t delay forever and this isn’t working.”

Bucky didn’t answer, too busy staring into the depths of the box like its contents might bite him. When he finally said something, it was breathless. “I don’t think you’re going to have to make any other phone calls.”

Steve didn’t believe for a second that it was the relic in the box, so he came closer, peeking over. There it was, as strangely pristine as it had been the first time he saw it, nestled in a sea of tiny paper strips. Reason told Steve that it could be a very clever fake, but it wasn’t. He would have bet his life on it.

“What idiot thought this was a good idea? Do they not know how unreliable the postal service is?” Bucky groused, plucking an envelope from where it was tucked into the inside edge of the box. It was labeled with Bucky’s name in familiar handwriting.
“Apparently me.” Steve watched Bucky’s eyes widen in surprise, pulling the note card from its envelope with much more urgency.

“I guess if he’d tried to go through S.H.I.E.L.D. they’d have wanted to know what was in the box,” Bucky conceded, opening the card. “I wonder how long he’s been holding onto this for.”

It made sense, Steve supposed. If he had an opportunity to ensure the relic ended up where it needed to go, he would have taken it, too. Technically had taken it already. Something. It was unnecessarily confusing, and in this moment at least, he thought he maybe grasped why Bucky was so worried about a paradox. Not interacting with his other self was one thing, but he couldn’t quite stifle his curiosity. “What’s it say?”

Bucky flashed Steve a smile, but there was no joy in it. Not really. There was only a moment’s hesitation before Bucky handed over the card.

**Bucky,**

You’ll be needing these about now. I’m under the impression that at some point we tried stealing this, but we’ve found a better way. Every now and again, the future is worth changing.

**Yours,**

**Steve**

Steve recognized his own neat, if slightly imperfect handwriting, which made not having written it all the more disconcerting. Not that Steve got much of an opportunity to dwell on that. He lifted his gaze to Bucky, who looked like he might as well have been standing over someone’s grave. “I guess this is it, then. Time for you to go home.”

The prospect should have been a celebratory one. It was why he’d come to Bucky for help in the first place, and it had always been headed here. Still, Steve didn’t feel very much like celebrating. That statue was such a heavy weight. He’d never shied away from responsibility, but some small, mournful thing in him wished he could send it away and pretend they’d never found it.

“Do you think I’ll wreck the future if I stay one more night?” he asked as he carefully eased the shield out from under the relic, because he could leave if he had to, but he couldn’t stand going out like this, the two of them frowning at a box on a table.

“It all works out the same in the end, probably,” Bucky conceded with a smile that looked less like joy and more like a veneer to hide his grief behind. Steve might not have recognized it, except that Bucky looked exactly like he felt. Grieving or not, Bucky’s voice was light and untroubled. “I mean, I still owe you a date.”

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Bucky was determined to end on a high note. He wouldn’t muddy what time they had left with the heartache he was harboring. If this was the last night they got together, Bucky wanted it to be something that they’d both remember with a smile.

The sun was just beginning to set when they pulled into the drive-in theater. As Bucky pulled into their parking spot alongside perhaps half a dozen other cars, he snuck a glance at Steve, who was quietly taking it all in. “Are all theaters like this now?”

“No. It’s old-fashioned, really. Less old-fashioned than you,” Bucky teased, nudging Steve with his elbow. “I’d never been, so I thought it could be a first time for both of us.”
For just a second, Steve’s expression clouded with something Bucky couldn’t quite suss out. It was there and gone, smoothed over with an infuriating Captain America smile that made Bucky want to shake it right off Steve’s face. “So what are we watching?”

Bucky smiled back instead of shaking Steve, and set about tuning in the radio to the proper station. “Casablanca.”

“Oh, um… Humphrey Bogart, right?” Steve was watching the empty white screen, or perhaps the last few wisps of orange and pink creeping across the sky behind it. Bucky’s lips pressed together. “Wait, you haven’t already seen it, have you?”

“No. I’m pretty sure the last movie I got to see was starring me,” Steve admitted. For a second, he turned away, taking in their surroundings. “So, how are we supposed to hear it?”

“There are speakers outside. We can sit on the roof of the car,” Bucky suggested. He’d brought a blanket for just such an occasion, but Steve had lifted a single, dubious eyebrow at him, and Bucky relented. “Or we could just listen to it through the speakers in here.”

“Okay.” Steve said, reaching between them to grab the blanket from the back seat. He’d pulled the whole pile of fabric up and had the passenger door open before he turned his head to look at Bucky. “You coming?”

