you know I'd quench that thirst

by napricot

Summary

Steve hasn’t exactly had the time to really examine his new and improved dick. He hopes, suddenly, that this isn’t the one thing the serum has failed to fix. Compared to not being able to breathe properly, it’s a small thing, Steve will admit that. That his dick takes forever to get hard and often fails to stay that way is—was, now, hopefully—pretty low on Steve’s list of ailments, as frustrating as it was.

Steve Rogers is very much not a virgin. Not before the serum, and sure as hell not after it, when the serum ramps up his libido along with everything else. Too bad everyone thinks Captain America is a sexless historical symbol. Or: the tragicomic sexual odyssey of Steve Rogers, and how it begins, and then much later ends, with Bucky Barnes.

Notes

Title from FKA Twigs' "Two Weeks."

The rest of this should be posted in the next few days, it's mostly finished.
Content note for vague, passively self-destructive/suicidal thoughts.
“Is this what it’s like for healthy people all the time?” Steve demands of the SSR doctor examining him. Because if so, Steve has been missing out on more than he’d ever known.

The doctor blinks. “Well, I don’t know. You’re certainly in peak physical condition. What does that feel like to you?”

“Incredible.”

He can take a full breath and his heart keeps the right rhythm. His vision is perfect, and his hearing is too, in both ears. The world has opened up with the colors and sounds and details that he has, apparently, always been missing out on. Nothing hurts. It’s amazing. He’d call it a miracle if not for the memory of the way the serum burned through him, how the Vita-Ray chamber felt like being struck by lightning in slow motion.

He thinks, fleetingly, of Bucky after long rounds with the punching bag: flushed and bright-eyed, his hair curling with sweat, his smooth skin glistening with it. 

_Aren’t you tired?_ Steve would whine. One brief round with the punching bag left him feeling like a wrung-out and threadbare dish towel, or maybe a landed fish. _Course I am! But it feels good_, Bucky would say, and Steve had never understood that, how Bucky could work a full day and still go down to the gym to box, then go out dancing after that. To Steve, tired never felt good. It felt like losing a fight. Now, Steve thinks he finally understands. With this body, surely he could never feel tired, and if he did, surely even that would feel good.

“Congratulations, I suppose,” says the doctor. “Now blow into this, I need to check your lung capacity.”

The SSR doctors run test after test, take vials and vials of blood. Steve runs, faster and longer, mile after mile, until the doctors say _that will do for now_. Steve lifts weight after weight, the heaviest ones the SSR has, until Howard just sends him around the base to lift every piece of heavy equipment he can find. Steve dutifully reads off eye charts that get further and further away, until even his perfect eyes can’t make out the distant letters, and he listens to a series of tones as doctors ask him _did you hear that_, and he answers _yes_ and _yes_ and _yes_. None of it makes him tired.

“He’s perfect,” says Howard, dark eyes alight. “He’s _better_ than perfect.”

Steve thinks the doctors have surely collected every fluid his body is capable of producing, but they even ask him to jack off into a cup.

“Excuse me?” Steve demands, looking around wildly, in case Agent Carter’s nearby. She’s not, thank god.

Howard is unembarrassed. “We need to know how the serum has affected your sperm, Rogers. It’s all very scientific. We won’t be watching you or anything, we just need the sperm. There’s some nice pictures in there, to get you worked up, and—” he leans close, “I can even get you a projector set up in there, get you some real blue movies—”

“No, that’s fine, thanks,” says Steve, and flees into the private exam room.
Steve hasn’t exactly had the time to really examine his new and improved dick. He hopes, suddenly, that this isn’t the one thing the serum has failed to fix. Compared to not being able to breathe properly, it’s a small thing, Steve will admit that. That his dick takes forever to get hard and often fails to stay that way is—was, now, hopefully—pretty low on Steve’s list of ailments, as frustrating as it was. Bucky never seemed to mind it anyway, which had convinced Steve once and for all that Bucky Barnes was probably the most patient man in all of New York.

Don’t worry, I like taking my time, he’d say, and then he’d kiss Steve like they had all the time in the world, would take as long as it took to coax Steve into hardness with his hands or his mouth. Bucky had always seemed willing and able to carve out an eternity in the space of a night that way.

Bet you say that to all your girls too, Steve had gasped, and Bucky’s eyes had gone sharp and hot. No, that’s just for you. I take my time with you. You’re my best guy, aren’t you?

Christ, what’s Bucky gonna say about all this? He’ll be happy about Steve’s heart and lungs, Steve knows that, but all the rest...is he still going to be Bucky’s best guy? Will Bucky still want him, if he looks like this? He looks good, he knows: the fondness in Agent Carter’s eyes has kindled to a more heated appreciation, and the nurses’ eyes linger on him, the way Steve’s seen women’s eyes linger on Bucky. But maybe Bucky likes him better smaller. Maybe Bucky will look at this body and see a stranger.

Steve still looks at this body and sees a stranger.

You’ve just got to get used to it, is all, he tells himself. It’s like when his voice had finally dropped, and for weeks, he’d startled a little to hear his own voice come out of his mouth, deep and strong, the voice of a much larger man. The larger man he now is. You’ll get used to it.

He looks around the exam room, settles himself on the small exam table for lack of any other options. There’s no mirror, so he just pulls his pants down and looks. Like the rest of him, his dick is bigger, but only enough to keep him more or less proportional. Otherwise, it’s the same, feels the same in his hand, and Steve sighs in relief, but—he’s scarcely given himself an exploratory stroke before he feels his dick starting to harden.

Oh. Definitely fixed.

He ignores the eight-pagers and pin-ups Howard left, and thinks instead of Bucky’s hands on this new body, of Agent Carter’s red, red lips.

It doesn’t take him long at all to fill the cup.

After, he shudders as he strokes his still half-hard and sensitive cock. He could go again, he thinks, surprised, but thinking of Bucky has ignited more miserable homesickness than frustrated desire. God, he misses Bucky. That’s one thing the serum hasn’t smoothed over or disappeared. If anything, he misses Bucky more sharply now, as if his newly perfect heart can devote more attention to twinging and aching for Bucky’s absence instead of thanks to its own unsteady rhythm.

Fuck, how the hell is he going to explain any of this to Bucky?

A few days later, Howard claps him on the shoulder. “We’ll need more samples over time, but sorry Rogers. You’re shooting blanks.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your swimmers, your sperm: they’re sterile. No kids in your future. Always a possibility with the
Vita Rays, sorry. But hey, silver lining! You don’t have to worry about getting any ladies in trouble! Or about VD either, probably.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Eventually, Steve gets used to his new body. The good health that first felt so astonishing begins to feel normal, and it’s not as if he’s pushing this new body’s limits doing a USO show. At least, he’s not pushing his body’s strength. Spending time around so many scantily clad, beautiful showgirls is pushing his limits in other ways.

He’s never jacked off more in his entire life. Not even in the hot grip of a too-late puberty, and not even in the wild rush of when he and Bucky first started fooling around, had he been so desperately, constantly turned on. He doesn’t do anything about it, of course he doesn’t: the showgirls are here to do their jobs, just the same as he is. He’s not gonna be anything like the guys in the audience who catcall them, or even try to pinch or grab them. But he wants, his imagination is driving him crazy with how much he wants, and he spends what feels like all his downtime in hotel rooms, jerking off. He learns that he can come again and again, wringing out one orgasm after another. Once, he gets to seven in a row in the space of an hour, and it just leaves him shaky, over-sensitive, about five seconds away from crying over how much he goddamn misses Bucky, who, if he were here, would laugh, would hold him, would put his perfect fucking patience to use exploring the limits of Steve’s new dick.

When Agent Carter checks in with him, bearing a checklist of questions from the SSR doctors, he’s not sure how or if he should answer when she asks, “Have you noticed any additional changes in your body?”

“Uh, I—not really?”

Agent Carter’s not convinced. Her perfect eyebrows furrow. “Steve. Any little thing. It could be important.”

He cannot talk to Agent Peggy Carter about his dick. He just can’t. Not when he’s thought about—no. Steve’s pretty sure he’d rather die.

“I can drink milk now without, uh, you know...” he gestures vaguely at his stomach. It’s not even a lie; everything that used to trouble his touchy stomach has been fixed along with all the rest of it.

Agent Carter relaxes, smiles. “I’m assuming it’s the same for any other foods that used to trouble your stomach?”

“Yeah, so far,” he says, and the rest of the questions are routine from there.

Maybe if he gets another examination from an SSR doctor, maybe he’ll mention it to them. He never put much stock in the priests’ dire warnings against “self-abuse,” but for all he knows, this new ramped up libido could be a symptom of something worse, or something wrong with the serum. He’ll talk to the doctors.

Steve does not talk to the doctors. This is just a kind of late puberty, right? It'll pass.

“Steve, come out with us!”

“Yeah Steve, what’re you gonna do back in your hotel room anyway?”
“Just one drink and dance, please?”

The USO showgirls are fluttering and swarming around Steve, still bright and full of fizzing energy after a day on the road and two back-to-back shows. Steve would have thought that after dancing for work, they wouldn’t want to go to a dancehall at the end of the day too, but no, they’re all abuzz with the prospect of hitting the dance floor.

“You don’t want to dance with me, trust me,” says Steve with an apologetic grin. “You all go have fun, I’ll just head back to my hotel room to—” Try to write a vague yet unsuspicious letter to Bucky then jerk off as many times as he can manage before falling asleep, probably, but he can’t say that to the showgirls. “Read and listen to the wireless.”

The showgirls fall silent. “No. That’s not acceptable. You’re coming with us,” says Grace, whose round face usually looks sweet and cheerful, but just now, looks decidedly forbidding, like Agent Carter’s when a man calls her sweetheart. The rest of the showgirls are giving him looks that are alternately pitying and uncompromising.

“Uh, just one drink and dance, I guess?” he says, and they all smile and cheer.

Steve had written this small southern town off as sleepy, but its dancehall is as loud and raucous as any in Brooklyn, and when Steve notices the obvious lack of young men in the hall, he begins to understand why the girls had been so insistent on him coming with them. He doesn’t have long to feel guilty about being here instead of on the front lines with all the rest of the dancehall’s missing men, because Nancy drags him onto the dance floor before Steve can even finish his one drink.

Nancy effectively manhandles him into dancing, and it even kind of works. Steve’s dancing with marginal competence now, old lessons from Bucky finding some purchase in this new body. Nancy’s dancing awfully close to him though, and she’s warm and sweet-smelling in his arms, her breasts soft and thrilling every time they brush against him, and Steve hasn’t been this close to anyone for this long since he got the serum. Parts of him are really taking notice. To his horror, Nancy’s taking notice too.

“I am so sorry,” he says, and lets go of her. “I’ll just—go back to the hotel, thank you for the dance —”

He has to half-shout to be heard over the thump of the music, and Nancy steps closer to him even as he’s trying to step away.

“I can…go back to the hotel with you?” offers Nancy, visibly confused.

“Oh no, I don’t—that’s not—I really am sorry, I didn’t mean for—I had no intention of—”

Nancy raises a perfectly plucked dark eyebrow, and her eyes dart down to his intensely embarrassing problem. “Well, part of you certainly seems to have its own intentions.”

Steve’s face flares with such sudden heat he must look like he’s abruptly acquired a terrible sunburn. “And that is entirely inappropriate, and I apologize. Like I said, I’ll just…” He moves to leave, but Nancy’s blocking his path to the exit.

“What a gentleman,” says Nancy, smiling now. “Do you blush all over, Steve?”

“Um—”

Nancy takes hold of his hand and begins pulling him out of the dancehall. “Let’s go have some fun
in your hotel room. You don’t have a roommate tonight, do you? Or a girl back in Brooklyn?”

“No?” Steve has a guy in the war, but he can’t tell Nancy that. And anyway, if he were here, Bucky would be cheering Steve on.

“Then come on!” says Nancy, and they walk back to the hotel, not far from the small town’s dancehall.

Steve used to think “Main Street” was just a shorthand for boring small towns, but after a few weeks on tour, he’s learned it’s not: these towns really do have Main Streets, and they really are where just about everything is. It’s a far cry from Brooklyn. If he’d spilled out of a dancehall this early there, outside would have been just about as loud and raucous as inside. Here though, Main Street has already taken on a sleepy air, and the night air is balmy, not yet chilly, but cold enough that the warmth of Nancy’s body beside him is palpable compared to the cool air.

Bucky would flirt right about now, drop an arm around Nancy’s shoulders, or take her hand. Steve doesn’t. Steve is sweating and still half-hard, and he has no idea how any of this is happening. Is this how it happens? You dance and share some heated looks, and then it’s bedroom time?

Nancy breaks the silence when they’re a block from the hotel. “Listen, I’m not fast or anything, but you’ve been decent this whole tour, and you’re a handsome guy. We can fool around some without any of this courting nonsense, can’t we? These are modern times. There are ways for a girl to avoid getting knocked up.” Nancy says it with some vehemence, and Steve gets the feeling she’s continuing some argument she’s had with someone else.

“I—sure.” Steve wonders if he should mention that his sum total of experience with women is Beth McClintock, who’d been just as small as him in their last year of high school, and who’d “fooled around” with Steve like it was a partnered homework assignment for science class, kissing and touching as if she was running down a checklist of sex. I just want to know what it’s like, and I know you won’t be a jerk about it, or hurt me, she used to say. “Um, I’m not that—experienced, is all.”

Nancy smiles at him. “Really? Good. No bad habits to break.”

When they finally get back to Steve’s room, he still has no idea what to do. He stands awkwardly in the middle of the small room, wondering if he should offer Nancy a drink, before remembering he has no drinks to offer. Should he offer her a seat? There’s only the bed and a tiny desk. Before he can do something silly like pull out the desk chair for Nancy to sit on, she steps close to him, as if she wants to dance with him again. He rests his hands on her waist, for lack of any other place to put them, and stares down at her wide-eyed.

“Relax, Steve, we’re just having some fun,” she says, and then they’re kissing, and then Nancy directs his hands onto her breasts, and then they both suddenly have a lot less clothing on. Nancy’s curvy body is beautiful, her thighs and calves strong from dancing. She’d make a lovely model for figure drawing.

“Um, wow,” Steve murmurs, then blushes, because what a stupid thing to say, but Nancy must not mind because she lights up with a laugh as she runs her hands over Steve’s naked chest. He shivers when her palms brush his sensitive nipples.

“Right back at you,” she says, and draws him down to the bed, where they do some more very pleasant kissing and touching before Steve fumbles to put a rubber on, and Nancy maneuvers him into the right position to sink into her.

Steve doesn’t last long, only a few thrusts before he’s shuddering and coming. “Oh honey, how long
has it been for you?” asks Nancy, still holding him close.

Since Bucky shipped out. His own hand, apparently, doesn’t count. He’s feeling kind of betrayed by his own dick here: not coming at all back when he was small, and coming too fast now that he’s big—shouldn’t there be a happy medium?

“Uh, a while. I’m sorry, I can—”

“Help a girl out, Steve,” says Nancy, and directs his hand down to where she’s still wet and hot, and Steve’s happy to oblige, moving his fingers at Nancy’s gasping direction, finding that small, hard spot that has her arching her back and making high, needy moans until he feels her contract around his fingers. He’s ready to go again by then, which is a development Nancy meets with delight, and that time, she comes not long after him, clenching hard and hot around his dick. When they roll apart, she lets out a happy sigh and trails almost-ticklish fingers over and over Steve’s chest.

It’s perfect, and a hell of a lot better than coming into his own hand.

“That was nice,” murmurs Nancy. “Thanks, Steve.”

After that, Steve carefully doesn’t treat Nancy any differently, and Nancy does the same, apart from a few warm smiles. But the other showgirls start looking at him more anyway, and they’re looking with intent, instead of just curiosity. It’s giving Steve ideas. Inappropriate, sexy ideas. He can’t—won’t—approach any of them though. It’s one thing for Nancy to ask and for them to make time with each other by mutual agreement. It’s another thing entirely for Steve to ask. Steve’s not willing to make any of the chorus girls feel uncomfortable or unsafe with an unwelcome advance.

A couple cities and four shows later, just when Steve’s resigned himself to making do with his own hand again for the foreseeable future, Maggie approaches him when he’s helping to get the set packed up. She’s tall and slim, as tall as Steve, and even kicking her legs on a chorus line there’s a dignity about her, like she ought to be in a ballet, having roses thrown at her feet.

“Nancy says you can show a girl a good time and not come over all—” she flutters a hand gracefully. “You know.” Steve’s not sure he does know, but he can guess. “That true?”

“Um. Yes?”

Is this what it’s like to be Bucky? Steve wonders. Suddenly, Bucky’s seemingly magical ability to always know a girl who’s willing to go out for a dance or to come home with him seems like less of a mystery. Bucky, handsome and polite and kind, just roguish enough to be charming but not so much that he seems dangerous, and always honest with every girl he’s stepped out with: he’s not looking to go steady just yet. Steve has always felt vaguely guilty about it; Bucky likes girls, sure, but he’d be halfway to married by now if not for Steve and needing to keep up appearances, and surely the girls Bucky goes with or cajoles into double-dating with Steve deserve better. Now, looking at Maggie, he wonders: maybe those girls had gotten exactly what they wanted.

“Good,” says Maggie, and smiles at him, a blush rising high on her cheeks. “I’ll come to your room at ten.”

Maggie knocks on his door at ten sharp, and glides inside like she owns the place. She looks Steve up and down, assessing, and Steve nearly comes to attention.

“Most men don’t like that I’m taller or as tall as them.”

“It’s not a problem for me, ma’am—Maggie.”
“And you understand this is just physical?” Maggie asks, her voice brisk and at odds with the careful way she’s unpinning her hat, and then unpinning her honey dark hair from its severe bun. Steve’s mouth goes dry when the smooth fall of it slips free to rest over her shoulders. “And that you have to use a rubber?”

“That’s all fine by me,” says Steve, and shifts awkwardly from foot to foot. He feels like he should be saying or doing something else, but he’s out of his depth. None of Bucky’s flirting lessons prepared him for this particular scenario. Maybe next time he writes Bucky he should ask for advice.

Maggie smiles, and begins to unbutton her dress. “We’ll do just fine then,” she says, and they do.

They do more than fine. Steve learns a lot from Maggie, even in the space of just one night. He learns how to pleasure a woman with his mouth, learns what the slick heat between her legs tastes and feels like on his lips. He learns that women can come more than once in a row, faster even than Steve’s serumed body can manage, which makes him wonder how the hell women keep from doing it all the time. He learns that he likes it when the woman’s on top, likes feeling the strong muscles of her thighs gripping him, likes cradling her breasts and hips with his hands.

He learns a lot more from some of the other USO girls too.

“Your future wife is going to bless our names,” says Grace with a grin, tousled and lovely in yet another hotel bed. Of course the moment she says it, Steve thinks Agent Carter, and blushes, which is ridiculous, because he has no idea when he’ll ever see her again, or if he will. For his last few checkups, the SSR has sent actual doctors. None of them have been able to tell them anything about what the SSR plans to do with him. Surely the SSR can’t keep him on the war bonds circuit for the entire war?