“We don’t have to go out there,” Bucky pointed out. The bright sunset had already faded into twilight.

Steve got out of the car anyway, poking his head back in after. “But you want to.”

“I never said that,” Bucky protested as he unbuckled his seatbelt, going over their conversation in his mind to be sure that was true.

There was a fond little twist of Steve’s lips that squeezed on Bucky’s heart from every angle. “You didn’t need to, though. Are you coming?”

Bucky got out and climbed over the front end of the car to settle on the roof. It gave slightly under their weight with a low thunk of metal caving inward. The two of them sat side by side, legs resting against the windshield.

The first stars were just peeking out, bright pinpricks across a swiftly darkening sky. The slight chill of the evening air was dulled as Steve pressed closer, curling his arm around Bucky’s waist, and draping the blanket around their shoulders. Smiling at nothing in particular, Bucky tucked his head against Steve’s cheek, getting comfortable as the screen lit up.

They were halfway through a bag of Skittles when the Gestapo was getting ready to march into Paris, and Bucky felt Steve tense up against him. It made sense. Of course it made sense. It was all practically current events to Steve. Bucky didn’t know what he could say that Steve didn’t know already, that they won, that the world kept on turning once it was over. Bucky tipped his head up to look at Steve’s face and wondered if he ought to have picked another movie.

“I love you so much, and I hate this war so much.” Ilsa’s voice echoed, and then the movie was briefly crowded out by the tender brush of Steve’s lips across his forehead. Maybe not the war, then. Bucky melted into Steve’s embrace, swallowing something thick and mournful in his throat. He lifted his head, holding back the grief that threatened to drown him with a tender kiss.

In the background, Ilsa was saying her goodbyes to Rick, though he didn’t know it yet. “I mean, if
something should keep us apart, wherever they put you and wherever I'll be, I want you to know that… Kiss me. Kiss me as if it were the last time.”

The lot was almost empty, so no one was around to see the way they molded together like two pieces of a whole. No one but Bucky caught Steve’s endearingly grumpy whisper about how Twizzlers resembled candle wax more than proper licorice, or the way his eyes got too bright and damp around the edges when the citizens of Casablanca drowned out the Germans with song. They weren’t alone, maybe, but this moment in time was theirs.

Bucky’s hand found its way to Steve’s as Rick watched Ilsa’s plane escape into the fog. If Steve noticed the slight hiccup in Bucky’s breath, he was kind enough not to say. Goodbye stalked closer with each passing moment, but neither of them wanted to invite it in.

They sat together palms touching and their fingers entwined, staring at the screen long after the credits had rolled and it had gone dark. Around them, people were milling about, taking a break before the next movie. No one was looking at them, but Bucky felt oddly exposed anyway, like all the raw affection and heartbreak he was carrying around was scrawled out, plain as day.

“There’s a second feature. It’ll be starting soon I imag-” Bucky was cut off by a hand cradling his cheek and Steve’s lips over his. Bucky didn’t so much melt as dissolve into it, not daring to name the emotion that drove them.

“I think I’d rather go home if it’s all the same to you,” Steve whispered against Bucky’s mouth. Not Bucky’s place and not the house, but home. Bucky could have screamed at fate for the unfairness of it all. Their lives were all these little mosaic pieces, and in the face of the bright, joyful bits where they got to be together, all the rest of the picture seemed so bleak.

“Yeah, okay,” Bucky choked out, dropping one last kiss to the corner of Steve’s mouth and easing himself off the roof of the car. He held out a hand to Steve and forced a watery smile to wobble across his lips. “Let’s go home.”
There was a gap of about thirty seconds between the time when Steve’s eyes first flicked open and when realization of what day it was dawned on him. In the space of those seconds, he had time to smile at Bucky’s peaceful expression and the shock of dark hair in his face. He scooted closer to Bucky’s naked form under the blankets, not because he wanted anything, but just because it was pleasantly intimate. There was a sleepy hum as Bucky burrowed in against his chest, and Steve’s arms were folded around Bucky’s back before he realized.

It was the first day in a couple of months that wouldn’t end with them together. There was a time to go back to, a set of responsibilities, a whole slew of things that had already happened, but not yet to him. The rest of his life was waiting, and Steve didn’t want to go.

Steve thought about the movie from the night before and wondered vaguely if this made him Ilza, begging not to be made to do the responsible thing. You’ll regret it. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life, Rick had insisted. The only thing he regretted in the moment was that Bucky’s sleep-warm skin under his palm would soon be nothing more than a memory.

Reality crashed down on them both like a sledgehammer. There was a faint, miserable hitch in Bucky's breathing, and he went oddly still under the slow, sweeping motion of Steve's hand up and down his back. At a loss for words, Steve bowed his head, pressing his nose against the top of Bucky's hair.

"It's going to be weird having the whole bed to myself again," Bucky mumbled, draping his arm over Steve's flank. His tone was a little bit too even, measured out, word by word. Steve didn't dare look at Bucky's face, afraid of what he might find there.

“You mean not having anyone to steal the covers?” Steve smiled even though he didn’t feel like it, and willed his heart to stop clenching at the way Bucky silently squeezed him a little tighter.

“Yeah,” Bucky breathed, the sound muffled against Steve’s skin and suspiciously shaky. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

Steve stayed for as long as he could justify, and then some. It wasn’t fair to either of them really, delaying the inevitable. It was just that everything they did was for the last time, and maybe they were both a little bit guilty of drawing out the moments.

Bucky insisted on feeding him, even if it was just bowls of cereal while they leaned against the kitchen counter. They crowded into each other’s space, unsure of how to lift the heavy weight that blanketed them both. Neither of them knew quite what to say, so they didn’t.

The clock on the oven said 10:43 by the time Steve gave up on stalling over breakfast. With a sigh, he set his empty bowl in the sink. “I ought to take a shower. I should probably be presentable for the dressing down I’m going to get for disappearing for… years.”


Impulsively, Steve took Bucky’s hand. He half expected Bucky to pull away, to prefer some privacy. Instead, Bucky followed, silent as the grave, and maybe he was seeking solace in this as much as Steve was.
The details all blurred together, leaving only impressions. The shower was a tight fit for both of them, but it wouldn’t have mattered, not with the way they gravitated towards each other. He went through the motions in a haze, hardly aware of turning on the water and stepping in. Bucky’s hands were on him though, slick with soap and painstakingly tender as they swept from his wrists to his shoulders and back again.

It reminded him of the strange rituals prescribed to sacrifices to the gods. Apparently, you had to be fed and clean and dressed just the right way to meet your doom. If that’s what this was, Steve was glad the hands on him were Bucky’s.

Steve reached for the bottle of shampoo, but Bucky stopped him with a hand on Steve’s and a sad smile curling on his lips. “Let me.”

If there was one thing out of this moment that Steve wanted to take with him, it was the sensation of Bucky’s fingers in his hair. Bucky’s short nails scratched gently at Steve’s scalp, a pleasant contrast to the warm spray of water. Bucky lingered, probably longer than necessary, but Steve couldn’t begrudge him a thing. Instead, he returned the favor. Maybe Steve couldn’t give Bucky what he deserved, but he could give this.

They stayed long after they probably could have been done. Steve had started to reach for the faucet, but then Bucky leaned in, and it seemed a great deal more important to embrace him. Bucky didn’t say a word, didn’t kiss Steve, just sagged into him, head resting against Steve’s shoulder. Neither of them moved until the water started to run cold.

Somehow, they shut off the water and got out of the shower. Steve had gotten so used to sharing space with Bucky that it was second nature to follow him. They were halfway there when he realized that his uniform was the one thing that hadn’t ended up in Bucky’s bedroom.

It wasn’t until he was alone in the guestroom that Steve allowed himself to crumble, just a little. He hadn’t even set foot in it in a month, at least, but it had lost that magazine cover look it had had in the beginning and never really got it back. From the slight skew of the blankets to the book he’d forgotten on the nightstand, everywhere he looked was evidence of the way he’d settled in.

Steve breathed in and let it out in a sigh. He wasn’t here to reminisce about what he was leaving behind. Willing himself to be blind to his surroundings, Steve made for the closet door and pulled it open.

There it was, the crux of all this, hung up on an otherwise empty bar. In that uniform, he was Captain America, and Steve Rogers was a footnote. He’d resigned himself to that until he’d gotten here, until Bucky, and now he wasn’t sure he knew how to go back.

Piece by piece, Steve pulled himself together, just like it was any other mission. The Captain America suit rolled right up over Steve Rogers, shielding the truth of him from the world. As he pulled on his boots and gloves, Steve tried to focus. He’d taken the responsibility this uniform came with so intentionally. He’d chosen to be where he was going once. He’d just have to remember how to choose it again.