Steve still hasn’t told the doctors about his…libido issue. He just has to get it out of his system, right? It’s not anyone else’s business anyway.

The SSR apparently has every intention of keeping Steve on the war bonds circuit for the entire war. Or alright, it’s not war bonds in Europe, but even when he’s miles from the front lines, he’s still there as the USO’s dancing monkey in tights, not as a soldier. Steve can’t help but think of it as an obscene waste of the gifts the serum has given him, and of Erskine’s sacrifice. The USO tour in the States had been one thing: as embarrassing as it had been, the money rolling in for war bonds at least had a concrete benefit. But out here, so close to the front lines, among the ruins of war-ravaged European cities, the Captain America song and dance routine is horribly out of place.

Even the cheerful USO girls are muted and quiet here. Everyone’s thinking of loved ones on the front, finding it all too easy to imagine their brothers and friends and sweethearts with the same hollow eyes and injuries they see among the soldiers they perform for. Worse still, it’s too easy to imagine them as the empty spaces among the crowds of weary, underfed soldiers. Steve hasn’t had a letter from Bucky in over a month, and that one had been over a month old by the time it had reached him. What if he’s…he can’t even think it, but he can’t stop thinking about what Bucky’s doing or where he is either. By unspoken mutual agreement, Steve and the girls stop making time with each other. It doesn’t feel right out here.

Steve’s not doing any good out here. Steve’s not useful out here. He’s gone from being too weak and worthless to fight, to being too valuable to risk. He’s not sure which is worse.

“I have to do more than this,” he tells Agent Carter, after a day of being followed around by a film
crew. The carefully staged scenes of preparing for battle and leading men into fake combat are as close as he’s gotten to actual combat. “What the hell good does all this playing pretend do?”

“Propaganda is a valuable part of the war effort,” says Agent Carter evenly, though her mouth is tight. She doesn’t like this any more than he does.

“I just need a chance, Agent Carter,” he says, and her warm brown eyes flash with something wild and bold that makes Steve’s heart flutter in his chest.

“I know. You might just have to make one, Private Rogers, instead of waiting for one to be handed to you.”

“Is that what you did?”

She smiles, a wolf-like baring of teeth, sharp and not at all sweet. “Yes.”

He gets his chance when he hears the news about the 107th. Your friend is most likely dead, Phillips says. And Steve thinks, no, and starts planning.

The second Bucky’s unfocused eyes lock onto Steve and recognize him, Steve thinks everything’s going to be okay. Bucky’s alive, Bucky still knows him even in this new body, Steve’s gotten this far: from here on out, it’s going to be okay. That insane certainty stays with him even as he half-carries Bucky through the factory, and even as they leap across a literal pit of fire.

In the light of dawn, thirty miles behind enemy territory with hundreds of Allied soldiers Steve needs to lead back across the line, and Bucky barely conscious, Steve crashes back down to reality. What the hell was he thinking? Everything’s not going to be okay! His radio’s busted! A lot of these men, Bucky included, need medical attention immediately! Steve’s not an actual officer! He sure has to fake it for all these men who think he’s an actual captain though. He wishes desperately that Bucky were up to helping him. He’s a sergeant, after all, and judging by how worried some of the men are for him, he’s a good one.

But after the burst of lucidity and energy that got him out of that factory with Steve, Bucky’s back to being mostly unresponsive, his skin pallid and sweaty, his too-thin body trembling even when he’s unconscious. Steve’s never seen Bucky so bad off, and it’s terrifying. Steve wants to grab Bucky and run, carry him to the nearest hospital and order them to make him better. He could, he thinks. He’s strong and fast enough now. But there are other people relying on him, and Bucky and Agent Carter would kill him if he abandoned these men.

Morita, one of the few men with any medic training, can’t offer any help. “It’s whatever those Nazi bastards dosed him with, I think. He had pneumonia earlier, it’s why he got moved to the lab, but his lungs don’t sound so bad now. Can’t do anything but wait for whatever it is to run its course.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him, Cap,” says one of the other men, the one with the ridiculous mustache, Dougal or Dugan or something. “You just get us on the march.”

He does, somehow, with copious help from what’s left of the 107th. They get the injured on what tanks and trucks that they can get running, and Steve goes to check on Bucky again. His heart pounds hard and fast, as if it wants to return to its old, unsteady beat. But no, Steve’s just scared. What if Bucky’s taken a turn for the worse? To his relief, Bucky’s color is better, even if he’s not conscious yet.

“He woke up to puke his guts out, then we got some water in him. He’s just asleep now. Think he’s
past the worst of it,” says Dugan.

By the time they stop for a needed break, Bucky’s up again, if somewhat wobbly. He’s leaning on a tree for support, staring vaguely into the distance.

“Dugan’s supposed to be keeping an eye on you,” says Steve, frowning and looking around for the man’s distinctive hat.

“He went to go piss.” Bucky shifts his gaze to stare at him, wide and unblinking. “Steve.”

Steve approaches him carefully. “Yeah Buck, it’s me. I know I look different, it’s kind of a long story.”

“Steve,” says Bucky again, something desperate in it now, and the sound pulls Steve to him, sure and urgent as a chain yanked around his neck.

“You doing alright, Buck?” asks Steve, and presses a hand to his forehead. He’s too warm.

Bucky doesn’t answer, instead brings his own hands up to Steve’s face, cupping Steve’s cheeks, then tracing his face, as if Bucky were a blind man, learning him by touch. He can see Steve though, and his focus has feverish intensity, something close to the same heat he favors Steve with in their bedroom. Steve’s cock stirs, heedless of how very much this is not the goddamn time. Bucky’s hands on his face are broad and big, and these clever, sensitive hands have wrung a lot of pleasure out of Steve. Steve has missed Bucky’s touch so goddamn much.

“Is this real?” asks Bucky, dreamy and distant. Okay, maybe the drugs haven’t cleared his body yet.

“It’s real. Hey, I don’t look that different, do I?” His body, sure, but his face is the same, mostly. More filled out, and he’s grown into his chin. Nothing to be done for his nose, of course. But Steve still recognizes the face in the mirror.

Bucky brushes his thumb over Steve’s lower lip, and Steve’s mouth falls open. Bucky’s eyes flicker down to focus on his lips. God, Steve wants, but Bucky’s not well, and there are dozens of soldiers yards away. Bucky sighs, sways forward. There’s a faint tremor in his limbs, like maybe he’s cold. Steve takes his weight, lighter than it should be. It’s still a thrill to have Bucky in his arms like this.

“Still my best guy?” mumbles Bucky into Steve’s neck.

“Always,” answers Steve, his throat suddenly tight. He risks pressing a kiss to Bucky’s forehead. “C’mon, let’s get you off your feet, huh?”

After a lot of yelling, meetings, debriefings, and a rushed promotion to actual captain for Steve, the SSR finally allows that Steve might be more useful in the field than as a dancing monkey on the USO circuit. Even so, it takes the combined force of Steve, Bucky, and Agent Carter’s stubbornness to get Steve the unit he wants.

“You all damned well better be worth this,” grumbles Phillips, and sends them off for three weeks of training in the English countryside. Steve doesn’t object. He’s well aware they need it.

Between the training and Steve’s after-hours studying to get up to speed, he and Bucky can’t scrape together more than a few minutes of time to be alone with each other. Steve had given Bucky the whole story back in London—Erskine, the serum, the USO tour—and endured Bucky’s white-faced anger and worry over it. You let them experiment on you? Bad enough you want to get yourself killed on the front lines—Any other time, Steve would have pushed back, would have thrown
himself into an argument with Bucky. But he’d just pulled Bucky off of a Nazi laboratory table, and Bucky was still so brittle and on edge, the dark circles under his eyes seemingly permanent, so Steve held back.

Bucky’s better now, more wondering and watchful than worried. Medical had cleared him after a couple days with no more than an order to get his weight back up, and the few days’ rest in London seems to have done him some good. He’s still more stone-faced than Steve’s ever seen him before, but that’s to be expected, Steve supposes. He’s a soldier now, after all, and he hasn’t had an easy time of it. Steve wants to help, he’s just not sure how. Some time alone together could be a start.

Steve very badly wants to get some time alone with Bucky. They haven’t had time or privacy enough for more than a few desperate kisses, or some embraces that could, just barely, pass for two old friends happy to be reunited, and it’s not enough, not for Steve. He finally gets the time when they’re all given an afternoon and evening’s liberty. They duly spend a couple rounds at the pub with the team, for the sake of team-building and morale, then they slip away.

“They’ll be there all night,” murmurs Bucky into Steve’s ear. “C’mon, I know you’ve got your own quarters.”

Steve does: a cottage he shares with an RAF officer who’s off with his own sweetheart. “Finally,” breathes Steve, and feels the shape of Bucky’s smile against his cheek for just a second.

When they get to Steve’s quarters, Bucky flops down onto Steve’s bed, cocks his head, and favors Steve with a hungry kind of smile.

“Show me what you’ve got, Rogers. Take it all off.”

“You’re not gonna help me?”

“Not yet. C’mon, I wanna see what the marvels of science have done for you, pal.”

Steve flushes, but he sets about taking his uniform off under Bucky’s heated gaze. When he’s down to his underwear, he stops, puts his hands on his hips instead of crossing them across his chest like he wants to. “Well?”

“Holy shit,” says Bucky faintly. His eyes are wide now, and fixed on Steve’s chest. Yeah, Agent Carter had seemed pretty interested in that general region too. Steve again resists the urge to cross his arms over his chest, or fidget. He’s too nervous to be more than half-hard.

“Is this—are you still—I know I look different.” Steve can’t bring himself to ask what he really wants to know: do you still want me?

“C’mere,” beckons Bucky, and Steve joins him on the bed. Bucky arranges him so he’s propped up against the thin pillows, then straddles him, and Steve’s hips jerk up almost involuntarily. Bucky grins, pleased. “Oh, you’re eager, huh? Well, be patient, I’m not done yet.”

He lowers his head to Steve’s bare chest, and turns his head so his ear’s pressed against the skin over Steve’s heart. He listens there for a long moment, and Steve’s caught between the urge to smile and cry. He brings a hand up to run it through Bucky’s thick hair instead, and Bucky hums happily, turning his face to press a brief kiss to Steve’s chest. Maybe it’s just his imagination, but Steve can swear he feels the heat linger there, an invisible brand. Eventually, Bucky’s satisfied by the even, steady beats of Steve’s improved heart, and he leans up to kiss Steve, long and sweet.

“I really missed that,” whispers Bucky when he pulls away.
“Me too.”

Bucky continues his examination of Steve’s new body, running his hands over all the new muscles where before Steve had been little more than skin and bones. New body or not, Bucky’s touch feels the same: rough from his callouses, gentle with his care.

“C’mon, let’s see all of you,” says Bucky, and starts to tug Steve’s underwear off. Steve lifts his hips to help and then tries not to die of embarrassment when his cock starts to harden to full mast just from Bucky looking at him. “Oh wow. Look at you. Everything’s bigger, huh?”

Bucky takes Steve’s cock in his hand, carefully, almost experimentally, and just the touch of his warm hand is enough to make Steve moan and go fully hard. Steve hears Bucky’s breath catch, watches Bucky bite his plush lower lip.

“That’s gonna feel real good inside me,” says Bucky, low and dirty, his eyes gone dreamy, and Steve’s brain just about short circuits. “Tell me you got some vaseline.”

Fuck fuck fuck, Steve does not have vaseline. “No, shit, do you—”

Bucky shakes his head. “Another time, then,” he says, and begins stroking him.

Bucky, used to settling in for the long haul with Steve’s touchy dick, starts with a slow and steady pace. He’s visibly surprised when just that keeps him hard as nails, precome already pearling at the head of Steve’s dick. Steve starts to thrust up against Bucky’s hand.

“Faster, Buck, c’mon,” he says, and Bucky obliges. Steve wants to last longer, he does, but it’s been so damn long since Bucky’s touched him here, and it feels too good, better than Steve’s own hand by far. Bucky has new callouses, and the small catch of rough skin against the oversensitive skin of his cock is maddening. It’s little more than a minute before Steve comes messily all over Bucky’s hand and his own chest.

“Sorry,” says Steve.

“For what? That was great,” says Bucky with wide eyes. “Been that long for you, Steve? Women have gotta be all over you, looking like this now. You and that Agent Carter never…?”

“No! And, I mean, it’s been a few weeks for me, yeah, but—”

“Oh, so women have—”

“Yes, just not Agent Carter.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow as he pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and cleans them off some. “Really? The way you two were looking at each other? That red dress?”

“We haven’t spent much time together. Dunno if you noticed Buck, but there’s a war on. Agent Carter’s got better things to do.”

When they talked in the pub, she had said he could call her Peggy though. And she’d said she was looking forward to working together more. So maybe…

“Hmm,” says Bucky, narrowing his eyes. That’s his scheming look. Steve doesn’t know how Bucky’s gonna manufacture matchmaking opportunities in a war, but knowing Bucky, he’ll manage it if he thinks Peggy’s worthy of Steve. For now though, he drops it. “But there’ve been other women? C’mon Steve, spill.”
“You’re still wearing clothes,” whines Steve, tugging at Bucky’s uniform, and Bucky grins. He hesitates, though, before he begins taking off his jacket.

“Feel like a pile of bones compared to you right now,” he says with a wince.

Steve almost responds with a joke, almost makes some smart ass comment about Bucky really turning into him, but the anxious uncertainty in Bucky’s downcast eyes stops him. Bucky shouldn’t ever, ever doubt that Steve wants him.

“Buck. That doesn’t matter to me. I’ll—I’ll always want you, c’mon.” Bucky rolls his eyes, but his mouth softens into a small smile.

Steve rolls them over so he’s astride Bucky now, and helps Bucky undress, stopping to kiss every part of him he uncovers along the way. And yeah, once Bucky’s shirtless, Steve can see what Bucky means: he’s brutally lean now, ribs all too visible, the cut of his hips sharp. Steve resists the urge to bundle him up in warm clothes and bodily carry Bucky to the canteen and stuff him with food. At least his bruises have mostly faded. Thin and bruised or not, he’s still beautiful. Steve suspects Bucky will always be beautiful to him.

Steve kisses each new faint scar on Bucky’s chest, feeling Bucky go loose and relaxed under him.

“You’re not gonna distract me, Steve, what’d you get up to on that USO tour, huh? You can’t tell me you looked like this and none of those girls laid a hand on you.”

Steve pulls Bucky’s pants and socks off, and Bucky shimmies out of his underwear too, impatient. His thick cock is already hard, and Steve sighs happily just seeing it. He has a lot of plans for Bucky’s dick tonight.

“There’s my best guy,” Steve says to Bucky’s dick, and Bucky laughs, bright and beautiful. It’s been too damn long since Steve’s heard that laugh.

“My eyes are up here, pal! And c’mon, the USO girls, tell me.”

“What about you? Your letters were awfully vague.” Steve’s hard again by now. He positions their hips together and moves against Bucky, making Bucky gasp and moan.

“Didn’t want the censors knowing my business, and a work camp isn’t exactly—oh my god, you’re already hard again?”

“Yeah, it’s like that now,” says Steve, trying and failing not to blush. Bucky’s delighted. “That’s, uh, why—with the USO girls. I got the serum, and god, it was like puberty again, only worse, ‘cause I could just go again and again, didn’t get tired. I jerked off so much. Thought of you every goddamn time.”

At that, Bucky puts his arms around Steve and kisses him, deep and hungry. “Yeah. Me too,” he says.

They’re rutting against each other in earnest now, messy and uncoordinated, neither of them used to Steve’s new size just yet. Steve takes hold of both of their cocks and starts stroking, swallowing Bucky’s groan with a kiss. When they pull apart, they’re both breathing hard, and Bucky’s eyes are dark and intent.

“So, you jerked off a lot,” says Bucky breathlessly. “Then you, what, propositioned some of the girls? Don’t tell me that fancy serum of yours gave you the ability to flirt too.”
“Nah, the girls propositioned me. I dunno what you want me to say, Buck, we, uh—”

“Fucked, you fucked them. Don’t make that face, I’m sure you fucked them very politely and respectfully, it’s still fucking. Was it good? I bet it was good. I told you it would be, if you’d just—”

Steve squeezes and tugs on their dicks just a little harder, and Bucky moans. “It was good, it was perfect. They were all, um, real happy I could go again so quickly.”

“I’ll bet,” says Bucky with a dirty grin. His face has a pretty flush now, his mouth very red, eyes sparkling. God, the way he looks at Steve. It’s just the same as always, open and devouring, like he can’t ever get enough of Steve. Steve could almost live with how everyone else in the world wrote little Steve Rogers off, so long as Bucky looked at him like that. “Keep talking.”

Steve’s no good at this, compared to Bucky, but he can make an attempt. “Maggie, she’s as tall as you are, and she, uh, was on top, and I want—I want you, like that. Riding me.” Bucky’s trembling just a little now, moving faster under him. He’s close.

“Yeah. God, yeah, I want that, I really, really—you’re sure you haven’t got any vaseline—or lotion, or—?” Steve shuts Bucky up with a kiss, and Bucky comes in one hot rush, letting out a broken kind of moan into Steve’s mouth, which sends Steve over the edge too.

It takes them a while to catch their breath. Bucky eyes Steve’s cock speculatively.

“Buck…” says Steve waringly. He’s not gonna fuck Bucky dry, they’d tried that once out of desperation and it had not been pleasant for either of them.

“What? How many times in a row can you go?” he asks.

“I got to seven on my own once, then it kinda just started hurting.”

Bucky’s eyes go unfocused. “Oh my god.”

They don’t quite get to seven that night: they break for a cobbled together dinner of bread and cheese, and then Bucky dozes some, mindful of the time. Steve’ll have to make sure Bucky gets back to the quarters he’s sharing with Gabe Jones before the others wonder where he is or what he’s doing. Still, even if it’s just for a couple hours, it’s nice to share a bed again. It’s nice to be in Bucky’s arms again, even now that he’s big. Bucky’s arm is wrapped around Steve’s chest, his hand resting over Steve’s heart, just like always.

“Steve…”

“Yeah, Buck? We’ve got another half hour or so before you should go.”

“I know. I just wanted to say—I’m happy you’re healthy, and I’m happy you’re here, but I wish—I wish you’d stayed home, Steve. This war…I wish you’d stayed away from it.”

“There’s no staying away from it, Buck, that’s the point. Either you stand and fight, or—”

“I know, god, I know. But—this is gonna be bad. I don’t think you know how bad. What it’s like, the things you have to do…”

Steve takes Bucky’s hand, and presses a kiss to each of his rough knuckles. “We’ll get through it together,” he promises.
By the end of their second mission behind enemy lines, Steve begins to understand how bad it is. No amount of back alley fights or bootcamp-drilled lessons have prepared him for what it feels like to kill a man. No Captain America propaganda reels are ever going to show the shield splattered with blood and brains and viscera. Steve throws up on the riverbank before he can finish cleaning the shield off in stream of icy water.