Steve put on his helmet. In the corner of his eye, he could see the movement of his reflection in a mirror, but he didn’t look. Captain America wasn’t what he needed to see right now. Instead, Steve tightened the strap of the helmet around his jaw as he stepped into the hallway, making a quick stop in Bucky’s office.

The sketchpad he had done most of his drawings in as of late was sitting on the edge of Bucky’s desk, near the armchair he often camped out in. Determined to take something with him, he flipped
through it and pulled out a few of the sketches he’d drawn of Bucky, including the one Bucky had seen at the museum exhibition. Carefully as he could, he folded them up and tucked them away in one of the pouches of his uniform. Out of reasons to delay, he headed for the kitchen, steeling himself for whatever came next.

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Neither of them had touched the box since the night before. It sat on the table, oddly threatening, like a noose waiting at the gallows. Bucky’s stomach flopped as the inevitable hurtled towards them.

The uniform made everything so much more real. Steve was so soft around the edges, warm and affectionate, but Captain America was all stern resolve. It was like he’d been distilled down to a caricature of himself. The morning light was hazy over everything, leaving Steve, from his clenched jaw to his garish uniform, looking desaturated, like an old photograph. He might have been standing there, but Bucky could already feel his absence.

“So, how does it work?” Bucky asked, lingering at the far end of the table. He wanted to be closer, but he also didn’t particularly relish the idea of being blown back if the effect was substantial.

“I’m not really sure.” Steve made no move to reach for the figurine just yet. “I grabbed it mostly by accident and suddenly I was nowhere.”

“Nowhere?” It probably didn’t matter now, but Bucky couldn’t help being curious. “But you ended up here.”

“Eventually, but first I was nowhere. It felt like they were deciding if I was worth the trouble.” Steve tensed even more than he had already, lips pursing as he rested his fingers on the table.

“They?” Surely, Steve didn’t mean the Norns. Bucky was ready to believe that time travel was possible, but mythology was… mythology.

Steve shrugged, looking uneasy. “I have no idea. I couldn’t see anyone. It was just a feeling, that knot you get in the pit of your stomach when someone is watching you.”

Bucky nodded, even though he couldn’t begin to make sense of what Steve was saying. He ventured closer, wanting very much to grab Steve and never let go. There was no justice in losing what they’d just begun to build together. Steve had never been his to keep though, and Bucky knew if he embraced the man, his fragile resolve would crumble. Bucky settled for laying his hand on Steve’s back, fingers splaying across the roughly textured fabric of his uniform. “Well, however it works… Safe travels.”

“Thank you, Buck. For this. For all of this.” Steve turned to face Bucky, strangely calm. He rested his hand on Bucky’s shoulder, and Bucky was almost grateful for the thick leather glove that hid away the warmth of his fingers. The gesture seized at Bucky’s heart anyway, an insistent tremor as Steve spoke to him. “I won’t forget this.”

Us, Bucky’s mind immediately corrected, knowing Steve was only trying to soften the loss. It didn’t work in the slightest, and Bucky impulsively reached out, grabbing the straps of Steve’s uniform to pull him in. “Oh shut up.”

Bucky didn’t give Steve a chance to respond before he crushed their mouths together. It was one last desperate note to go out on. There was more helmet than anything under Bucky’s hands as they made their way to the sides of Steve’s face. The chin strap kept rubbing against Bucky’s skin, but
it didn’t matter. Steve arms were a vice grip around Bucky, clutching him close, as if he were the one precious thing you save from a burning building.

Then it was over. They broke apart with gasping breaths, and Steve tilted his head, helmet resting against Bucky’s shoulder. His grip on Bucky loosened, but he didn’t let go.

“Steve?” Bucky fought to keep the tremble from his voice, and he cursed how thick the material of Steve’s uniform was. Sure, it kept him safe, but it also meant he wouldn’t feel much of the way Bucky’s palm skimmed up and down his spine. Bucky tipped his head to the side, until his cheek was resting against the leather over Steve’s ear. “You okay, pal?”

Steve’s breathing was shaky and quiet. “I don’t want to go.”

Bucky sucked in a breath like he’d been punched between his ribs. “Don’t. That’s not fair. Please don’t make me be the one to force this.”

“What if I stayed? They didn’t need me to win the war. There’s good I could do here, surely.” Steve protested. He was so desperately obstinate, and it would have been endearing if it hadn’t broken Bucky’s heart to look at him.

“You don’t stay, Steve.” Bucky curled his hands around the edges of Steve’s shoulders. It was tender, but it put some space between them too. “It’s already happened. You’ve already done what you were gonna do.”

Bucky had to stop looking when Steve’s expression crumbled, because, more than anything, he just wanted to give in. That he was intimately familiar with what came next didn’t help. It just made him feel the impending loss more keenly. Steve cupped his jaw, and even with the glove, it was such an intimate gesture. “Maybe it doesn’t have to be. I don’t know what happens next.”

“But I do!” Bucky squeezed his eyes shut and covered Steve’s hand on his jaw with his palm. “I do. You don’t stay. You can’t stay, Steve. If you stay, we never meet because the reasons I became the expert you were looking for won’t ever happen.”

“Bucky-” Steve’s teeth worked over his bottom lip, the both of them lingering, holding off the inevitable for a few more seconds.

“I’d give anything for you to be able to stay. I love you, but we both knew there was going to be an expiration date on this,” Bucky choked out, every word a battle. He couldn’t pretend he wasn’t wrecked anymore, and gave up trying to. “Your future is already written.”

Steve stared at the ceiling, eyes glassy with the sorrow he was still trying to bottle up. He barely looked at Bucky, even when he gave a slight nod. It wasn’t agreement so much as resignation, but that was the best anyone could have expected from either of them. Steve tipped his head forward for one last kiss, gentler than before. Their mouths fit like they’d been made to. Bucky wrapped himself up in the slightly spongy feel of Steve’s glove against his jaw, and the rough tactical fabric against his knuckles when he slipped the fingers of his free hand under the collar of Steve’s uniform to cradle his neck.

Even when it was over, they stayed, wrapped up in each other, breathing in the same air. Steve’s helmet pressed against Bucky’s forehead, an unwelcome intruder on the moment. Bucky’s heart was full of shrapnel, but he didn’t have it in him to be sorry for even a second. He turned his head to kiss Steve’s cheek in the open gap that the side guard didn’t cover. “Maybe I’ll go visit you when this is all over.”
“Wait.” Steve’s expression changed abruptly, hopeless grief filtering away in the blink of an eye. “He said that sometimes the future is worth changing. I think I understand what he meant.”

“Steve…” Bucky couldn’t do this. He just couldn’t. There was no hope left that he could see, and as much as he wanted to cling to Steve forever, it wouldn’t keep Steve here. “There isn’t any getting around this. You have to go.”

“You’re probably right,” Steve agreed, though strangely that didn’t seem as awful a prospect to him as it had been moments before. He smiled tentatively, thumbing at Bucky’s cheek. “Do you have to stay?”

Bucky froze, trying to wrap his head around the idea. They still didn’t know exactly how the relic worked. “We don’t even know if I can.”

“No… We don’t. I don’t know if anything will happen or if it might send you somewhere else. I’ve never heard of it killing anyone, but then, I hadn’t heard of it at all, so that’s probably not a great indicator.” The brief smile he’d had was quickly deflating as he listed off all the reasons trying might be too dangerous.

Bucky shut Steve up with a gentle peck to his lips. “I’ll do it.”

“You shouldn’t,” Steve protested. “It might be suicide.”

“It might keep us together, too,” Bucky countered. “Plus, it’s my choice to make. I’m doing it.”

“Are you sure?” Steve’s brows dipped in concern, but he kept ahold of Bucky.

Bucky had never been so sure of anything in his life. “Just let me write a note.”

Steve waited and Bucky slipped away long enough to grab pen and paper to scrawl out a message.

Sam,

Look up Steve when you find this. The one who actually belongs here.

Bucky

“Look me up?” Steve asked as he peered over Bucky’s shoulder.

“Future you. Either this doesn’t work and Sam will want to know what happened, or it does work and I’ve been living under a different name or something.” Bucky made a tent card of the paper and wrote Sam’s name in large, neat print. “One way or another, he should know.”

“If this doesn’t work…” Steve’s lips pressed tightly together, and Bucky was close enough to catch the nervous swallow that came before he finished. “I just need you to know I love you, too.”

“You sap.” It was hard to be scared the way those words took root and blossomed in Bucky’s chest. He leaned in, pressing a quick kiss to Steve’s mouth. “It’s going to work.”

In one deft motion, Steve reclaimed the hold he’d had on Bucky before. If this didn’t pan out, there were worse ways to spend their last seconds together, so Bucky returned the gesture, hooking his arm around Steve’s back, and crowding in close. Almost nose to nose, Bucky just caught Steve’s pensive smile. “You ready?”