Bucky just rubs his back, gentle, and hands him a canteen. When Steve meets his eyes, they’re grave and cold, flat grey like storm clouds.

“This is what the war’s like, Cap,” he says, and it’s his toneless talking-to-superior-officers voice. Steve feels the new reality of it click into place with awful finality: they’re not just Steve and Bucky, two poor, queer kids from Brooklyn any more.

“Yeah. I get that,” says Steve, and hates how harsh the words sound.

Bucky’s hand moves up to Steve’s neck, his thumb stroking along Steve’s pulse point. “We’ll get through it together,” he offers, soft now.

Steve and Bucky take advantage of every single free night they can when they’re back at HQ in London between missions. Bucky is unwilling to risk anything more than furtive, quiet hand jobs when they’re out in the field, but in London, in Steve’s private quarters, he’s willing to take his time, be thorough, the way he always did in their shithole apartment. And Steve can return the favor, can carve out a few hours’ worth of peace for Bucky, a few hours where the harsh distance on his face disappears to reveal Steve’s sweetly wicked Bucky, all bright eyes and I-dare-you grin. The war has changed them both, body and soul, but Steve knows he’s still Bucky’s best guy, and Bucky’s as happy as ever to show that to Steve.

It’s a risk, still, of course. But everyone in the SSR knows that Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes are childhood friends, and it’s common enough to find Bucky stealing a nap in the relative peace of Steve’s quarters, or to find Steve and Bucky holed up together going over mission prep. If, sometimes, Bucky should happen to fall asleep there…well, Gabe’s happy enough to not be woken up by Bucky returning to their room, and who’s going to accuse Captain America of indecent behavior?

No one, unless they literally catch him in the middle of said indecent behavior.

There’s a short, sharp knock on the door, and Peggy’s voice follows it, “Steve? I’m sorry to bother you so late, but Phillips asked me to bring by these updated troop movement maps—” and she’s opening the door before Steve and Bucky can even make an attempt at concealing themselves or what they’re up to.

Steve tries desperately to think of an innocent excuse for being naked in bed with his mostly-naked best friend, and fails. For a long, frozen moment Peggy just stares at them, and they stare at Peggy. Steve briefly contemplates putting some belated distance between himself and Bucky, but Bucky’s hand is gripping Steve’s shoulder tight enough to bruise, and Steve’s naked under the thin blanket they’d only just managed to throw over themselves. As it is, Bucky’s long, bare legs are poking out from under it, and his skinny ankles look equal parts vulnerable and damning.

Bucky tries a wobbly, “Uh, this isn’t what it looks like.”

“Oh? What is it then?” asks Peggy in a disarmingly breezy tone. She closes the door behind her with a gentle click.
“This is... for medical purposes,” says Bucky, then his face twitches, as if rebelling against the dumbest way a man has ever explained having their hand on another man’s dick. Steve feels himself blushing so hard he’s surely moments away from bursting into literal flames.

“Medical purposes,” repeats Peggy flatly.

Bucky, apparently, has fully committed to his idiocy. “Uh huh. Because of the serum, Steve has to...you know...” Bucky makes a vague, yet deeply obscene gesture with his hand. The hand that had just been on Steve’s dick. “…a lot. His, uh...”

“Libido?” Peggy suggests.

“Yeah, that, is um, pretty strong, and I’m just...helping him out?”

“As friends do.”

Bucky nods, and puts on an expression of wide-eyed, too-sweet innocence that has no place on his face given just what his hands and mouth had been doing mere minutes ago. “Yes.”

“And is there a medical purpose to you being mostly unclothed and...” Peggy’s eyes flick down to the obvious bulge of Bucky’s erection. They shift closer together, as if to try to hide the evidence. “…excited?”

Now Bucky flounders, and Steve, having not yet self-immolated into the sweet release of death, decides to just throw himself on this particular grenade.

“Peggy. Me and Buck, we’re, uh...we’ve always...” Steve doesn’t even have a word for this. They’re not exactly sweethearts, but this isn’t about just sex for them either. Bucky’s just...everything, to Steve. Bucky shoots him a warning, terrified glare, but then he looks at Peggy, and something he sees on her face makes him abruptly relax back into his usual loose-limbed sprawl.

“Been queer for each other,” finishes Bucky. “You gonna get us blue carded out for it? Or do you wanna join us?” Steve jerks and flinches full body against Bucky, but Bucky just grips him tight and hisses into his ear, “Look at her, Steve.”

Steve looks. Peggy hasn’t moved since she closed the door behind her, and she looks as perfect as always, hair and lipstick crisp and in place, her cheeks flushed with anger—or no, not anger. Her red, red lips are parted a little, her eyes bright, and her breath is coming fast, and Peggy doesn’t get like that when she gets angry, she goes cold and hard, like Bucky—oh.

“Join you. For medical purposes?”

“It’s a serious case, Agent Carter. I could use an extra hand,” says Bucky, voice gone low and dark, and Steve can’t help the desperate, strangled moan he lets out. Bucky’s already sliding his hand back down towards Steve’s cock.

“Oh dear lord,” whimpers Peggy, a hand spasming in the fabric of her skirt. She tosses the file in her other hand onto the room’s small dresser. She clears her throat, affects a brisk air. “Well. If it’s a serious case,” she says, and begins to unbutton her uniform jacket.

“Um,” says Steve, unable to look away. Peggy throws her jacket on the dresser too, then starts unbuttoning her shirt to reveal her brassiere.

“I told you, you gotta marry this woman, Steve.”
Peggy laughs, giddy, and steps out of her heels, shimmies free of her skirt. She rolls her nylons off carefully, and Bucky’s hand is working Steve’s cock again, Peggy’s eyes fixed on the sight, Steve’s eyes fixed on Peggy.

“You’d give him up, Sergeant Barnes?”

“Isn’t about giving him up, Agent Carter. Steve’s the best, I’m happy to share him with the people who agree.”

Even in this insane situation, that makes Steve fairly melt, and he smiles, leans his head back in search of Bucky’s mouth, and Bucky meets him for a sweet kiss, shyer than usual, given they have an audience. When he opens his eyes again to look at Peggy, she’s naked, and glorious with it. She could be a sculpture lit to perfection in some gallery, if not for how lush and inviting her every curve is. Steve wants desperately to touch her, to cup her full breasts in his hands, to taste between her legs.

“Oh my god,” he and Bucky say in unison, and Peggy laughs.

“I’m flattered, I think.”

“You absolutely should be,” says Bucky with fervor.

After a brief hesitation, Peggy moves towards the bed. For a moment, they’re all still, frozen in a collective inhalation of breath and uncertainty, and then Peggy darts forward to kiss Steve, one cool hand on his jaw. It’s a firm, decisive sort of kiss, commanding, even. Steve opens his mouth to her, lets her taste him.

When they break apart, Peggy is flushed and breathless. “Well. Carry on then,” she says, and settles herself on the edge of the bed beside Steve.

“Yes, ma’am,” says Bucky, and jerks Steve off until he comes, which doesn’t take long once Peggy leans over to kiss Steve again. “Don’t worry, he’ll be ready to go again in a few minutes,” Bucky reassures Peggy as he makes a vague effort to clean them up with the sheet.

Steve’s face flares with heat, and gathers his courage. “Until then, can I—” He touches Peggy’s bare thigh, her skin impossibly soft, and scoots awkwardly down the bed. Peggy’s eyebrows fly up, but she sits up, lets her thighs fall open.

“Alright,” she says, and Steve gets himself situated, positions his head between her legs where she’s already wet enough to make her dark pubic hair glisten, the scent of her arousal thick.

Steve parts her folds with his fingers, just the way Maggie and Grace had shown him months ago, and bends to taste her. Peggy makes a sound that’s somewhere between a sigh and a moan, thrillingly new, as he licks inside of her. Bucky murmurs something low and indistinct to Peggy that makes her laugh and moan again, and that’s it, that’s Steve’s favorite sound in the whole world, Bucky’s bedroom-rough voice melding with Peggy’s pleasure. He can’t help the happy hum he makes as he keeps tasting Peggy, and he feels her thighs shiver around him. The heat of this somehow always surprises him, like it’s a secret he discovers every time: the wet warmth, how messy and human it is, and the reaction when he teases the exact right spot with his tongue.

He glances up when Peggy’s breathy pleased noises are muffled, and sees Bucky kissing her. He recognizes that kiss. It’s Bucky’s devastatingly patient kiss, the one that slowly draws you into gasping, dizzy bonelessness before you entirely know what’s happened. Steve goes kind of slack-jawed watching them: the perfect dips of their clavicles, their graceful necks, Bucky’s hand on her cheek. Without turning from Bucky, Peggy puts a hand on Steve’s head, and pushes him back down.
Well, alright then. He gets back to work, licking deep and long strokes inside Peggy.

Between his and Bucky’s attentions, and Peggy’s directions to go faster and press harder, it’s not long before he can feel Peggy’s thighs tensing, the wet heat of her clenching and fluttering. The long, throaty moan she lets out as she comes reverberates through Steve, and shoots straight down to his cock, already hard and aching again.

“You had better be ready again now,” says Peggy as she pulls him up. Bucky’s looking at them both with dazed, wide eyes like he can’t quite believe what’s happening, and Steve gives him what’s probably an equally dazed, stupid grin back. He can’t believe it either.

“Yeah, I’m ready,” Steve tells Peggy, and Bucky chucka rubber at him, settles in to apparently watch. “You’re next, you gonna last?” he asks Bucky, whose cock is looking pretty damn hard.

Bucky smiles lazily. “Yeah, I’ll last. Don’t leave the lady waiting.”

Peggy stretches under Steve, her flushed face still soft with the aftermath of pleasure. Steve can’t resist caressing her breasts, her dark pink nipples. She arches up into his touch, gasps and moans when Steve’s thumb traces circles around one nipple.

“Get that rubber on, Steve, and get in here.”

She’s so wet he slides in easy, and Peggy wraps her legs around him to take him in deeper. She smiles up at him, eyes half-lidded, and it looks like a dare. Steve maybe falls more in love right then, and Peggy maybe sees it, because her smile widens. After a few mismatched thrusts, Peggy sets the pace and Steve follows.

“Now that is a beautiful sight,” says Bucky, and Steve glances over at him to see him watching raptly, his breath coming fast, before Peggy commands his attention again.

“Harder,” Peggy orders, and Steve hears Bucky moan. Maybe he’s touching himself while he watches them. “Make yourself useful, Barnes.”

Bucky swears, but he obeys, sliding a hand between Steve and Peggy to tease at her clit, and the way Peggy cries out rocks through Steve and Bucky both.

“Harder, faster, both of you, come on,” gasps Peggy, and Steve obliges her, still careful with his strength, until he feels her tighten around his cock, until she throws her head back in abandon, mouth open and red. He’s still rocking into her when she pulls him down for a wet and filthy kiss, and that’s all it takes for Steve’s orgasm to crash through him.

Steve flops over, half onto Bucky, who yelps and moans.

“Oh Barnes…if you don’t—” Bucky’s still hard, precome smearing the head of his cock, and his eyes are hazy and wild. Steve can’t believe he hasn’t come yet.

“Christ, I don’t care who, just—please—”

“Yeah, okay,” says Steve, and gingerly climbs over Bucky so Bucky’s in the middle, fumbling to strip the used condom off at the same time.

He and Peggy reach for Bucky’s cock at the same time, and the sound Bucky makes is something between a sob and a moan. It’s too soon for even Steve to get hard again, but if he could, that sound
would have done it. Steve and Peggy both stroke Bucky’s cock until he comes, shaking.

It takes them all a long moment to catch their breaths, and then they survey the mess they’ve made. Bucky, fastidiously as ever, makes a dissatisfied noise and crawls over Steve to stumble out of bed, still naked, and gets a wet washcloth. Peggy shifts closer to Steve and rests her head on his chest while she peers at Bucky with curiosity, and some appreciation. Steve doesn’t blame her: Bucky’s long, leanly muscled form makes for a nice view, even if he is still skinnier than he ought to be. Once he’s wiped himself down, Bucky comes back to start on Steve and Peggy. Steve’s used to this little routine, but Peggy’s not, and she seems rather bemused. She’s making no move to leave though, instead stroking her hand idly up and down Steve’s chest.

“Do you two do this all the time back home? Bring a woman home?” Peggy asks, once they’re all marginally less sticky and Bucky’s gotten back under the covers again. There’s no particular suspicion or accusation in her tone, only curiosity.

Steve snorts and shakes his head. “No, Buck just went out with women on his own. You saw me before the serum, you think women gave me the time of day?”

Peggy sits up and frowns down at him. “No, Buck just went out with women on his own. You saw me before the serum, you think women gave me the time of day?”

Bucky props himself up on one elbow and beams at Peggy with that smile that makes his whole face crinkle up with joy and his eyes sparkle. It’s a smile that never fails to have Steve smiling back, besotted, and it seems to catch Peggy by surprise. But then, she hasn’t had a chance to see it until now. There’s not much for Bucky to smile about in this war. Peggy’s surprise quickly melts away in favor of a smile of her own.

“That’s what I always said! Steve deserved to get way more than the time of day even before he got all these stupid muscles, I don’t know why no one else—”

“Buck…” groans Steve, hoping to forestall the familiar rant, and Peggy laughs.

“I think we’ll get on quite well like this,” she says, and leans over Steve to press a quick kiss to Bucky’s cheek. Steve has to pull her down for a kiss of his own after that, and he can feel her still smiling while she kisses him. Far too quickly, she starts and breaks away with a little gasp. “Oh damn, the maps! I came here to show you the maps—”

She gets up to retrieve the papers from the dresser, and Steve definitely ought to be thinking of the troop movements she’d mentioned earlier, but Peggy’s still naked, and the view from behind is very nearly as good as it is from the front. Steve’s already getting ideas. So’s Bucky, judging by his small, sharp intake of breath. Peggy returns to spread the maps out on the bed.

“Look, we think this might impact the mission planned for…”

Bucky grins at Steve, eyebrows raised: can you believe this? Steve grins back, then leans forward to examine the maps. This is going to work, he thinks. It’s crazy, maybe, but it’s going to work.

In the cold light of day, Steve’s a little more worried about just how this is going to work. Bucky’s already mentally planning Steve and Peggy’s wedding, Peggy having comprehensively won him over by expressing her appreciation for Steve’s smaller self, but Steve’s acutely aware that spending a night together doesn’t mean anything. He pulls Peggy aside before the Commandos leave SSR HQ for their next mission.

“Listen, about the other night…”
“You and Barnes haven’t anything to fear from me,” says Peggy. “Though really, you could stand to be more careful.”

“Right, yes, though you did sort of barge in—” Peggy raises an eyebrow in warning and Steve moves on. “I meant—you and me? Or, uh, you and Bucky…are we, what’s—”

“We’re in the middle of a war, Steve. I neither require nor want any promises. I’ve seen too many of those broken by Nazi bombs. Let’s just…continue attending to your medical problem, shall we say, and when this is all over…” Peggy takes a quick look around, sees that no one’s looking, and reaches out to grasp Steve’s hand. She gives it a hard squeeze.

Steve doesn’t say that after the war is its own kind of risky promise.

Instead, he just says, “Alright,” and smiles, and wishes he could kiss her. Her lipstick would leave a telltale mark though. He moves to leave before they’re spotted by any curious eyes, but Peggy stops him with another squeeze of her small, strong hand.

“But Steve…it’s you and me. Barnes is delightful, and a lovely bed partner, but you’re the one I want. I’ll take the matched set as it were, and happily, but I’m here for Steve Rogers.”

Steve is the luckiest man alive, surely. He nods, ducks his head, and squeezes Peggy’s hand back carefully.

“I’ll do my best not to disappoint. Fair warning, I’m pretty sure Bucky’s already planning our wedding.” Peggy’s eyebrows fly up. “Not that I’m proposing. Not that I wouldn’t, of course, I would, but you said after, and, of course, you haven’t even said yes, not that I’m asking yet, just—”

Peggy laughs, and presses a finger against his lips for a brief second. “Darling, shh. Quit while you’re ahead. I know.”

“Not tonight honey, I have a headache,” says Bucky with a tired smile. His voice is low and hoarse, his eyes red-rimmed.

Peggy tsks, presses a hand against his forehead. “You’re feverish.”

Steve had hoped a warm bath, more warm drinks, and a nap in Steve’s quiet quarters would help Bucky shake the cold he’s been coming down with since the moment they got back on their transport to SSR HQ, but Bucky’s clearly had no such luck. He’s leaning in the doorway of Steve’s quarters, looking little the better for resting there while Steve and Peggy finished up one last briefing before tonight’s planned dinner date.

“Just a cold, and too much damn time in the rain,” says Bucky. He’d spent the better part of their last mission out in the freezing rain, running from sniper nest to sniper nest to provide the rest of them with needed cover fire. “You two go without me, I’ll rest up here.” By the end of the sentence, Bucky’s voice has all but disappeared, and he winces.

“Maybe you should go to the infirmary,” says Steve.

Bucky just shakes his head and shoves Steve out into the hall, jerking his head in a clear go gesture.

“Go to Peggy’s after, I’ll be fine,” rasps Bucky with what’s left of his voice.

“If you’re sure…” Steve says, and after a quick look down both ends of the hallway, he presses a quick kiss to Bucky’s heated cheek.
“Feel better,” Peggy orders, with a kiss to Bucky’s other cheek, and Bucky accepts it with a smile, and a lazy salute.

Going out alone with Peggy is still something of a nerve-racking novelty. They have to be careful to go out to pubs and restaurants that are well outside of the SSR’s usual London orbit, and they rarely have the time and effort to spare for it. Far easier to sneak into each other’s quarters. And going out on a date alone, without Bucky or the awkward contrivance of a double date, is still decidedly new to Steve. He’s not sure he’s any good at it. They have an unspoken rule not to talk about the war, or at least to try not to, and Steve can’t think what else Peggy would want to talk to him about, so he asks about her instead, and from there, the conversation builds and flows more easily. By the end of dinner, Steve thinks he hasn’t fucked it up too badly, or at least, Peggy’s charmed by his fuck ups, so that’s alright.

He mumbles an apology on their walk back to Peggy’s flat. “Sorry, I know I’m not good at…this. Women. Dates.”

Peggy just takes his arm and smiles at him, eyes sparkling even in the faint glow of the dimmed streetlights. “Darling, don’t worry about it. You’re just fine. Now tell me, surely you read something other than those military history tomes I’ve seen in your trunk, what’s your favorite book?”

It’s a definite softball as far as conversation goes, but Steve takes a cheerful swing at it anyway, and they pass the rest of the walk gently mocking each other’s taste in literature. When they finally get to Peggy’s flat, Peggy wastes no time in kissing Steve. It’s no chaste, end-of-the-date kiss; it’s a dirty promise that has him gripping the curve of her hips, then lower, his over-eager cock already filling.

“Did you ever almost tell me, Steve?” she murmurs against his lips between biting kisses. She cups his cock through the front of his trousers, and he only barely holds back a groan. “About this particular side effect of the serum? Because darling, I would have been happy to offer some medical assistance on the matter.”