“I’m ready.” Bucky let Steve take his hand, the two of them reaching for the artifact together. “I’ll see you on the other side.”
Bucky closed his eyes, his thumb nudging against Steve’s as they wrapped their hands around the relic. There were no sounds to indicate that he was somewhere else, and the only feeling Bucky took note of was that Steve was no longer beside him. The fragile, fluttering hope he’d been hanging onto was crushed. They’d tried, and Steve was gone, and with no one left to be strong for, he broke down on a miserable sob.

He could feel it, the heave of his chest, the dampness under his palm when he brought the hand he’d been holding Steve with to his face. All the evidence was there, but it never reached his ears, as if his voice had been stolen from him too.

Distraught and confused, Bucky opened his eyes, bracing himself to look at the empty place Steve had occupied. Steve was gone, but so was the room and so was the relic he’d been holding onto. Even the floor dissolved out from under his feet. He felt the give as he floated, though he could see nothing.

Steve had mentioned this nowhere place, but it was terrifying in reality. He could see and hear nothing, and when he reached out in search of a handhold, all he came up with was empty air. With all light stripped away, he couldn’t even see his outstretched hand, and some awful, creeping whisper suggested maybe it wasn’t there at all. Maybe there was nothing left of him.

Somewhere, something was watching him. They were nowhere, everywhere, the same unsettling weight in his bones he’d felt looking at the pictures of Urðr. No words were spoken, but Bucky was certain he was being judged. He was equally certain that he was going to come up short. Steve was a hero, but Bucky? Bucky was a selfish, lovesick fool.

“Please,” he begged. He squared his shoulders as best he could with no way to ground himself, and scrubbed the tears from his face though they’d have been impossible to see. He’d known the risks and jumped in willingly. There was no place for bitterness now. “Whatever you do with me, please don’t let him think it’s his fault.”

He hadn’t heard himself, but whatever was watching him must have. The nothingness that enveloped him became a question that Bucky didn’t know how to answer. He could only meet it with surrender, closing his eyes and waiting for it to bury him entirely. Consciousness waned, and Bucky drifted, clinging to a memory of a familiar pair of arms around him.

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The first thing Bucky was aware of was the ache of something hard and uneven digging into the space between his shoulder blades. His eyes fluttered as he tried to get his bearings. Mostly, that amounted to a breathless, relieved huff of laughter that he was alive. Whatever else he was about to confront, at least he was still that.

Something cool blew across his face, inconsistent and blustery, carrying the echo of an unfamiliar bird call. He was outdoors, probably, sprawled out on what felt like a pile of rocks. There was the sharp, uneven thing between his shoulder blades, but also at his hips, his thighs, his arms. When Bucky finally managed to focus past the hazy lines of his eyelashes, he was met with shades of grey in uneven layers that he finally worked out to be an overcast sky. Definitely outside, then.

Bucky tried to sit up, and the motion sent him skidding downwards. Whatever wreckage he was lying in was dislodged as he went, and settling was painful. He was dizzy, and the whole world seemed to be spinning, but mostly he was okay, if alone.

Alone. No. He wasn’t supposed to be alone. Bucky staggered to his feet, his heart in his throat as he took in his surroundings for the first time.
The rubble went on for a distance, peaks and valleys of fractured chunks of stone that looked like they might have once been in the shape of bricks. Whatever had stood here seemed long forgotten, a wreckage set in an expansive meadow, lush and green from plenty of rain. Bucky couldn’t see much farther. The horizon was blocked by a line of trees, all new foliage and spring blossoms. None of it was anything Bucky was looking for.

“Steve?” Bucky called out, picking his way through rocks. There was no telling where the relic might have put Steve down, and only the version of events Bucky grew up learning about to say that he’d come back at all. What if they were on opposite sides of the world? What if the Norns had claimed Steve’s existence in exchange to releasing him? Dread coiled like a snake in Bucky’s stomach as he considered the possibilities, each worse than the last.

Time had settled the wreckage of this place, but the rocks still slid and crumbled under Bucky’s sneakers. He shivered as the wind cut right through the fabric of his t-shirt, hoping civilization wasn’t insurmountably far away. First, he needed to search the place for Steve.

He trudged through the rubble, slowed by the fact that the most difficult terrain he’d navigated in recent memory was the staircase to the building his lecture hall was in. Bucky wobbled dangerously once, twice, and then stumbled to his knees, but perhaps it was a gift that he did. He was startled by the sudden pressure of something smooth around his wrist, his heart racing as he picked out the shape of leather clad fingers against his skin. It was moving, a sign of life, but the rest of the glove disappeared into the pile of rocks.