“I, uh, no? I was too, you know. Embarrassed.”

“That’s a shame,” she says, and nips at his lower lip, almost hard enough to draw blood.

She starts pushing him towards her bedroom, divesting him of his jacket and shirt and undershirt along the way. When they get to Peggy’s small, tidy bedroom, Peggy gives him one last firm push, and Steve falls backwards onto the bed, looking up wide-eyed at Peggy. She stands at the foot of the bed, still unruffled and put-together in an emerald green dress, a rare and much appreciated alternative to her uniform. She puts her hands on her hips and surveys him right back, and Steve squirms under her attention. A pleased smile lifts one corner of her red lips, then she bends down to yank Steve’s shoes and socks off, business-like.

“Trousers and pants off,” she commands, and Steve scrambles to obey. “Did you just get yourself off alone in all those hotel rooms?”

“No. Or yes, but not only—the USO girls, they—we—”

His stomach sinks, hoping Peggy won’t be put off by this. She’s never seemed especially jealous of Bucky, too charmed and bemused by Bucky’s enthusiasm for her and Steve, but there had been that time Private Lorraine kissed him—

Peggy’s eyes widen. “Good lord, don’t tell me you fucked all of them.”

“No! Not all! And I never made any untoward advances, I swear, it was all—”
Peggy laughs, then she leans down to shut him up with a kiss. When she pulls away, she pats his cheek. “Of course you didn’t. I’m quite certain you wouldn’t know how. I only wish you’d told me about this particular…medical issue, is all.”

It feels strangely obscene to be laid so literally bare under Peggy’s gaze, lying naked on her bed while she’s still fully dressed, like he’s the blue movie she’s about to watch. His hands itch to touch himself, to touch her. The way Peggy’s eyes narrow suggests he ought to wait, so instead he scoots back on the bed until he’s sitting up against the headboard. He resists the urge to cover up his straining cock: it’s not as if Peggy doesn’t know he’s turned on. And the whole point is to show her, isn’t it? He watches avidly as she steps out of her heels, and watches more avidly still when she hikes the skirt of her dress up so she can carefully unroll her nylons, practically more precious than gold with the rationing.

“What would you have done?” he asks. He already has his own ideas: Peggy riding him, or her red lips stretched around his cock, all the things he imagined during those nights alone in hotel rooms.

But Peggy doesn’t say any of that, and doesn’t move to touch him. “I would have asked for a demonstration, Rogers.” Once she’s tucked her nylons safely away somewhere in her dresser, she turns to Steve. She tosses a tube to him—ointment? no, lube—and a small towel. “So get to it.”

“What?”

“Go on. Touch yourself. Show me what the…problem is.” She comes around to sit beside him on the bed, both feet still on the floor, disconcertingly prim and proper, apart from her mussed lipstick. Her hair is still pinned up perfectly, the curls just so.

“I—okay,” he says.

It takes a couple tries to get the lube open, and he fumbles some onto his hand. He starts to stroke himself, finally, and Peggy watches. She’s not unmoved by the sight—her lips part, just a little, and her breath starts to come fast—but she doesn’t touch him, or herself. She just watches, hands folded in her lap, as proper as a schoolgirl. Even so, just her watching him is enough to make his heart pound hard and fast, fast enough that he almost expects it to trip into its old unsteady rhythm.

“What did you think of, when you did this alone in all those hotel rooms?” she asks, in a tone that could almost be casual if not for how her voice has dipped lower than usual.

“You. Bucky. The USO girls, sometimes.”

“Tell me,” she orders, and Steve closes his eyes in mingled mortification and pleasure.

He’s not good at this, not like Bucky is, but he tries, and he talks until it’s too much, talks about Peggy’s mouth and Bucky’s hands and Maggie’s strong thighs, until Peggy’s unwavering, hungry stare and the filthy things he’s describing, and the feeling of his own hand on his cock, all get to be too much, and he comes into the towel. Peggy darts forward to kiss him, and now there’s no sign of her earlier reserve. Peggy kisses a lot like she punches, savage and bruising, nothing held back. She grips him by the hair, hard, and kisses him until he can only make small, desperate noises into her mouth.

“Again,” she says when she sits back, breathing heavy.

He has to swallow hard before he asks, “You going to help?”

“Not yet. Is it too soon? You know, most women can—”
“I know, but gimme a few minutes here, Peg—”

“Very well,” she says with a smile, and kisses him again. He reaches for her, one hand to clutch at her hair, his other to palm at his over-sensitive dick, already on its way to filling to hardness again. “Just from kissing?” she asks.

“And you.”

Peggy lets out a pleased hum that’s almost, but not quite a moan, then starts kissing him again, and after that, it doesn’t take long at all before he’s thrusting up into his own hand, gasping into Peggy’s mouth. He comes again, short and sharp, already wanting more, chasing after that more in her mouth before she pulls away, breathing heavy.

“Again,” she says.

“Peggy—”

She grins, wicked and open-mouthed, red lipstick smeared and hair finally in disarray, and Steve rather abruptly realizes that he has a definite type.

“I’ll join you this time,” she says, but when he reaches for her, she darts back, and chides him with one wagging finger. “Ah ah ah. Separately. You like watching, don’t you? I see the way you look at me and Bucky.”

Peggy hikes her dress up and slides down her underwear, kicking it away, then settles across from him on the foot of the bed, on her knees so her dress rides up her thighs to reveal smooth skin. The arch of her back when she slides her fingers between her legs is a perfect bow, breasts pressing against her straining dress. Yeah. Steve likes to watch. He likes to watch the way Peggy bites her lower lip, the way her fingers are wet and slick, the pink flush spreading all over her pale skin. He waits until she comes the first time, her head thrown back, one long sigh of satisfaction as she shudders, and only then does he start jerking himself off again.

“Aren’t you feeling over-dressed yet?”

“No that you mention it…”

Peggy grins, and gets up to to take off her dress, then her brassiere. Steve’s eyes go immediately to her full and lovely breasts, her stiff nipples. He groans when she holds her breasts in her hands and teases at her nipples, brings one hand up to tease at his own, moving in time with his hand stroking his cock, faster and faster, until he comes again, falling back against the headboard with the force of it. Peggy does too, he thinks, when he hears her strangled and high moan. He’s made a mess of the towel by now, and he’s shaking with the aftershocks of a third orgasm in too-rapid succession. If Peggy says again, he’s not sure he’ll be able to stand it.

“Please,” he says, and she nods, and finally, finally joins him on the bed, finally touches him, kisses him again. He’s an ember, stoked into full flame.

It’s a haze of too much after that, lips and hands and tongues, sweat-slick skin. Peggy under him, legs and arms wrapped around him, her soft skin and her strong muscles. There’s a bright light in her dark eyes, a hard-edged smile on her lips, like this is a fight she intends to win. Soon enough he’s hard again, so hard his balls ache with it.

“Again?” asks Peggy, breathless, and he nods, slides into her, slow and careful, though she’s wet and ready. She digs her nails into his back, hard. “Don’t be a gentleman now, Steve. Harder, come on.”
When Peggy comes, her nails draw blood. When he does, he flares hot all over, white, devouring heat, empty of everything but feeling, and her.

Steve gave up on shame for what he is or what he wants a long time ago. I don’t have time, he’d told Bucky, fresh off another bout of pneumonia the winter after Steve’s ma had passed, and Bucky had flinched, tried to smile: you’ve got time, you’re on the mend. But he didn’t, he didn’t have time, that’s what he’d realized as he’d struggled to breathe with heavy, drowning lungs, and if he was going to keep breathing even when it hurt, even when his lungs fought him, then he was going to keep wanting Bucky too.

So Steve, still feverish and frantic with it, had grabbed hold of Bucky’s shirt and pulled him in close, smashing a desperate kiss in the general vicinity of his mouth. I don’t have time to pretend I don’t want you, he’d told Bucky. Maybe it was the fever that made the memory burn with such peculiar bright intensity, but Steve could never forget the wild, desperate joy and agony that had lit Bucky’s eyes then, before Bucky’d kissed him back, messy and bruising.

He was going to be dead by thirty, wasn’t he? There was no time to waste on being ashamed of loving Bucky. Steve would allow for caution, and he didn’t mind Bucky going with other girls, but he wasn’t going to let anyone dictate what he and Bucky were to each other. Fuck shame, and fuck the world’s ideas of what kind of love was right. Steve and Bucky didn’t have the goddamn time to waste on any of that.

So what he’s feeling now, when he has Peggy up against the wall in the file room after a late briefing, when Bucky goes down on his knees to suck Steve’s cock in the bombed out remains of one French town or another, when Bucky and Peggy both have him gasping and begging from the touch of their lips and their hands, it isn’t shame. It isn’t shame that makes his stomach twist and lurch when the tilt of Bucky’s head puts his jaw on tempting display, or when the curve of Peggy’s red lips turns sly. It isn’t shame that makes his heart pound at the sight of Bucky’s finely-wrought hands on the grips of guns and rifles, and it isn’t shame that makes his breath come fast every time he watches Peggy deck some asshole. It’s desperate, devouring want, and it’s there even when it shouldn’t be.

He’s here to fight a war, and still, still he wants. This body is meant for war, but it’s pretty good at other things, and sometimes the contrast fills Steve with—not shame, but something like it. Some sick suspicion that again, he doesn’t have time. That he’s asking too damn much of the world: his health, this body, winning the war, Bucky, Peggy. Surely he can’t keep all of it.

When he mentions it to Bucky, Bucky just shakes his head, that cold and grave look in his eyes again. He knows the war’s no place for it, but god, he misses the light and joy in Bucky’s eyes, his light-up-the-world smile.

“That’s not how it works, Rogers. No one deserves any of this, good or bad. No one’s sitting up on a throne in the sky, deciding whether to give or take it away. And if there is, he’s an evil son of a bitch. No one deserves this fucking war.”

And yet, when Steve does lose nearly all of it—Bucky, the possibility of a future with Peggy, his life—he can’t help but think, of course. He’s still going to be dead before he’s thirty.

It’s not so bad though, he thinks, Peggy’s voice fading in his ear as the Valkyrie rattles and jolts around him, as the ice rushes up to meet him. He always knew he wasn’t going to have much time.

At least this way, he’s going out for a reason. At least this way, he won’t have to bear the unbearable pain of Bucky’s loss for much longer.
When he wakes up again in the future, it’s sort of like coming out of the Vita-Ray chamber again, only with the distant quality of a lucid nightmare. You’re alive, and it’s 2012, he tells himself, over and over again, and eventually he figures he’ll believe it.

“Welcome back,” say all the SHIELD personnel, or, “Thank you for your service.” Steve can’t think of a response, so he just arranges his face into the appropriate Captain America mask, and smiles or nods.

The SHIELD doctors run test after test, take vials and vials of blood. There are new machines now: a tube that puts Steve in mind of an iron lung, and that makes terrible, deep noises as the doctors urge Steve to just stay as still as possible, and other scanners that make mysterious noises and yield bright and baffling renderings of Steve’s body. The doctors ask him to run on a treadmill, and he does, for miles and miles. The doctors ask him to lift weights, and he does, the heaviest ones they have. The doctors ask him questions like how do you feel and do you know where you are and do you understand what’s happened to you, and he gives them the answers that he thinks are right, if not quite true.

The SHIELD doctors ask him to jerk off into a cup too, just like the SSR did. They leave him alone in a gleaming exam room with a plastic cup and some magazines that are too lurid and artificial to stir him. He thinks of just going back out and saying, sorry, dick’s broken, but then he’d probably have to talk about it, and no thanks. He thinks of Bucky, an automatic reflex, because he’s thought of Bucky while jerking off for about as long as he’s been jerking off, but Bucky—

Grief swamps him, incomprehensibly vast, and Steve floats in it, some part of him at a wondering remove at the sheer oceanic immensity of it.

The last time—Steve’s chest heaves, because now he knows, it was the last time, ever, Bucky’s never going to—the last time he and Bucky had sex hadn’t been anything special. Just jerking each other off in the close and cold dark of their shared tent, before the assault on the train with Zola on it. Bucky had been nervy and quiet, and distant in that way he was on hard missions, the vital, warm parts of him locked away in favor of cold competence. But after enough devouring, deep kisses, Bucky had turned pliant and passionate, his hand on Steve’s cock tight and hot, Steve’s hand on Bucky’s cock moving in time with the restless motion of Bucky’s hips. The tent had been dark enough that even Steve’s enhanced eyes had barely been able to make anything out, so all he’d had to go on had been the small, desperate noises Bucky let out, the sounds of his heavy, hot breath and his heart. Steve had paid minute attention to each and every sound, and it had felt, in an obscure way, more intimate than the times they’d fucked looking each other in the eye.

Even now, the memory makes Steve hard, and Steve hates that, hates that his stupid dick just wants, deaf and dumb to Steve’s misery. He pulls his pants down and takes rough hold of his dick, stroking hard and mindless, until he comes into the stupid cup. It doesn’t feel good, feels more like throwing up, or a purging of some sickness, than any kind of pleasure, but it’s not like it matters. The doctors won’t be able to tell.

He puts himself back together, and leaves the exam room to hand over the cup. The nurse’s eyes widen at whatever look is on Steve’s face right now.

“Is there anything else,” he asks, and can’t quite find the energy to even make it sound like a question he cares about the answer to.

“Um, the doctors, they’d uh, like to do a sleep study tonight? Just to make sure—”

“I wake up again.” There’s an idea. Maybe he just won’t wake up.
“Uh, yeah, maybe, sir.”

He does the sleep study. He wakes up again. After that, SHIELD medical releases him.

*He’s perfectly healthy,* the doctors say, and *he needs some time and help to adjust,* and Steve agrees, because that seems reasonable enough, that sounds like something he should accept.

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Time passes, and Steve adjusts. He reads, and makes lists of things to look up, and learns about the 21st century. He fights some aliens. He goes on a road trip, tries to get the measure of people in this new century. (He keeps almost turning to his left to say something, but that space is empty now. In anonymous motel rooms at night, he keeps almost picking up a pencil to write a letter, but there’s no one to send it to.) He lets SHIELD put him to work fighting other bad guys. When Fury suggests a move to Washington DC, he accepts. He doesn’t particularly care where he lives. Nowhere is going to be home anyway.

He gets to know some people, a little. Tony Stark’s an asshole, but his kindnesses come sideways: he sees how little Steve has to do outside of SHIELD, and he keeps Steve busy with charitable events. He talks and talks, and doesn’t seem to mind that all Steve contributes to their conversations are dry asides that earn him sharp, surprised grins. When it comes to SHIELD, Steve’s pretty sure Natasha’s his handler, but she’s a good teammate too, and she’s refreshingly blunt with him, unimpressed by or uninterested in the legend Captain America’s become.

SHIELD makes him see a psychiatrist a couple times a month. Steve gets the impression that it’s just some bureaucratic formality, because once the psychiatrist is sufficiently reassured that Steve’s rational and functional, he lets their sessions slip into bland back and forth about Steve’s impressions of the 21st century. He asks how Steve feels, sometimes, and Steve just says *fine* or sometimes *tired,* or *restless.*

None of that’s a lie, but it’s not the whole truth either.

The truth is that the things he feels rattle around inside of him, very small, in an enormous empty space. He’s certain people must be able to see it, how hollow he is, how much of him hasn’t come back. How much of him can’t come back, gone along with Bucky. But the psychiatrist doesn’t seem to notice, other people don’t seem to notice, except for Peggy on her good days. No matter how much he talks about his new SHIELD coworkers or the history he’s catching up on, he can’t hide that all he’s doing is existing, not from her.

“Oh Steve. I know it’s hard, but you must live,” she says, and that shames him, because Peggy had done just that, hadn’t she? She’d built a good life, done good work.

On her bad days, Peggy asks him where Bucky is. He can never bring himself to tell her Bucky’s dead.

She’s right though. He has to live. He has to do something outside of SHIELD and his Captain America duties. Exercise doesn’t count, he decides, given how much of that he does at the SHIELD gym. Art’s good, and Peggy loves every sketch and watercolor he takes her, but it’s a pretty solitary hobby, which was part of what had first drawn him to it when he was a kid, stuck in sickbed after sickbed. He’s not sure what else he’s got going for him, living-wise. That’s probably bad.

“I’m not good at this,” he tells Peggy during one visit, after Peggy’s mouth has gone all pinched and sad at how little Steve has to share that’s not work-related.

“At what, living? Don’t be ridiculous.”
“No! I mean—social things! People! It was Bucky who—” Who’d dragged Steve out into the world beyond art classes and museums and assorted protests. Bucky who’d talked to people, who’d dragged Steve to dance halls and movies and shows.

Peggy takes his hand. “I know. But darling, you know what he wanted for you. A full life.”

“With you,” whispers Steve miserably, bringing her hand up to his mouth to press a kiss to her thin, dry skin. Peggy gives him a tremulous, teary smile.

“We’re both of us too late for that.”

For a moment, they sit in the silence of what they could have had: Steve and Peggy married, Bucky as best man; Bucky settling down on the same block as them with a woman who deserved him and who maybe wouldn’t mind sharing him; no children for Steve and Peggy, thanks to the serum, but maybe Bucky would have—he’d been so good with his little sisters…the dream is too painful to hold onto, burning like a coal straight from the fire, and crumbling to ash just as quickly.

Peggy wipes at the tears gathered in his eyes. “No use weeping over might-have-beens. Don’t get lost in mourning, darling. You will find new friends, new companions. I did, though I still missed you two very much.”

Right now, Steve can’t imagine it, even with Peggy as proof that it’s possible. He nods anyway, and promises her he’ll try.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, Steve's sexual odyssey in the 21st century.
Chapter 2

He really does mean to try to start making friends in the 21st century. He googles it, like he does with everything he has questions about nowadays, and Google gives him some helpful articles about how to go about making new friends. It seems like it’s a not uncommon problem for people around his age to end up in a new city, far from their usual social circle and lacking in friends nearby. Even though the circumstances are wildly different, it does make Steve feel like less of a freak.

And hey, there are even websites and apps that will match you up with potential friends. Though, okay, after some more exploration, Steve sees that those websites aren’t so much for new friends as they are for assignations—hookups, people call them hookups nowadays—or sexual and romantic relationships. And, well, Steve’s not opposed to that.

His libido is still serum-enhanced. At this point, he’s given up on hoping it’s some sort of serum-provided puberty that’ll pass, and it’s gotten worse, somehow. He gets hard at any and every little thing: the sight of a lithe, shirtless man stretching on the Mall before a run; the brief touch of skin against skin when his neighbor Kate brushes past him in the hallway; god, even the short grunts and groans from people lifting weights at the gym. It all goes straight to his cock, bypassing his brain entirely. Jerking off a lot barely seems to help.

Steve hasn’t had sex with another person in almost a year, hasn’t actually wanted to, beyond the demands of his stupid dick, but he’s starting to feel pretty desperate for some form of release that isn’t just him and his hand. So Steve adjusts his priorities from “find a friend” to “find someone to fuck.” The 21st century seems considerably more accepting of casual sex, as Rumlow and the rest of the strike team have more than amply demonstrated with their gross locker room talk, and it seems common enough to look for someone to spend the night with. This should be easier than it was back in Steve’s day, right?