“Steve?!?” Bucky didn’t so much as hesitate, scrabbling to remove the debris. He dug the wreckage away, heedless of the way the sharp edges cut into his soft, bare skin and scraped his knuckles bloody. His heart was in his throat, hammering away, but Bucky didn’t stop. “Just hang on. Please, please, hang on.”

There was no telling how much was left to go, or if Steve was injured, but Bucky forced his focus to narrow. One problem at a time, and right now that problem was finding the man at the other end of that hand. He didn’t notice the tension enveloping him until it was gone, deflating violently as a popped balloon when the rubble started to move under his palms.

The rocks gave a little, trembling with each movement. They shook away with a loud clatter, some collapsing inward when Steve was finally free enough to haul his way out. His face was smudged with dirt, and he coughed as he flopped down on his back beside Bucky. His chest rose and fell in deep, gasping breaths, head lolling to the side until his helmet pressed against the side of Bucky’s knee. “I’m never complaining about the alley again.”

Bucky scrambled on his hands and knees, turning around until his face hovered above Steve’s. He hissed as he put weight on one injured hand, freeing the other to cradle Steve’s cheek. Even having barely escaped suffocating under a pile of rocks, Steve was laser focused. He carefully cradled Bucky’s hand, easing it away to see the smear of dirt and blood from a dozen cuts and scrapes. “You’re injured.”

“You’re alive.” It was all Bucky could bring himself to wait before dipping his head, pressing a kiss to Steve’s lips. Steve was alive. They were alive.

He’d meant it to be gentle, but Steve was having absolutely none of it. What began as a soft press of Bucky’s mouth to Steve’s became all consuming. One of Steve’s hands was an anchor against the back of Bucky’s head, the other curling in a vice grip around his back. It flicked a switch, and all Bucky’s honorable intentions gave way to sinking down over Steve and kissing him senseless.

When Bucky pulled away, it was only to tuck his face against Steve’s neck. The textured fabric of
Steve’s collar rubbed against Bucky’s face. He didn’t care that they were dirty, or that he could feel the first few droplets of rain seeping into the thin fabric of his shirt. Even the cold didn’t matter because Steve was wrapped around him, the flat of his palm skating comfortably up and down Bucky’s back, and nothing could be wrong about that.

“We should go.” Bucky felt Steve’s arms squeeze around him one last time before letting go. “It’s a walk back to town and I need to get ahold of… someone.”

“How do you know?” Reluctantly, Bucky climbed to his feet. Without the distracting presence of Steve right there, the cold sank in a little more insistently. Bucky shivered hugged his arms, wincing at the sting of pressure against his cut up hands.

“I recognize this place. The surroundings anyway.” Steve curled an arm around Bucky’s shoulders, steadying him and offering some measure of warmth as they picked their way through the rubble. “I guess they put me right back where they pulled me out of.”

The mission. Bucky had read more times than he could count about where Steve had disappeared. Under other circumstances, he would have been put out by how far they had to go, but still riding the high of alive and together, it was hard to be upset about anything.

“I still can’t believe it worked,” Bucky said instead, leaning into Steve and breathing out a relieved sigh when rocks gave way to grass instead. The reality of what they’d gotten themselves into was just starting to set in. “Do you think it always works?”

“If it always worked, we’d have heard about it a lot sooner, don’t you think?” Steve murmured. His gloved hand skimmed up and down Bucky’s arm, the sensation an undeniable reminder that they’d made it.

“Okay, that’s a fair point,” Bucky conceded. “But why us?”

“They’re all about fate, right?” Steve smiled, wry and playful for the brief moment Bucky saw it. Then it dissolved into a tender kiss to Bucky’s temple instead. “Maybe they just decided that what was missing in our lives was each other.”

Bucky smiled so hard, it felt like his cheeks might split under the pressure. He had no idea what came next, or what he was going to do with himself now that his current area of expertise was mostly useless, and that was fine. It was good, even, because Steve’s cheek was warm against Bucky’s head where they leaned together and they had the entire rest of their lives to figure this out.

Epilogue

“Look, kid. This is the last time I’m going to tell you this. There is nothing anyone wants to know about me that hasn’t already been written,” Steve insisted, his tone just a little bit sharper than he’d meant it to be.

“But Mr. Rogers-” Bucky sounded so young on the other end of the phone. It was all he could do not to smile. It would be a series of degrees and a good number of books before this Bucky really knew him, and it wouldn’t do to give away the ending.