It’s not.

At first, Steve just thinks he hasn’t got the hang of 21st century flirting and dating norms. Sure, Steve’s not that great at flirting, he gets that, that’s not news to him. But nowadays, no one even seems to realize that Steve’s trying to flirt. The second anyone recognizes him, they call him “Sir” or “Captain,” and the conversation follows well-worn grooves where he’s thanked for his service and asked about how he’s adjusting to the future. Steve’s compliments are met by blushes and stammering, his invitations to coffee or dinner get wide-eyed, flustered demurrals. It’s nothing like when Steve was small and girls turned him down with kind or pitying smiles, or even outright disgust. No, people are interested, Steve can tell. But he still can’t get a date, or much of anything other than selfie photos with awkward and starry-eyed fans.

Sexual frustration drives him to the 21st century’s vast and varied collection of readily available pornography for every taste imaginable, and a whole lot of tastes Steve had never even imagined. The internet, so helpful. Jerking off to blue movies is a very slight improvement over jerking off alone in the shower.

Out of morbid curiosity, he searches for Captain America porn. There’s kind of a lot of it, in a lot of different configurations, and almost all of it is ridiculous. Steve still watches it, of course, and it’s funny when it’s cheap and stilted videos of Cap getting fucked by some huge guy in Hulk-green body paint. It gets decidedly less funny when it’s Cap with thinly-veiled versions of Peggy, or Bucky. And anyway, watching parody versions of himself get fucked in blue movie after blue movie while Steve himself can’t get a single hookup is a special kind of hell.
“God…bless…America—” grunts one fake Cap as he’s pounded in the ass by an improbably burly fellow “soldier.” Some heinous, electronic version of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* plays in the background, the slap of skin against skin an obscene counterpoint. Steve still gets hard. He glares at his dick, betrayed.

After a month of failures, Steve gives up on trying to flirt with people and pick them up in person. Maybe that’s just too old-fashioned for modern times, or maybe it’s just too hard for people to get past the Captain America factor in person. It’s the 21st century, right? People all arrange their sexual liaisons via app now. Steve can roll with the times. He downloads Tinder and Grindr to his phone, and sets up his profiles. He doesn’t advertise that he’s Captain America, obviously, that’s a security and public relations nightmare. But he doesn’t bother to hide his identity either, and just posts pictures of his own face and body, and lists his name as Steve. He’s not going to have sex with anyone under false pretenses.

He considers just waiting to see if people will contact him, but impatience wins out, and he begins swiping through the array of single men and women the app tells him are nearby. There are a lot of them.

Once he’s got the hang of it, Steve’s not sure he likes using Tinder and Grindr. It’s simple enough, but flipping through people’s profiles and evaluating them for sexual liaison purposes like he’s going through a Sears catalog of sex feels uncomfortably predatory and crude. They’re all strangers, and some pictures and a brief profile really aren’t a lot to go on. Steve feels a brief thrill of guilt every time he swipes left on someone, and is almost tempted to send messages assuring them they’re perfectly lovely, but—and that’s exactly the kind of interaction this whole setup is meant to avoid. It still doesn’t sit quite right with Steve. There’s definitely something to be said for how straightforward it is though. And maybe this way he can avoid the whole Captain America factor.

When the messages begin pouring in, he realizes he can’t.

*Lol nice try “Cap.”*

*Are you seriously trying to catfish as captain america? Come on.* Steve has to look up what catfish means, because last he checked, it was a kind of fish, not a verb. Now it means conning someone online apparently. *I’m not catfishing,* he tries, but he’s ignored.

*Yeah, ur definitely “steve” who just hppens to look like captain america, ur definitely not a serial killer. Blocked, u CREEPER.*

*I’m pretty sure it’s illegal to IMPERSONATE CAPTAIN AMERICA for the purpose of hooking up.*

He tries to convince them it’s not a joke, or a trick: *hey, that’s my real name, and those are my real pictures. I’m just a guy, you know?* It doesn’t work.

*Impressive commitment, but srsly dude. No.*

*U really should be ashamed of urself*

*I’m reporting u*

Things don’t go better with the people who do think he’s genuine, or who are at least willing to play along. He gets a lot of pictures of people’s asses and groins in American flag-patterned underwear, which has got to be some kind of Flag Code violation, especially when there’s an erect dick pressing against the stars and stripes.
Hey cap, I’m real interested in saluting the flag. [Picture of a penis and a small American flag]

On a scale of one to America, how free are you this weekend? [Flag emoji]

Steve, huh? Can I still call you captain America in bed? ;) I’m real patriotic

You can call me agent Carter. Or ma’am. [Kissy lips emoji]

It’s an honor, captain Rogers. I’d love to go commando for you and howl in bed ;) [Eggplant emoji] [Dog emoji]

I’d love to be the Bucky to your Cap Steve ;) I look real good in booty shorts [Picture of a nicely firm ass encased in tight red shorts]

That one makes Steve’s stomach drop and his heart seize before he remembers: those stupid fucking comics and cartoons. They’d turned Cap and the Commandos into caricatures, and it had been kind of funny at the time, when the first comics had made their way to the actual Howling Commandos at the front. Bucky had been so hilariously outraged at being turned into a kid sidekick: I’m a year older than you! he’d exclaimed, waving the comic around wildly. And why is there a toy teddy bear version of me too?! The existence of the Bucky Bear had, admittedly, been pretty damned baffling, though it was very cute. It’s just propaganda, for the kids, you know? Steve had told him with a grin, and later, in their shared tent, with his hand on Bucky’s cock: if I wear the old Cap outfit for you, will you wear the shorts and the mask? For a moment, the awful, blank weariness Steve had grown all too used to seeing on Bucky’s face had lifted, and he’d laughed, breathless. Yeah, sure, but only if you fuck me in them. They never got the chance.

I’d prefer not to do that, Steve messages back.

After the third person messages him with some variation on call me bucky and boss me around, sir [Leering emoji], Steve snaps. It was the other way around, actually, he shoots back, and then closes the stupid app. He stares at the phone screen until it goes blurry, then presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, hard enough to see stars.

They hadn’t done it often. Steve was too damn ornery and prickly, unwilling to do anything that smacked of playing the fairy for Bucky. But sometimes, after Steve had lost a fight and limped home bleeding to pick another fight with Bucky about the fight he’d just lost—sometimes something dark and hungry had kindled in Bucky’s eyes, and something raw and desperate in Steve had risen up to meet it.

“What’d I tell you about picking fights when I’m not there to back you up, Rogers?”

Bucky’s tone is even, conversational, his hands gentle as he cleans blood off Steve’s face. It doesn’t settle Steve. He feels rattling, explosive, a grenade with the pin dangling loose, next to Bucky’s nonchalant calm.

“You aren’t the boss of me, Barnes,” he says with a snarl, and bats Bucky’s hand away.

“No?” asks Bucky, mild as ever.

His other hand comes up to the back of Steve’s neck, and it is not gentle. He grips Steve there, steady and hard, and squeezes, his thumb stroking back and forth along Steve’s angry pulse. The jolt of sensation that sends through him is so strong it ought to straighten his crooked spine. Steve gasps, tips his head back. When he meets Bucky’s eyes, the wild want there tells Steve he’s going to be begging by the end of the night.
“No,” he says anyway.

Bucky smiles, incongruously sweet, and sets about showing Steve how wrong he is. It’s the one fight Steve doesn’t mind losing.

On the limo ride back to Stark Tower after a children’s hospital visit, Tony grabs Steve’s phone the moment Steve pulls it from his pocket.

“Not that I’m not impressed you’re using a smartphone, I definitely had you pegged as a flip phone, phones are only for phone calls kind of guy, but tell me, are you actually using any apps on this? Or is it just a very shiny, very expensive brick that makes calls as far as you’re concerned?”

“Tony—” Steve makes a half-hearted lunge for his phone, but Tony just scoots away and holds it out of reach.

“Google, Maps, Seamless, oh hey is that a sketchpad app, nice, Yelp, Netflix…alright old man, not bad, not bad. No games?”

“They’re kind of obnoxious on such a small screen. I’ve got big hands.”

“Fair enough. Uh, wait, Tinder? Spangles, do you know what Tinder is? Did Clint put this on your phone? And you have Grindr too?!”

“Those apps are for finding new friends, aren’t they?” asks Steve, shooting for the kind of dry joke that can usually startle a bark of laughter from Tony. He apparently misses this time, because Tony doesn’t laugh.

“Oh Cap, my sweet summer child, no. Who told you that? Was it Clint? You can’t trust Clint. I’m deleting these from your phone, it’s for your own good. Oh my god, Grindr. I can’t even imagine. Your poor virgin eyes. You want new friends who share your weird old man hobbies or whatever, try Meetup, there’s a group for everything.”

Steve just installs the apps again when he’s back in DC. He tries reworking his profile with a firm explanation that he’s absolutely not catfishing, and adds a few new photos that he thinks make it obvious they’re actual selfies. Having seen many, many examples of the form by now, he thinks he’s got the hang of it, and takes one of himself, shirtless, in front of his bathroom mirror.

Lol nice photoshop skills.

Nice try, but cap’s way more built than that.

Okay, even if you pasted cap’s head onto your body, I’m interested.

“Is your phone on silent? You cannot have your phone go off during a briefing again, Fury will have an aneurysm. You remember how to put it on silent, right?”

“I put it on silent!” says Steve, not breaking his stride towards the briefing room. Despite her shorter legs, Natasha keeps up easily.

“Hand it over, let me check.” There’s no use arguing. Natasha will just start digging in his pockets herself, and that, Steve’s sure, would lead to an intensely mortifying is that a phone in your pocket or are you just happy to see me situation. He hands his phone over. “Good job, it is on silent!” She
doesn’t hand his phone back. He glances over to see her swiping through his phone with interest.

“Natasha. Give it back.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t look at your texts. Your apps are boring—wait. You have Tinder? And Grindr? Did Rumlow put these on your phone? Because you shouldn’t listen to that asshole.”

“According to Google, this is how people get dates now.”

Natasha sucks in a breath and grimaces. “Google’s not wrong, I guess. But you shouldn’t be using these. Talk about culture shock.” She stops him in the hallway, hands him his phone back with a keen and curious look. He checks his screen; Natasha’s deleted the apps. “You’re interested in dating?”

“Peggy says I oughta put myself out there. Really live in the 21st century.”

Natasha doesn’t smile, but her face softens like she wants to smile. “She’s not wrong. But don’t do it with hookup apps, god. Let me help you, I can introduce you to some people, set you up on some dates.”

Steve opens his mouth to object automatically, then thinks better of it. It can’t go any worse than Steve’s own attempts, can it? And Natasha will vet his dates too, so they’ll be decent people at least. Asking Natasha herself is out of the question: he likes her, he thinks they could be actual friends, eventually, but he’s still uncomfortably aware that in all likelihood, he’s part of her assignment. *Keep an eye on Cap, make sure he’s adjusting well, help him integrate into SHIELD...* Steve would rather not have *engage in casual sex with Cap* be part of that assignment, it’s unfair to both of them. But if Natasha’s offering to set him up on some dates, surely that’s better than relying on the likes of Tinder. Everyone she picks won’t constantly be questioning who he is, at least.

“Yeah, okay.”

The blind dates Natasha sets him up on don’t go badly, per se. Steve’s definitely had worse. For one thing, these women are actually interested in him, instead of just going out with him out of pity, or obligation. The conversation flows easily too, because if there’s one thing waking up in the future is good for, it’s a ready supply of small talk about the popular culture he just has to catch up on according to his conversational partner. If said small talk is occasionally awkward and ungainly under the weight of the unsaid *shame about how you’ve lost almost everyone you ever loved*, Steve figures that’s still better than the kind of conversational crashing and burning he used to do. So really, the dates are successes.

It’s just that Steve has no idea how to tactfully ask his dates if they’d like to end the night in his bedroom. He has to be doing it wrong, because after four perfectly pleasant blind dates with a series of smart, tough, gorgeous women Natasha has collected from assorted SHIELD departments and federal agencies, he has yet to manage anything more than a gentlemanly kiss on the cheek or peck on the lips.

Date one, with Emma from SHIELD Medical: dinner at a nice Thai restaurant, and some nice conversation about movies. She’s lovely, with an athlete’s muscled body and sparkling, pale green eyes. He’s pretty sure she likes him too, judging by the way her eyes linger on his chest. After dinner, Steve walks Emma to her car, and before he can even suggest continuing their date, in a bedroom perhaps, Emma kisses him on the cheek and says, “I had such a great time tonight, Cap,” and leaves, her face flaming with a bright red blush the whole time.
Date two, with Nicole from SHIELD’s legal department: a weekend lunch at a vegetarian restaurant, followed by a pleasant walk through the neighborhood. Nicole is passionate and talkative, expressive with her hands, and Steve maybe fixates a little on how pink and soft her lips look. Steve tries to invite her up for “coffee.” Her eyes widen, and she blushes and stutters. “Oh, you really don’t have to. And I mean, I shouldn’t, I definitely shouldn’t,” she says, playing nervously with the strap of her purse. “I had a great time though!” she adds, and presses a fast, sweet kiss to his lips, before blushing even harder and leaving. He could swear he hears her mutter, “Stay strong, Nicole,” to herself as she walks away.

Date three, with Megan from the FBI’s counterterrorism unit: dinner and drinks at what Steve learns is called a “gastropub” nowadays, where they get into a heated and fun discussion about baseball and what team Steve should root for in the 21st century. Steve thinks that this date is going somewhere, because Megan leans into him, touches his hand and arm and the look in her dark brown eyes is kind of like the look the USO girls used to give him before dragging him off to some hotel room. But at the end of the night, after Steve asks if she’d like to continue their argument about designated hitters in his apartment, she hesitates. Megan stares at his mouth, then lowers so quickly that Steve wonders if he imagined it. She bites her lip, eyebrows furrowing, then seems to come to some kind of resolution before saying, “Some other time? We should catch a baseball game together!” She’s already walking towards the Metro, though she does glance back at him once, like she’s already thinking twice about walking away. Maybe Steve had made her uncomfortable?

Date four, with Samantha from SHIELD’s human resources department: Sunday brunch and a stroll through the Smithsonian, during which she links her arm with his. It’s the most sustained human contact Steve has had outside of sparring since—well, since being unfrozen. That’s bad, probably. Two layers of cloth separate them, and still the warm touch fizzles through him. When Samantha mentions that she lives nearby, Steve thinks it might be an opening and offers to see her home. “Oh, you’re such a gentleman! That’s a nice change,” she says, and dimples up at him with a sweet smile. At her door, Steve shifts from foot to foot and dithers over asking her if he can come in. Just as he’s opening his mouth to say it, she goes up on tippy toes to kiss him, mumbles something about having had a nice time, and closes the door.

Even after a few second dates, and some third ones, and a fair amount of texting back and forth, the dates play out the same way. He has a nice time, his date has a nice time, and they each go home alone. Steve tries to keep in touch with them, but then he goes on a mission, or has a long few days of training exercises, and when he thinks of picking up his phone to text or call back after days or weeks of silence, he finds he has nothing he wants to say. He always ends up going to visit Peggy instead. Even when it’s a bad day for it, her memory flickering between decades, there’s not really anywhere else he’d rather be.

“How’s dating going? You haven’t been scared off by us 21st century girls yet, have you?” asks Natasha, when they’re t-minus two minutes from infiltrating a terrorist base. He’s pretty sure she thinks it’s easier to catch Steve in a lie at moments like this, that he’ll be too preoccupied to lie or deflect well.

“No. But I don’t think I’m ready for a relationship yet,” says Steve. The words come out flat and cold. Maybe he should have tried to soften them, sound more apologetic. But he doesn’t feel particularly apologetic about it. When he thinks about going beyond a few dates or casual sex, he can’t even imagine it. There’s just a giant empty space there, and he knows the space’s shape is Bucky’s, and nothing and no one is going to fill it.

Which is fine. Steve’s got fairly low expectations nowadays. He doesn’t need or want to find a new best friend by dating. He’ll settle for someone to make time with, and he’s about to tell Natasha as much: I’m not ready for a relationship yet, but I’m pretty desperate for some one-night stands. But
then the sound of gunfire erupts from the base, and the mission’s underway.

Maybe he doesn’t need to go on dates. That’s just the new version of courting, and Steve’s never been the courting kind. And alright, maybe arranging a one-night stand via dating apps didn’t work, but he still has options. His 21st century popular culture catch up has informed him that people still go to bars and nightclubs when they want a one-night stand, and Steve can do that. It seems straightforward enough: go to a bar, buy someone a drink, approach them, and then just ask if they want to go home with him. No pretense necessary, no courting required. Just clear communication and a night of mutually pleasurable sexual release.

But first, some recon. He spends a few nights haunting a couple of the local bars, getting the lay of the land and people watching while he nurses a whiskey that does nothing for him. The bartenders recognize him, their eyes widening once they get a good look at him, but they leave him alone apart from a murmured, “Drinks are on the house, Cap.” Steve tries to object and gets nowhere, so he just tips generously instead.

He thinks a few of the other bar patrons recognize him, and some even greet him with the breezy, cheerful acceptance of the tipsy. But no one really approaches him. That’s fine, it gives him the chance to observe. He eavesdrops on a few people as they attempt to find some companionship for the night, and once he thinks he’s got the hang of it, gives it a shot himself. It doesn’t go great.

He sticks with women, because this isn’t a queer bar and he has no idea how the signals between queer men work nowadays. Steve’s got enough on his plate just navigating this situation with women, he can’t add the uncertainty of which men might be queer too. So he focuses on the women, and tries to call to mind the way Bucky used to walk into a dancehall, take one sweeping look around, and find some gorgeous girl to dance with. He’d never seemed predatory or calculating about it, and Steve could never quite tell specifically what kind of girl caught Bucky’s eye, or how he almost always found one to dance with, and then later to kiss or more with. As far as Steve could tell, all Bucky had to do was tilt his head and smile, and that was it, the girl was taking his hand and they were spinning together on the dance floor. Now that Steve’s about to try something similar himself, a coy look and a grin seem wholly inadequate.

Bucky had made it look so easy. But then, everything had seemed easy to Bucky: school and sports and women and war. Bucky had only rarely let slip the effort it all took.

*Buck, if there’s a heaven and you’re up there, help your best guy out down here.*

There’s only silence, of course. Bucky’s not some wicked angel on his shoulder, to whisper in his ear. The warm, tingling thrill of Bucky’s eyes on him, the tender weight of his focus—those are absent too, a void Steve swears he can feel pull on him every damn day. Christ, he’s getting maudlin. He can’t even blame the whiskey. He downs it anyway, and then he approaches one woman whose throaty, uninhibited laugh catches his attention from across the bar.

“Hi, can I—”

“Oh my—Captain America?! Thank you so much for your service.”

Steve has yet to figure out how to continue a conversation past a *thank you for your service.* He smiles and pretends he was just on his way to the bathroom. He tries again.

“Uh, are you—you’re Captain America, right?”

“I prefer Steve when I’m off the clock.”
The woman nods, her blue eyes wide. “Of course, right, yeah.” She plays with the tiny straw in her drink. “So Cap, how’s the 21st century treating you?”

Steve gives her the Captain America smile and says, “Can’t complain,” though he could, extensively. No one wants to hear him complain about the 21st century. They want a propaganda film reel come to life, patriotic soundbites.

“Well, uh, thank you for your service? Stay safe?” she says, and a wince flickers over her face before she smiles. “Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry, I won’t bug you anymore, enjoy your drink?” Steve doesn’t know why everything she says is a question, but he lets her go back to her friends. This clearly isn’t working.

He tries on another night, and approaches a red-haired woman who’s alone like he is. It’s the graceful stretch of her pale neck that catches his eye, and makes him briefly wish marble was his preferred artistic medium instead of paper and canvas. She’s not particularly dressed for a night out, wearing slacks and a soft-looking sweater, her hair in a messy bun. But she tilts her head and smiles when Steve makes eye contact with her, and when he joins her at her end of the bar, she blinks in surprise.

“Captain Rogers,” she says, almost but not quite a question.

“Just Steve, please. Can I buy you a drink?”

“Sure. I’m Vanessa.”

They exchange some polite small talk for a couple minutes while they wait for the bartender to bring Vanessa her Old Fashioned. When he slides it in front of her, she lifts the glass for a toast, and Steve obliges her.

“I appreciate the drink, but what I really want is...” Steve braces himself, shoulders hunching. Here comes the Cap-related question. “Everything you can remember about living in a tenement in Brooklyn in the 20s and 30s.”

“What?”

“I’m a grad student at William and Mary, my doctoral thesis is on urban life at the turn of the century. I’ve got a ton of primary sources and interviews and oral histories, but it was all pretty recent for you, right? You’ll remember all the details, the stuff other people think isn’t important, but totally is.”

“Yeah, it was—it feels pretty recent for me, yeah.”

“So, do you mind telling me about it?” Her hazel eyes are bright and curious, and she’s leaning close to be heard over the din of the bar. Her perfume makes his nose twitch, something smoky and floral, a pleasant reprieve from the bar’s overwhelming alcohol smell.

Everyone always asks Steve about the war, about battles. Sometimes people mention the Great Depression. No one’s ever asked him for the gritty details of tenement life. He finds that no, he doesn’t mind telling Vanessa about it, doesn’t mind summoning up the sense memories of his childhood. They spend a couple hours there at the bar, Vanessa scribbling away as she hangs on Steve’s every word, and while Steve goes home alone that night, he does have Vanessa’s number, and maybe a new friend. Okay, I owe you a couple hours of 21st century tutoring for this. Call me anytime.

Steve tries what the internet informs him is a queer bar next. With the amount of gay porn out there
about thinly veiled versions of Captain America, surely actual Captain America can find a man to have sex with. Plus, it’ll be a novelty to go to a queer bar and not have to worry about ending up in jail. He and Bucky had never gone to one more than a few times out of fear of just that. *We can be queer together in our own damn apartment, and we’ll be a hell of a lot less likely to be arrested there. Let’s stay in tonight, Steve.*

The bar is lively, even midweek, and Steve blends in easily. He’s far from the only clean-cut, muscled guy in here, and for a moment, he lets himself hope that he’ll finally succeed in his mission. Almost the moment he sits at the bar, and still unnoticed by the bartender, a man slides in next to him, brown hair and cat-like greenish eyes. There’s a mischievous curve to his lips, and Steve thinks, yes.

“Don’t tell me you came here alone. Actually, do tell me that, it’ll fulfill my wildest dreams, it’s just that it would also be very sad, because you very obviously should have gorgeous young men hanging off your impressive biceps.”

Steve laughs. “I’m here alone. Not interested in staying that way.”

Those mischievous lips curl into a delighted smile and the guy puts a hand on Steve’s shoulder, leans in. Then his eyes widen.

“Oh my god, are you *Captain America*? You *are*. Holy shit.”

“Oh—”

“I’m so sorry sir, I didn’t mean to—oh my god, are you here for *work*? Is there, like, a *terrorist* or something in here? Do you have your shield?” He pats at Steve’s back, as if the shield could possibly be hiding back there.

“No, I’m just—”

“Oh my god, I just blew your cover. Shit, shit, I’m sorry.” He darts forward to press a kiss to Steve’s lips. “Shit! That was—that was to maintain your cover. Don’t punch me. People do that, right? Fake-out make-out? Okay, seriously, I will leave you alone, definitely catch that terrorist, god bless America,” he rambles, then rushes away from the bar. Steve just blinks, dazed.

The guy must spread the word among his friends, which is far from good operational security if Steve were here on a mission, but the result is that the atmosphere in the bar gets tense and anxious. Steve finishes his drink, mutters an awkward apology to the bartender, and leaves.

He tries a different queer bar the next night. He’s there early enough that it’s quiet still, not too many people along the gleaming bar or at the plushly upholstered booths and tables. There’s a small stage being set up over by a small dance floor. There must be some sort of event tonight. A little placard on the bar informs him that Thursday nights feature a drag show.

When the bartender stops to take his drink order, he blinks at Steve, but after some hesitation, doesn’t say anything other than, “What’ll you have?”

“Beer, whatever’s good on tap.”

While he waits, he surveys the sparse crowd. Most everyone appears to be half of a couple, and Steve stares too long at them: the older, gray-haired men leaning against each other, arm in arm, the young men holding hands. Once, he’d been one of them, Bucky’s arm thrown around his shoulders, both of them tipsy and giddy at being able to kiss each other in something like public view. If Bucky were here now, he’d—
The bartender slides his beer over, and someone takes a seat next to him. He looks over to see a brown-skinned man, probably somewhere in his fifties judging by the liberal dusting of gray and silver on his close-cropped hair. He’s got a handsome, square-jawed face, and a fit, stocky body. Steve’s interest stirs.

The man smiles and cocks his head at Steve. “Hi, Cap. How’re you doing?”

“Great. Uh, how are you?”

“I’m doing just fine. You know what kinda bar you’re in, honey? You here with a friend?”

“Yes? And uh, no, I’m here alone.”

He raises an elegant, very well-groomed eyebrow. “Here for the drag show?”

“Kind of?”

“Hmm.” Steve’s about to try for a hopefully smooth wanna watch with me? but before he can, the man grins and says, “Well, enjoy the show, Cap,” and walks away.

Steve sighs. He gets the feeling he’s not going to be successful tonight either. After approaching other men, he’s proven right: everyone assumes he doesn’t know what kind of bar he’s in. They’re all perfectly friendly, and urge him to stay for the show, but when Steve spots people taking out their phones to take pictures, he figures it’s time for a retreat. He doesn’t especially need the entire internet to know about his failed attempts to secure a one-night stand.

I’m never going to have sex again, am I, thinks Steve, and goes back to his empty, silent apartment. In the brief moment before he turns the light on, the blank walls and ambient city light form stark, deep shadows, and the thunks of his locks sliding into place feel as heavy and final as the door to a mausoleum grinding shut.

He gets ready for bed, then jerks off, perfunctory and resentful of his body’s demands. He’d be perfectly fine with celibacy right now if not for this stupid, serumed up body, he’s sure. He lets himself wallow in the possibility: an impermanent serum, a return to his old body, a life rendered finite and therefore more bearable. Bucky being the last person to have ever wrung pleasure from Steve’s imperfect body, Peggy the last person to have truly loved the body the serum gave him. Oh, is that all it’d take to turn you into a monk? Losing me and Peggy? Bucky’s memory asks. I don’t think so, pal. You’re alive, act like it.

Steve’s sharing his bed with a ghost. It’s better than nothing, but the other side of the bed is still cool and empty.

“A dozen muffins and a dozen danishes, please. A mix of whatever you’ve got. And a medium Americano.”

The barista ringing him up does a double take, then raises an eyebrow at him. “Do we have to worry about aliens invading or anything in the next few minutes? Or are pastry runs part of Captain America’s duties now? $53.60.”

Steve only barely manages to avoid wincing at the price. “Pastry runs are part of Captain America’s duties when he’s about to visit the children’s hospital,” he says with a smile as he hands over his card. And okay, he shouldn’t be talking about himself in the third person. “I take them for the nurses. I, uh, usually change at the hospital, but this is my second visit today, so…”
“Well, you’re not the first Cap we’ve seen today,” says the barista cryptically, and hands back his card. “Gimme a few minutes, I’ll get you some of the fresh pastries from the back.”

While he waits for his coffee and pastries, Steve takes a look around the bakery, and realizes what the barista meant: there are a few people in costume here, enough that Steve’s not especially standing out in his Captain America suit. It’s not Halloween, so why are there costumed adults roaming around on a Friday afternoon?

A costumed woman joins him at the counter to wait for her order, and he tries not to stare too obviously. She’s in some sort of red and blue leather armored bodice with a short skirt and knee-length boots. Her long black hair falls in shining waves to her lower back, far longer than he’s seen most women wear their hair nowadays. There’s a golden rope coiled on her hip, and a sword he hopes is fake hanging sheathed in a scabbard. She looks like a warrior goddess who’s stepped out of a storybook.

“Wonder Woman!” he blurts out, pleased to recognize her costume. The uniform looks different from the comics he remembers, but the golden lasso is familiar, as are the bracelets on her forearms, the gold and silver gleaming warmly against her brown skin.

She turns to him and smiles. “You got it,” she says, then gives him an appreciative once-over. “Hey, Cap. Nice costume. You competing in the con’s costume contest tonight?”

“Oh, no?” he says, and makes a mental note to look up what a ‘con’ is, apart from a confidence game or convict.

“That’s a shame, your costume looks great.” She squints at him. “And you look a hell of a lot like Captain America too.”

“Um, I am—”

“Americano for Captain Americano!” calls out the barista, and when he gets his drink, she adds, “I’ve got your pastries too.”

He takes the large bag and his coffee, grateful for the interruption. He downs nearly half the coffee in one nervous gulp, heedless of the heat, and decides not to correct Wonder Woman’s assumption. Being the real Captain America hasn’t done him any favors for literally any of his social interactions in the 21st century. What would it hurt if he let a beautiful woman assume he’s not the real Cap?

“You costume’s really great too. That’s not the Wonder Woman costume I’m most familiar with, but it looks amazing. Is it real leather?”

She lights up and grins, revealing dimples in her cheeks. “Thanks! And yeah, it is! I even dyed it myself! Kinda crazy to go so all out, I know, but I loved the whole process so much.” She leans in conspiratorially. “Just don’t tell anyone I bought the bracelets online. My make it from scratch aesthetic only goes so far.”

“My lips are sealed,” says Steve.

“Let me guess though, you’re a Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman kinda guy?”

He has no idea who that is. “I’m just a fan of the classics, the costume from the old comics. It was cheesy, I know, but…”

“She kinda matched Cap back in the day, didn’t she?”
She had. There’d even been a couple team-up comics with Cap and Wonder Woman, which had delighted Bucky, then given him decidedly dirty ideas about Peggy dressing up as Wonder Woman to match with Steve’s USO Cap outfit. Peggy had just laughed and said, *if you can find a costume, certainly. I love a fancy dress party.* Bucky had cheered and swept Peggy up in a showy kiss. *Maybe for your birthday,* Steve had told Bucky, too enamored of the sparkle in his eyes to dismiss the idea entirely. And hey, Peggy, with the lasso...well, anyway, it had never happened. Steve takes a sip of his coffee to give him time to gather himself.

“Yeah, she did. I always thought they’d make for an interesting couple,” he says, keeping eye contact with Wonder Woman. Her eyebrows tick upward just a little, a smile starting to form on her lips, and then the barista calls out an order for *Diana of Themyscira.*

He figures that’s the end of their pleasant small talk and attempted flirting, so he smiles at her and moves to go, but she stops him with a quick touch to his arm.

“Hey, no pressure, but...” She pulls a card from her purse, and tucks it into his utility belt. “I’m in Room 431 at the Wyndham. Should be done with the costume contest by 9:30. I’d love it if you came up to see me, Cap.”

The hotel room key card practically burns a hole in his pocket for the entire rest of the day. He pushes thoughts of Wonder Woman aside while he visits with the kids at the hospital. This is one aspect of the Captain America song and dance number that Steve truly doesn’t mind. Steve may not be great with kids, but these kids just need some attention and hope and understanding, and Steve can do that. The second Steve walks out of the hospital though, he’s thinking of the woman from the bakery’s offer.

He doesn’t even know her name. She thinks he’s just some guy in a costume. And, well, he kind of is, isn’t he?

He goes to the hotel.

He goes in uniform, and even takes his shield. Some judicious googling informed him that the “con” his Wonder Woman had been talking about was some sort of comic book convention, which involved people dressing up and selling comic book-related wares and attending comic book-related talks. It actually sounded interesting enough that Steve had snuck into the convention center for a quick look around, where he’d marveled at blending in for once. Even the concierge at the hotel doesn’t bat an eye when Steve walks in, and he gets to the fourth floor without any awkwardness.

By the time he’s standing in front of Room 431, he’s definitely feeling pretty awkward, and second-guessing this whole endeavor. Sure, Steve wants to break his decades-long dry spell, but this can’t be a good idea. Steve’s never had sex with a total stranger, for one, and what if this is some sort of trap or prank...well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. He knocks on the door.

After just a few seconds, the Wonder Woman from the bakery opens the door. She’s still in costume just like Steve is. “You know, I gave you the key, Cap.”

“Seemed rude to just barge in.”

She lets him in. The hotel room is nicely appointed, far nicer than any place he and the USO girls stayed in during their tour, but it’s a small and narrow room with little space for much of anything but the neatly made king size bed.
“Um, do you want anything to drink? The minibar is, like, extortionately expensive, but you know, treat yourself and all that…”

She’s playing with her hair, twisting a lock of it in her fingers. Steve’s obscurely relieved. He’s not the only one out of his depth. He casts around for somewhere to set the shield down, and settles on leaving it in front of the tiny closet.

“Oh, no thank you, I’m fine. I’m Steve, by the way.”

She grins. “Is that how we’re playing this?” She stops playing with her hair, tosses its glossy bulk over her shoulder, and straightens her spine into a commanding posture, a position that draws Steve’s attention to the bodice of her costume and her generous cleavage. “Hi Steve. Or should I say Captain Rogers? I’m Diana, daughter of Hippolyta, princess of Them—”

“Oh, that’s not, I mean—my name really is Steve.”

Her eyes widen and she brings her hands up to her face. “Oh my god, I’m sorry. I made it weird. Not that this isn’t already weird. I don’t do this kind of thing often, in case you can’t tell.”

“Me neither. If, uh, you’re not comfortable, obviously I can leave—”

“No, don’t! Please don’t. My name’s Dilshad, and I would very much like to have a one night stand with you. Hopefully you’re not a murderer.”

“Me too. I mean, I’d also like to have a one night stand, and I’m not a murderer. I…hope you’re not a murderer either?”

They stand and stare at each other in silence for a moment. How do people do this? At least with the USO girls, Steve had already known them. He doesn’t know a thing about Dilshad apart from her name and that she likes to dress up as Wonder Woman. She doesn’t even know he’s really Captain America.

She steps closer to him, goes up on her tiptoes, and kisses him. The strangeness of the situation dissipates under her warm, soft lips, and Steve’s body remembers what to do: hands at her hips, lips moving against hers. It’s not his first kiss this century—he’s kissed Peggy, and there was the guy at the bar too. But it’s his first real kiss this century that’s free of the burden of memory and loss, and that turns it sharp and sweet, as if he gets both the bee’s sting and its honey.

“So: confession,” whispers Dilshad when she pulls away. “When I was a kid, I maybe used to check out this Captain America book from the library a lot, and I maybe used to kiss the picture of Cap in it.”

“How do I rate compared to the two-dimensional paper version?”

“Pretty favorably,” she says, and kisses him again.

Steve doesn’t last long for their first round, but he makes up for it with rounds two through four. His whole body practically hums with the pleasant lassitude of good sex, and the easy, animal comfort of sharing a bed with another person.

“Oh, this has set the bar high for one night stands,” Dilshad says dreamily. She’s tucked up against him, her long hair in wild disarray all around them. “And now I’m gonna have weird sexy feelings every time I see actual Captain America on the news.”
Steve wonders if now is the time to reveal he’s actual Captain America. Probably not. His conscience gives a guilty twinge, but it’s not like he’s lying, per se. He showed up in the outfit, and he told her his name was Steve. If she drew the wrong conclusions, well, that’s not Steve’s fault.

“You didn’t have weird sexy feelings before? I thought two-dimensional Cap was your first kiss.”

She scoffs. “That’s different. Kids have weird crushes all the time. I was basically in love with the cartoon fox version of Robin Hood when I was a kid, but I’m not a furry now.” It’s probably not the time to ask her what a furry is. “Having sexy feelings for actual Captain America is just...weird. Kinda inappropriate? Like, I dunno, being sexually into Uncle Sam or Lady Liberty.”

“Uncle Sam and Lady Liberty aren’t real people,” says Steve, not liking where this is going.

“True,” allows Dilshad. “George Washington then. Or Alexander Hamilton. He has a very handsome portrait on the ten dollar bill. But you know, you can’t exactly have sex fantasies about Founding Fathers, or famous war heroes. They’re real people, but they’re like, historical figures, not heartthrobs.” She props herself up on her elbow and grins down at him as her hair falls forward to curtain them both. “Way better to have sex fantasies about the hot Cap cosplayer you met during a con.”

Steve smiles back, and hopes Dilshad doesn’t notice how strained it is. It shouldn’t be a surprise to find out he’s become more of a symbol than a man. That process had been well under way already during the war, and now on top of the symbol of Captain America, he’s history too, as old and calcified as the Founding Fathers. Who’s Steve Rogers in the face of all that? The knowledge sits heavy, like a suffocating mantle over his shoulders.

When he goes back to work on Monday, it takes Natasha all of two seconds to spot some invisible-to-Steve change in him.

“Had a good weekend?” she asks while they wait for the elevator.

She’s staring at him with intent focus, not even trying to hide the open curiosity in her gaze. Steve knows it’s impossible, but he honestly wouldn’t be surprised if she could somehow tell exactly how much sex he had this weekend, and in what positions. He determinedly doesn’t fidget.

“I did, thanks.”

Natasha waits, silent, but Steve caught onto that trick months ago. If she wants more details, she’s going to have to ask. Eventually, she accepts that Steve won’t elaborate and says, “Well, whatever you did, you should do it more often. You look good, Steve.”

Steve wonders if he could. Somehow he doesn’t think that being mistaken for a Captain America cosplayer is a valid or ethical strategy for regular casual sex.

The weeks and months pass. Peggy starts having more bad days than good. Steve stops training so much and goes out on more missions, which is good, because it’s not like he has much else to do. The blind dates Natasha keeps setting him up on continue to fizzle out, and just about everyone else he meets too obviously sees him as only Captain America. Which isn’t to say that Steve gives up on trying to have a social life and a sex life in the 21st century, because he’s too damn stubborn for that. He just…makes it less of a priority.