“I said no. Don’t call me again.” Steve abruptly hung up the phone because if he didn’t, he might give something away. It was remarkably difficult to talk to Bucky who was still a stranger, especially when Bucky - his Bucky - was sitting next to him, patiently waiting for the phone call to
Steve scrubbed a hand over his face, soft and slightly slack with age. “Did I do alright?”

“Yeah. You’ve done it. That “nothing anyone wants to know about me” bit was the thing that made me really sure I had to start writing about you,” Bucky conceded. His thumb dragged over the buttons on the remote control he was holding, but he didn’t turn the show back on.

“But?” Steve had learned all Bucky’s tells decades ago, and somehow Bucky still seemed surprised when he got caught. Steve nudged gently at Bucky’s arm with his elbow. “I heard a but somewhere in there.”

"I hate you. You know that right?" Bucky grumbled from his spot on the couch. It didn't sound very convincing, given the way he leaned against Steve, silvery hair brushing against Steve's jaw.

Steve pocketed his phone and fought off a smile, hooking his arm around Bucky's narrow shoulders. "Do you now? Why is that?"

Bucky waved haphazardly at Steve, as if that explained everything. "That. All of that is exactly what you said to me back in the day."

"Yeah, but we don’t know if you even came back with me last time around. Either way, I didn’t change anything in that conversation. Isn't that a good thing?" Steve bent his elbow enough to drag his fingers through Bucky's hair, grinning at the pleased little huff he got for his trouble.

"Yeah, but..." Bucky paused, leaning shamelessly into Steve's fingers. "Stop distracting me. I'm talking to you."

"One of these days, I'm actually going to listen and stop when you tell me to," Steve murmured, nails scratching lightly against Bucky's scalp.

"Don't you dare." They curled up together on the couch, and Bucky was quiet for so long after that that Steve was starting to think he'd fallen asleep. Apparently not. "What I was saying is that you have me."

"And?" Steve's brows scrunched as he tried to figure out what Bucky meant.

"And..." Bucky lifted his head enough to rest his chin on Steve's shoulder instead. They were in such close proximity that Steve could make out very little aside from Bucky's bright, blue eyes. "I spent seventy years thinking you didn't. Now, I don't even know. You could have just been running me off so I wouldn't see that we ended up old and stuck with each other."

"Stuck with each other." Steve's nose crinkled. "You're a real charmer."

Bucky sat up long enough to smile at Steve properly. Even frail and pushing ninety, he was the prettiest thing Steve had ever seen. "Oh, I don't know. I like being stuck with you."

"Lucky for you, the feeling is entirely mutual." Steve leaned in to kiss Bucky's lips, a soft, fleeting expression of an affection that had carried on for decades.

“Yeah, yeah.” Bucky smiled into the kiss, lingering for a moment before reaching for his laptop. “You old sap. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I’ve got a story to write. One last thing under my old name. Sam’s never gonna believe this.”

“Under your name?" Steve pulled his phone out of his pocket to double check the date. “You know
he’s not going to be gone for another seven years, right?”

Bucky hummed, but Steve wasn’t sure if it was an acknowledgement of what he’d said or just that words had been coming out of his mouth. “Then I better get started. I’m not as quick as I used to be.”

Steve waited for Bucky to get comfortable before he scooted closer, carefully arranging himself so that he could snuggle up without impeding Bucky’s movement. “What could you possibly have left to write about, Buck?”

Bucky flashed a toothy grin and snuggled into Steve’s embrace. “There’s one thing I’ve been wanting to write about for ages, and I’m finally to a point where I don’t care if anyone believes me.”

Steve’s eyes widened slightly, and his gaze flicked almost involuntarily to a little statue on the mantle. He’d gotten Tony to quietly acquire it for him years before, just in case the wrong people came looking for it. “You cannot possibly mean to tell people why I disappeared.”

“No! Jesus Christ, Steve. The very last thing anyone wants is for me to tell people time travel exists, or worse, for someone to believe me.” Bucky looked positively affronted, lips pursed comically as he opened a document.

“Well, I’m stumped,” Steve admitted, hiding his mirth behind a tender kiss to Bucky’s temple. “What are you writing?”

“The other story I’ve been sitting on most of my damned life.” There was a soft little sigh as Bucky leaned into the kiss that still made Steve’s heart melt. Bucky gave up one of his hands, lifting it off the keyboard to hold Steve’s instead. “The one about us.”

End Notes

You can find us as Artgroves and DrowningByDegrees on Tumblr!

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