He flirts half-heartedly with his neighbor Kate, since she at least just sees him as her neighbor Steve,
not Captain America, but she gently rebuffs him, which is fair enough. She once saw him accept a
delivery of three large pizzas just for himself, after all, and Steve’s pretty sure even being a super
soldier isn’t excuse enough for that.

Then Steve gets up the nerve to talk to the handsome black man he’s been seeing on his morning
running route for weeks, and while Sam Wilson gracefully ignores Steve’s apparently terrible flirting,
there’s still something warm and open about him, and he talks to Steve like a fellow soldier without
Captain America looming large and opaque between them. He talks to Sam at the VA and sees,
maybe, the faintest mirage-like shimmer of a future beyond Captain America for Steve Rogers. That
future seems closer given his growing reservations about SHIELD.

He entertains vague thoughts of submitting a resignation letter full of pointed objections to the wildly
out of control surveillance state and to the intelligence compartmentalization so intense that Steve
can’t safely or effectively complete his mission objectives, but then it turns out SHIELD is HYDRA
and he figures blowing up the Triskelion and three helicarriers will serve as an adequate resignation
letter instead.

And anyway, none of it matters as much as it should compared to Bucky. Bucky who’s not dead, but
who’s maybe been unmade so cruelly that he might as well be.

It doesn’t matter. Sam said maybe he’s not the kind you save, he’s the kind you stop, but Steve
stopped the Winter Soldier. Now he has to save Bucky.

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After eleven months, two weeks, and two days of fruitless searching for Bucky and a lot of HYDRA
hunting, Steve has to concede that he’ll settle for even finding Bucky at all, much less saving him.
It’s been one cold lead after another, and while they’ve burned off plenty of HYDRA’s ever
multiplying but still finite heads, Bucky’s proven to be elusive. Months ago, it had become clear that
Bucky was in the wind and off everybody’s radar, HYDRA and alphabet agencies and friendlies
alike. He’d tried to tell himself that no news was good news for now, but he couldn’t bring himself to
believe it. When he’d asked Natasha for her honest opinion, ready to hear some devastatingly blunt
truth, she’d just shrugged, far too relaxed.

“Honestly? Alright. In my honest and informed opinion, this is the best case scenario. Barnes is
almost definitely alive, and he doesn’t seem to be a danger to civilians, or us.”

“Of course he’s not a danger to—”

“Steve. He shot you. Three times. And the Winter Soldier wasn’t overly concerned with civilian
casualties in DC.”

“That wasn’t him. Not really.”

“Right. The point is, he’s not hurting anyone apart from HYDRA, so far as we can tell. He’s almost
definitely the person taking out some of these HYDRA bases and cells, and he’s mentally with it
enough to do it all without getting caught.” She’d shrugged again. “So, like I said: best case scenario.
Maybe he’ll come to you when he’s ready, when he thinks it’s safe.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Natasha had lost some of her relaxed posture then, and held his eyes with intensity. “Then he
doesn’t. There might not be much left of Bucky Barnes, Steve. Whoever he is now might want a
clean start.”

Now, five months later, when it’s just him and Sam still looking for Bucky after yet another dead
end, this time in Siberia, Steve’s beginning to think she might have been right.

The base in Siberia may have been a smoking crater of a dead end, but the cell of fugitive Russian HYDRA agents in Mongolia is practically right next door, and Steve’s happy to eliminate them with extreme prejudice. The intel suggested some of them used to be stationed at that base in Siberia. Some of them might have hurt Bucky. They might have been the ones to throw him in the cryostasis tube, or into the monstrous wiping apparatus.

After, when they’re back in their hotel room in Ulaanbataar, Sam watches, expression grim, as Steve cleans his shield on the lumpy hotel bed. He’s gotten the worst of the blood off already, but it could use another once over, and the straps need oiling. And it’s something for his hands to do. It’s been hours since the fight, but Steve’s still feeling it thrumming in his veins. His hands would be shaking, if they did that any more. But they don’t, so instead he just vibrates on what he suspects must be a cellular level.

Maybe he should go for a run. Or find someone to fuck. It’s been months, his stupid libido finally quelled some by worrying any casual partner could be HYDRA. Plus, it’s like now that his dick knows Bucky’s alive, it doesn’t much want anyone else. Steve’s two attempts at stress-relieving casual sex since the fall of SHIELD were either lackluster (a trusted contact of Natasha’s who’d fucked Steve far too tentatively for his liking), or actively disastrous (a woman from a hotel bar in Prague who’d all but thrown him out the window when the husband she’d never told him about showed up). But even if the sex is bad, maybe it’ll be enough to bleed off some of this restlessness.

Anything to keep from jerking off silently in the hotel bathroom, thinking of how Bucky’s new metal hand would feel around Steve’s cock, how strong Bucky had been during their fights in DC, how maybe Bucky could hold him down, hold him still while he—the strap breaks. Fuck, what the fuck is wrong with him, Bucky’s probably hurting and confused, Bucky’s suffered more than Steve can comprehend, and here Steve is turned on by the results of that suffering. Steve throws the shield down on the bed and goes to fetch his repair kit. Sam’s eyes follow him.

“You need a break, Steve. We can take a week or two, go back to the States, rest and regroup.”

“No.” Steve fishes the repair kit out of his duffel bag, and returns to his bed.

“This is not healthy, man. When you’re wound up this tight, there’s nothing left but snapping. All work and no play, and all that. Wait, do you get that reference, have you seen The Shining—”

Steve shakes his head. “I just need to get laid, it’s fine. Do you think people use Tinder or Grindr in Ulaanbataar?”

“What.”

Or I could just go to a bar,” he says, and starts fixing the strap.

“What.”

Steve looks up to see Sam gaping at him. “What?”

“You—uh, this isn’t—is this some cultural, man out of time misunderstanding? Did I just hear you say you need to have sex? And that you use Tinder? And Grindr? You know Grindr is for men who, uh—”

“Want to have sex with men, yes. Is that a problem.”
“No! No, no, it is not at all a problem. I’m just—rearranging some facts in my head is all.” Sam sits back on his bed, eyes wide. “Oh. Oh my god. You were flirting with me. On the Mall, after our run, you were hitting on me.”

Steve sighs. And here Steve had thought that Sam had just let him down graciously back then. But no, apparently Sam hadn’t even noticed.

“Yeah, Sam. I was hitting on you. Not well, obviously, since you apparently didn’t notice.”

“Holy shit. Okay. Right.” Sam gives him a speculative, apprehensive kind of glance. “Uh, I’m straight, mostly, but, uh, I guess—”

“Nope. It’s weird now. And you saying you’re ‘straight, mostly,’ doesn’t fill me with enthusiasm here. Do you think Mongolian shepherds will recognize me and get weird about fucking Captain America? Because everyone else gets weird about it.”

There’s a muffled thump from the ceiling, and Steve frowns and glances up, wary. When groaning and clanking sounds from the walls, he relaxes. It’s just old pipes. He finishes up with re-attaching the shield strap, and tests it with a few quick tugs.

“Yeah, I’ll bet. I support you and everything, but Steve, I’m gonna have to veto you using Tinder or Grindr right now to score a hookup with Mongolian shepherds, if only for the sake of op sec.”

“That’s fair. Everyone just thinks I’m catfishing anyway.”

“Oh my god.”

Sam’s bafflement is getting kind of annoying. “Yeah, I get it, Captain America is a sexless symbol. But you know I’m just a guy, Sam. And the serum gives me a pretty high sex drive. It’s not a big deal.”

“Right, of course, sorry. I didn’t mean to imply anything. It’s not that I thought—guess I just figured you were a sex only in a committed relationship kind of guy.” Steve shrugs, because Sam’s not entirely wrong, but it’s not as simple as that. “You don’t have to answer, but...you and Barnes?”

Steve almost doesn’t answer, he’s so used to reflexive, protective privacy when it comes to Bucky. But Sam has stuck with him on this search for Bucky, and when Steve’s been called away for Avengers business, Sam has kept up the search on his own. Steve owes Sam the truth, and more besides.

“Yeah.”

“And you and Agent Carter?”

“Yeah.”

Sam raises an eyebrow. “How’d that work?”

“By being me, Bucky, and Peggy, is how.”

“Oh.”

He doesn’t want Sam to get the wrong idea, so he says, “It wasn’t just sex. I love them both. And me and Bucky...I didn’t mind, if he went out with other women. He didn’t mind if I did either.”

“We call that an open relationship nowadays,” says Sam, and his tone is casual, but his eyebrows are
still hovering high on his forehead in surprise. “Or, uh, were you and Barnes just friends with benefits? You know, friends who fuck sometimes.”

That’s not an inaccurate description, Steve supposes. Bucky’s his best friend, and if it came down to their friendship or having sex with each other, Steve would choose their friendship without a second thought. But it seems too casual a term for what he and Bucky were—what he and Bucky are to each other.

So Steve shrugs. “Don’t know what word to put to it. He’s my best guy, is all. Always has been, always will be. Doesn’t matter if we have sex or don’t.” Steve wonders if Bucky remembers that. “I just—I hope he knows. That I love him. I wasn’t so great at telling him back then.”

Hell, Steve probably hadn’t been good at showing it either, not compared to Bucky. He hopes, desperately, that he’ll have the chance to do better.

“He knows. Maybe he doesn’t remember, but he pulled you from the Potomac, Steve. He knows.”

They head to Samarkand next, still on the trail of remnants of old Soviet HYDRA cells. Someone else has gotten here before them: there’s nothing here but the burned out remnants of some old HYDRA warehouses, and a HYDRA scientist who’s been dead for years. Steve can’t tell if any of it’s Bucky’s work or not.

They check one last warehouse, empty for years judging by the dust and the detritus of squatters, and Steve seriously considers just blowing it up anyway. They don’t need to, but it’d make him feel better, maybe. He feels the urge for a fight crackling inside him, as hungry as a fire, but there’s no fuel for it but Steve himself right now. It’s only the thought of Maria Hill’s deadly face of disapproval that stops him from asking Sam for the C-4. Sam’s already written off this warehouse judging by how he’s staring at his phone.

When Sam looks up from his phone, he says, “So Natasha’s got a lead on another one of the HYDRA scientists who might’ve worked on the Winter Soldier project in Croatia. Says she can get us a plane out of Samarkand in a couple of days, if we want to join her.”

“Does she need the back up?”

“No, but I hear the Adriatic is real nice this time of year, so I don’t know about you, but I’m taking her up on it. You should too. Consider it a working vacation.” Sam unsubtly eyes the way Steve’s clenching his fists. “You really look like you could use one.”

Steve relaxes his hands. He doesn’t need a break, he needs Bucky, and there are other leads they could follow. But Bucky’s trail is cold no matter what. Might as well go to Croatia to fuck up one of the monsters who hurt him. “Yeah, okay.”

Sam grins, aggressively cheerful. “Great! We’ll sight see here for a couple days then. Did you know Samarkand is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in Central Asia?”

Steve gets the feeling he’s about to learn a lot more Wikipedia-gleaned facts about Samarkand.

Sam insists on two separate rooms that night, instead of their usual double. When Steve objects, because there’s a reason they usually go with a double, and it’s not just convenience, Sam gives him a disbelieving look.

“You said you needed to get laid last week. You’re not doing it when I’m sleeping in the next bed
over. We’ll get adjacent rooms, okay? Then we can make sure neither of us is killed by a surprise HYDRA agent in the dead of the night or whatever.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to find someone to have a one-night stand with in Samarkand.”

The afternoon of sightseeing had been nice enough, the locals friendly, and he doesn’t think anyone recognized him as Captain America. But he felt far too out of his depth in an unfamiliar culture to even try to flirt. Steve fucks up flirting with his own fellow Americans, god knows how he’s fucking it up with the people of Uzbekistan. Probably best to just jerk off in his hotel room instead. That way he can avoid any diplomatic incidents.

Sam claps him on the back. “I believe in you. Also there’s a hostel near our hotel, I bet there are some backpackers who’d be up for some adventurous sex.”

“Any chance of you coming with me to be my wingman?”

“No way. I have a date with room service, the bath, and then twelve hours of sleep.” Steve gives Sam a betrayed look. “Don’t give me that kicked-a-puppy face. I’ll be your wingman in Croatia, promise. But this is an actually nice hotel and I’m taking full advantage of it. Go, get out, go to the hotel bar.”

When Steve goes down to the hotel bar, he sees some of the aforementioned backpackers. Most of them seem to have made an effort to look less like they’ve already traveled the better part of the Silk Road with nothing but what they can carry, but even in the bar they’ve still got small backpacks and bags that are fairly bristling with maps and guidebooks and phrasebooks. Steve hopes that he’ll be able to blend in with them, but that hope dies before he can even manage to order a drink. The backpackers recognize him as soon as he steps up to the bar. Steve lets the usual simmer of excited and disbelieving recognition burble on in the background as he scans the bar for anyone else who might not recognize him, or care who he is.

He’s about to try joining the vaguely surly-looking guy in the corner who has the slumped shoulders of a man who just got off-shift, when a young man with wild hair asks, “Oh my god Cap, are there Nazis in Samarkand?”

Steve sighs. “Not anymore.”

“You definitely deserve a drink for that. Or, like, a huge joint. Shit, fuck, forget I said that. Drugs are…bad.”

“Sure,” says Steve, and accepts the arak the bartender passes to him with a thin smile.

“Here’s to no more Nazis in Samarkand!” roars one of the backpackers. Steve joins the toast, and tosses back the arak in one gulp. It burns viciously going down, but the heat doesn’t last long.

He has a couple more drinks, then goes back up to his room.

There’s someone in Steve’s hotel room. The lights are off, and there’s someone sitting at the small table by the window. If Steve didn’t have such good night vision, he might have mistaken them for a shadow. As it is, they’re so perfectly still that it seems as if the whole world should freeze into stillness with them.

“Sam?” asks Steve, though he knows it isn’t Sam, and he’s already moving to get his shield from where it’s lying by the closet door.
“No,” says the man, and Steve stops. It’s only one word, but he knows that voice. He turns on the
light. “Hi, Steve.”

“Bucky.”

Bucky stands, his stillness shattering into something sharp and graceful, and for a moment, Steve
doesn’t know whether to expect a blow or an embrace. Maybe Bucky doesn’t know either, because
he strides forward then stops, only just within arm’s reach, his eyes wide. Just looking at him makes
Steve want so many things that he’s frozen with the press and weight of all his desires.

Bucky looks not unlike the backpackers Steve just left behind in the hotel bar, wearing sturdy, worn
clothes whose colors have faded in the sun or the wash. His hair is cropped messy and short, in that
awkward phase of growing out where it’s more cowlick than anything else. His eyes are very blue
against his tanned skin. Steve maybe ought to have some caution right now, because what if this is
the Winter Soldier more than it is Bucky, what if this is about to turn into the fight on the helicarrier,
but all it takes is one look at those eyes for him to be sure: this is Bucky, and Bucky knows him.

They both step forward at once, and Steve can’t call what they’re doing hugging, it’s too desperate
for that. They’re just hanging onto each other, shoving so close together that they stumble a little,
stepping on each other’s feet. It doesn’t matter. Bucky is broad and warm and solid in Steve’s arms,
and Bucky’s arms around him are practically a vice grip.

“Are you okay, Bucky, do you—”

“I can’t stay, I can’t, but I—”

Bucky starts to pull away and Steve makes a protesting noise, this close to throwing himself at
Bucky if that’s what it takes, but Bucky’s only pulled back so he can take Steve’s face in his hands
and kiss him. Bucky’s metal hand gives him a split second of shock before Steve’s kissing him back,
wild and artless and messy, like the first time all over again. Bucky makes a gutted, broken noise into
his mouth, and when Steve opens his eyes to look at him, he recognizes the look on Bucky’s face:
joy and agony, the same as when he was twenty and Steve first told him they didn’t have time to
pretend not to want each other.

“Buck, please, what are—are you okay, why can’t you stay—”

He doesn’t answer, just maneuvers Steve backwards, and they stumble in the general direction of the
bed before Steve falls back onto it and Bucky straddles him, his hands roaming everywhere while he
presses kisses to every bit of Steve’s bare skin he can find. Steve’s pushing his own hands up under
Bucky’s shirt in search of the smooth skin of his waist and back. Bucky’s broader and thicker now,
more muscle packed under all that soft, heated skin, and he wants to map every inch of the new
terrain of Bucky’s body, the way Bucky did with Steve after the serum. Steve’s aching hard already
and he doesn’t even know when it happened.

This has all gotten pretty wildly out of control, like a car with an accelerator pedal jammed to go full
speed. Steve should probably put a stop to it, slam the brakes or bail out, and demand answers,
demand to know where Bucky’s been and why he can’t stay and what he’s been doing.

But he’s missed Bucky so fucking much. It was one thing to know Bucky was alive, a terrible
miracle, and it’s another to finally have him here, flesh and bone and metal. Changed, but still giving
himself to Steve, still making the same small, wanting sounds. It’s all dismantling Steve’s ability to
think straight. Bucky’s solid and heavy on top of him, and it’s just like Steve imagined: he’s strong
enough now to hold Steve down. Bucky doesn’t though, not yet, not quite. Instead, he takes Steve’s
face in his mismatched hands, and looks straight in Steve’s eyes, fierce and wanting.
Bucky’s voice is low and ferocious, and Steve can see it’s taking him uncharacteristic effort to get the words out, some new strain in the skin around his eyes as he speaks. “I’m alright. I remember you. I—I always remembered you, until they took it away again. I’m sorry, I’m so fucking sorry—”

“There’s not a goddamn thing for you to be sorry for—”

“I almost killed you,” hisses Bucky. He stops, breathing hard, and rests his forehead against Steve’s for a second. “I can’t stay. You gotta give me more time, I promise I’ll come back, but I can’t stay.”

Steve pulls Bucky down and grips him tight, as if that will keep Bucky here.

“Why the hell not? It’s safe, I swear I’ll keep you safe—”

He feels Bucky shake his head, and Steve wants to lay into him about it because what the hell does he mean he can’t stay, but christ, Bucky’s trembling, his breath coming in hot, fast bursts against the skin of Steve’s neck. Steve runs a hand up and down his back, keeping the touch far steadier than he feels.

“Then why come back now at all, if it’s not for good?” he settles for asking, and it comes out more hurt than angry.

Bucky lifts his head, and braces himself over Steve, grinding down with his hips, then follows that up with a filthy, wet kiss, still rocking against Steve’s erection. Each movement might as well be a wrecking ball to Steve’s capacity for rational thought.

“You know why,” says Bucky, low and guttural, right in Steve’s ear, before he kisses the most sensitive spot on Steve’s neck. Steve moans, a long and broken sound he can’t quite believe is coming out of him, and Bucky swallows the sound with another deep kiss. “Shhhh,” Bucky soothes. “Anyone been giving you what you need?”

Steve rocks against him, nowhere near enough friction on his cock. “No. Please—”

“Really? No one?”

Steve tugs at Bucky’s hair, hard enough to make him gasp, and kisses him again. “A few people, but not—not lately. Apparently no one’s really willing to fuck Captain America.”

Bucky makes a growly disappointed noise and keeps kissing him, keeps grinding against him with his hips, and fuck, it’s not enough, it’s nowhere near enough, but Steve’s close to coming anyway, and when Bucky tilts Steve’s head back to press stinging and hot kisses to his throat, the heat somehow burns in one searing line straight to his cock, and he comes in his goddamn pants.

Bucky stops. “Did you just…”

Steve would be more mortified, but honestly, it’s Bucky, and the wicked tilt of his lips is pretty distracting, so Steve just nods and fumbles to get Bucky’s pants off. There’s a lot of ungraceful scrambling as they both kick off their shoes and start taking clothes off. Bucky accidentally knees him in the kidney, and Steve knocks his elbow into Bucky’s jaw, and Steve’s pretty sure they’ve torn some of their clothes in the rush to get them all off. He doesn’t care.

“How about I make you feel good—” pants Steve.

“Do you have—”

Steve wriggles out from under Bucky and rolls off the bed to stumble towards his bag. He pulls the
lube out and more or less tackles Bucky on the bed with one flying leap. The bed squeaks and creaks, and they freeze, but the bed holds up and no one bangs on the wall to tell them to shut up, and then Steve gets pretty distracted by Bucky laid out under him, naked and wide-eyed. He’s more muscled than Steve’s ever seen him, and there’s the metal arm of course, sleek and brutally elegant save for the line of pitted scarring where metal meets skin. He’s different, of course he is, but he’s still beautiful: new strength and new scars, evidence of both suffering and survival. None of that should be any reason for Bucky to look so uncertain. Steve kisses him, softly this time, to lift the downward turn of his perfect mouth.

“I’ll always want you,” says Steve, and blinks away tears when he sees the memory of the last time Steve told him that dawn in Bucky’s eyes. Some tension in Bucky that Steve had scarcely had the presence of mind to notice melts away.

With one smooth, effortless move, Bucky flips them so he’s on top, and the show of strength is enough to make Steve hard again. Bucky notices, one eyebrow ticking up.

“Yeah?” he asks, and Steve hands him the lube.

“Yeah, hurry up already.”

“Okay, but you gotta be quiet for me,” murmurs Bucky as he opens the lube and pours some onto his right hand. “Don’t want your pal Wilson to come barging in.”

“I’ll be quiet, just fuck me already, it’s been seventy goddamn years.”

Bucky smiles, sweet and wide, new lines at the corners of his eyes, and yeah, there he is, there’s Steve’s best guy. Steve’s not ever gonna stop being in love with him.

“Steve Rogers, how could I ever forget what a romantic you are,” he says, and slips a finger inside Steve.

Bucky takes his goddamn time, of course he does, still and always wary of hurting Steve, even now that Steve can take it and more besides. He keeps kissing Steve all through it, gentle but implacable, his fingers filling Steve but not enough, his rhythm too slow and steady. Even so, Steve’s cock stays hard, but he doesn’t touch himself, not yet. It feels more important to cup Bucky’s face in his hands, to slide his hands down to Bucky’s throat and feel his pulse pounding, to stroke along the sharp cut of his hips.

“I’m ready, c’mon, it’s fine,” Steve says, between kisses, quietly just like Bucky asked, until Bucky finally relents.

When Bucky slides inside of him, Steve nearly cries out, and he wonders if maybe he shouldn’t have promised to stay quiet. Bucky doesn’t move for a long moment, head bent forward, his eyes closed, some soft, complicated mix of longing and want on his face that Steve can’t entirely decipher. Steve would urge Bucky to move already, but it’s almost enough, just having Bucky inside him, and he wants to feel it for just a little bit longer. He wants this perfect moment of still closeness for just a little bit longer.

Bucky does move though, eyes open now and rapt on Steve’s face, and he takes hold of Steve’s thighs to adjust the angle before he fucks Steve in earnest. He starts slow, exploratory almost, watching Steve’s face carefully, hungrily. Every languorous thrust sparks white hot pleasure, a shockwave of feeling that ebbs and flows, crashing like waves with every movement of Bucky’s hips. Bucky always takes it so goddamn slow, the way no one else ever has. Steve can believe in eternity, when Bucky builds a piece of it for them like this.
“Buck, faster, you gotta go faster,” Steve begs eventually, stroking his own cock with a pleasure-drunk hand.

When Bucky does go faster, hitting that spot inside him that feels almost too good to stand again and again, Steve can’t help the sound he makes, is distantly surprised that raw and broken noise has just come from him. Bucky covers Steve’s mouth with his right hand, bracing himself on his left.

“What’d I say about staying quiet?” he gasps.

Bucky’s not exactly blocking Steve’s airway, but he still feels like he can’t get quite enough air through just his nose, and things get mixed up, kind of. Bucky filling him up, hot and hard, and Steve’s own hand on his cock and the floating, rushing dizziness in his head, and it all feels impossibly good. Steve comes so hard that everything goes blank with pleasure, every part of him wiped clean of everything but this perfect feeling. Bucky’s still fucking him when Steve returns to himself, and he could almost come again just from the knife-edge balance of pleasure and pain that’s Bucky still fucking him when he’s over-sensitive like this, and then again from the feeling of Bucky coming inside him in one pulsing rush.

After, Bucky slides out and collapses on top of him, a light tremor running through him. Steve takes hold of him, as tight as he can manage given how boneless he feels. They’re both still breathing hard and loud.

“What?” asks Steve.

“Yeah,” says Bucky, sounding drunk with it, and kisses Steve.

Usually Bucky’d be up and cleaning the both of them up by now, but right now he stays settled heavy on top of Steve, and kisses him and kisses him, like he’s been starving for Steve’s mouth. Steve doesn’t mind. Even the mess feels good, proof that Bucky’s here, that this is real. It’s not long at all before exchanging lazy kisses turns into rocking against each other, and oh. Bucky’s hard again, just like Steve is. That’s new. When Steve reaches down to give Bucky’s cock a stroke, Bucky shivers and laughs, a short and giddy little sound.

“I thought I wouldn’t get this back,” he says, aching wonder in his voice, and Steve’s not sure what he means.

“You’ve got me, you’ve always got me.”

Bucky shakes his head, but he says, “I know. I remember—I wanted you to fuck me like this. Me riding you. Did we ever?”

Oh christ. Bucky’s flushed and bright-eyed over him, his lips swollen and red, and fuck, it’s a good view, the best view, and Steve very much wants to appreciate it while Bucky’s fucking himself on Steve’s cock.

“Just once, on leave. Can we, do you—” Steve’s already pulling himself up to get in position.

“Yeah,” says Bucky, just as eager, and they fumble around the wreck of the bed for the bottle of lube.

Before Steve can even suggest or try to get Bucky ready himself, Bucky’s got the lube and is pouring some onto his fingers, his metal fingers, and reaching back to finger himself. Steve tries to imagine what that must feel like, the smooth metal, how strong it is, thicker than Bucky’s flesh and blood fingers.
“You should do that for me next time,” he blurts out, watching how Bucky’s face has gone slack with pleasure. He takes his own cock in hand and strokes, slow and easy, just getting himself ready. “Does it feel good? Tell me, Buck, what’s it like—”

“Gotta be careful, ‘cause it’s so much stronger, but—” he must have added a finger because he gasps and his eyes flutter closed, and then he continues, more breathless now, “It’s smooth, and I don’t know, thicker, so it feels—better, I guess. More.”

Goes faster too, apparently, or maybe Bucky’s just that desperate for it, because it’s not long at all before he takes hold of Steve’s cock to position it, kneels over Steve’s lap, and sinks down onto him, fast enough that it’s got to hurt. It’s fast enough that Steve very nearly shouts, the tight heat almost too much to stand so soon after he’s already come. Steve’s hips jerk up, automatic, and Bucky practically falls forward to brace himself against the headboard, panting already.

“Just—let me,” Bucky says, voice thick, and all Steve can do is grip Bucky’s waist, and hold on.

The last time they did this, Bucky ran his mouth the entire time, saying filthy things that had Steve blushing even mid-fuck, but now Bucky’s quiet except for the small exhalations of breath he makes every time he sinks down onto Steve’s cock. He holds Steve’s eyes, intense and searching. Steve doesn’t know what Bucky’s looking for.

“Buck, I’m here,” he says, and pulls Bucky down to kiss him. “You’re here, I’m here, we’re alright.”

Bucky nods in one short, sharp gesture, and keeps moving up and down on Steve’s cock, faster now. He kisses Steve, ungentle and deep, and Steve opens to him, lets him take whatever it is he’s looking for. Steve can feel his orgasm building and building, a wave that keeps cresting, and when it crashes, it’s only Bucky’s solid, real weight that keeps him from shaking apart. It only takes two rough strokes to Bucky’s cock and then he comes too in one warm spill over Steve’s chest.

They make a half-hearted effort clean themselves up. Steve’s already faintly mortified at the thought of the hotel maids seeing any of the wreckage of this night, and wonders if it’s acceptable to shove the bedding down the garbage chute and just leave an enormous tip. That’s a distant worry though, compared to the far more immediate worry about Bucky, who’s letting Steve hold him for now. Steve knows he’ll be gone the second Steve falls asleep, and Steve’s post-orgasm drowsy enough, and tired enough, that he’s going to fall asleep soon.

He tightens his hold on Bucky. “Please don’t go.”

“I’m sorry,” whispers Bucky. “I swear I’ll come back. I’ll come back for good, just—gimme some more time.”

“What’re you even doing, Buck? We can do it together, you and me and Sam and Nat, we can help.”

Bucky shakes his head. “Not with this. Just keep doing what you’ve been doing, alright?”

“What I’ve been doing is looking for you, jerk,” says Steve, knocking his forehead against Bucky’s. “You haven’t made it easy.”

“No shit I haven’t made it easy. I’m good at this,” says Bucky, low and hot, that old cocky tilt to his head there for just a second, then it’s gone. He grips the back of Steve’s neck and squeezes gently. “I need the cover to make my moves against HYDRA, so don’t change what you’re doing, Rogers. Keep following the leads you find on me, or on the Winter Soldier project.”
Steve’s about to object, but then he sees the sense in what Bucky’s suggesting; they’re probably splitting HYDRA’s attention right now, with Steve on Bucky’s tail drawing HYDRA’s notice and fire while Bucky’s already miles ahead wreaking his own more quiet havoc. It’s a good strategy, and it probably helps to sow confusion about where Bucky actually is.

“Okay, I hear you. No change in my mission parameters. But Buck, are you safe?”

“I’m trying to make sure I’m safe.” Steve looks for a lie in the slate blue of Bucky’s eyes, even and steady on his, or in the firm set of Bucky’s mouth, and doesn’t find it.

“Have you—your memories, did they all come back, or—” Bucky’s eyes flicker away to some vague spot over Steve’s shoulder.

“I remember a lot. You. The war. Brooklyn. Not all of it.” Now Bucky looks at Steve again, brow furrowed. “I don’t know what’s normal anymore. For remembering or not remembering. For how I remember.”

“Well, tell me what it’s like. Maybe I can help.” He’s not sure how, but he has to do something, offer something, anything.

Bucky hums, and doesn’t say anything for a long moment. “We heal the same now, I think. Slower for me, maybe. You know when our bones break and don’t set right? You can feel it’s wrong, see it even maybe, so you have to break it again, set it properly to let it heal right. It’s kind of like that. Again and again, over and over.”

Steve frowns. There’s a haziness to Bucky’s voice that makes the hairs on the back of Steve’s neck rise, and the haunted distance in his stare is too much like when Steve first pulled him out of Zola’s lab. Maybe Steve ought to leave it, take Bucky’s attempt at an explanation, but he still doesn’t understand.

“So your memories are…bones?”

“No,” says Bucky, vehement and frustrated. “It’s like—it hurt, the first time it happened. The—the thing I’m remembering. Or it hurt losing the memory. And then, if I want to get better, if I want to get it all back, it hurts again, remembering it. Like breaking the bone again, to get it to set right. Is that—do you get it?”

Steve’s not sure he does, entirely, but he understands enough to know that Bucky’s hurting, that remembering isn’t easy for him. The pain in Bucky’s eyes might as well be a knife to Steve’s heart.

“Jesus, Bucky, you shouldn’t be going through that alone,” whispers Steve, and Bucky shakes his head, mouth twisting.

“It’s alright,” he says, stroking Steve’s back like Steve’s the one who needs the comforting. “I’ll—I’ll be alright. Just, you gotta let me do this on my own, Steve. You have to let me go for a little longer. Please.”

Bucky hasn’t often pleaded with him, and hasn’t ever asked for much for himself, not anything that’s truly mattered anyway. Steve hasn’t got much in the way of defenses against it. Honestly, Steve’s not sure he could ever put up a defense against the unhappy downturn of Bucky’s mouth, set firmly to keep from trembling, or against the way Bucky’s looking at him right now, his eyes big and serious, and so deep with sorrow.

Maybe he’s making the wrong call here, but what’s the alternative? Force Bucky to stay? Allow him the dignity of his choice, Peggy had said, all those years ago, and Bucky’s gone so long without
being able to make choices of his own.

So Steve says, “Okay,” and kisses him. It’s a small comfort when Bucky kisses him back, slow and easy. He won’t, can’t, think of this as anything close to a goodbye, but still, he has to say it— “I love you. That’s one of the memories you got back, right?”

Bucky smiles. “Yeah. Wouldn’t have needed it though. I knew anyway.” Tears fill Steve’s eyes, sudden like turning on a damn faucet. Bucky brushes them away before they can fall, his metal hand just as gentle as his flesh and blood one. “And I know I’m doing a shitty job of showing it right now, but you gotta know I love you too. I’ll come back, okay? I promise I’ll come back.”

Despite his best efforts to stay awake, Steve still falls asleep, too comforted by the even, strong thump of Bucky’s heartbeat and the feeling of Bucky’s fingers stroking through his hair. When he wakes up to the sound of a room service cart rattling down the hallway, Bucky’s gone.

For a too-long minute, Steve thinks maybe it was all an extremely elaborate sex dream. Steve wouldn’t put it past his stupid serum-enhanced libido to transform even his sexual frustration-induced wet dreams into alarmingly vivid affairs. But no, there’s a piece of hotel stationery lying on the bed next to him that keeps him from going too far down that rabbit hole. Written on it in Bucky’s neatest print: IOU ONE (1) JBB. There’s a roughly sketched doodle under the words, the kind of deliberately childish thing Bucky would draw sometimes in the art classes he took with Steve, and it takes Steve a moment to puzzle it out. When he does, he can’t stop smiling: it’s a Bucky Bear, the silly but sweet little stuffed toy based off of the ridiculous comic book version of Bucky.

Better even than the doodle are the words, the promise of them. Steve traces the bold letters, over and over, until he recognizes the breathless weightlessness he feels radiating out from his chest for what it is: joy.

Sam does an unflatteringly exaggerated double take when he sees Steve.

“Holy shit.”

“What?” asks Steve, wary.


Some is an understatement. “Yeah. Hope we didn’t keep you up with any noise.”

“Oh. No. Some, uh, banging—” Steve smirks, and Sam course-corrects. “I mean, thumps, but...jesus. I’m going to regret this, aren’t I. I’m going to be sexiled from so many hotel rooms. Why in the hell did I ever tell you to get laid?”

The lead in Croatia is solid, and generates even more leads all across Eastern Europe as they (and Bucky) run down the dregs of the old Soviet HYDRA Winter Soldier program. Steve doesn’t tell Sam and Nat about briefly finding Bucky. He reasons that it’s because nothing’s changed, not really. Bucky’s still in the wind, and HYDRA still needs to be burned down to the ground. This is still Natasha’s best case scenario for Bucky.

But yeah, okay, mostly it’s that he doesn’t want to debrief with Natasha about how instead of sharing any useful intelligence, or convincing Bucky to come in, he and Bucky just fucked instead. He really ought to have gotten more details from Bucky.
He gets the chance a few weeks later in a van on a dark street in Prague, when he’s alone on a stakeout. Or he was alone, anyway. At hour three of his stakeout outside a shabby, alarmingly lopsided apartment building, the van’s passenger side door opens and closes, and someone slides into the passenger seat as if they belong there. Steve’s mid throat-jab before he spots the sheen of Bucky’s metal hand and arm, and pulls the punch.

“For god’s sake, Buck, you couldn’t knock?”

Bucky grins, a quick flash of white in the dark of the van. His face is partially obscured by a hat, and, as Steve looks closer, he sees that Bucky has a neatly trimmed beard. Steve resists the urge to reach out and touch it. The beard looks pretty damn good on him, and invitingly soft.

“Young man’s ETA is 37 minutes. You planning to kill him?”

“No, turn him in to Interpol,” Steve says. “Their HYDRA task force is trustworthy, Natasha’s cleared all of them.”

Bucky nods, then reaches across Steve to slide the driver’s seat back. In one quick move, shockingly graceful for the close confines, Bucky straddles him on the driver’s seat and settles heavy on Steve’s lap.

“How the fuck can you stand this,” says Bucky in a rough voice that makes Steve shiver. He doesn’t know if he’s faintly lightheaded from the abrupt rush of blood straight to his cock, or if that’s just from Bucky’s presence, from Bucky’s dark eyes fixed on him.

“Stand what?” asks Steve between kisses to Bucky’s jaw and neck.

“Being so goddamned turned on so often. This fucking supersoldier bullshit—” Bucky punctuates each word with a hard kiss, and fuck, he’s rocking against Steve too, each movement bringing a tantalizing surge of friction and pressure against Steve’s hard cock.

“Well, the USO girls helped me out at first—” Steve gasps, then groans when Bucky turns his attention to the sensitive spot behind Steve’s ear. “And there’ve been a few people since I woke up. Have you not—you know, they have whole websites for—and you’re so much fucking better at this than me—”

Bucky laughs. “Yeah? I’ll take your word for it. Sweet of you not to notice, Steve, but I’m a goddamn mess. Can’t stand anyone else getting that close.”

“This is okay though? We’re okay?”

“Yeah.” Bucky stops for a second, resting his forehead against Steve’s. “This is perfect.”

They keep rutting against each other, kissing the whole time, their hands frantic and hungry. Steve slides his hands over the solid, strong muscles of Bucky’s thighs, then up under Bucky’s shirt in search of heated skin. Bucky shudders, one long, convulsive ripple, and makes a desperate, small noise, and Steve’s about to ask if he’s okay, if he’s hurt, but then the movement of Bucky’s hips against him grows faster and harder, so much perfect pressure against Steve’s trapped cock. It’s not long before Bucky relaxes with one broken sigh, and the desperate motion of his hips turns slower, lazier. Steve recognizes that sweet sound: Bucky came, just from this. Steve’s pretty fucking close himself, closer still after that. Bucky reaches between them to unzip Steve’s pants and palm at his
cock through his underwear, and just the feeling of cool pressure is enough to pull an orgasm from Steve in one rough rush.

After one more long and lingering kiss, Bucky crawls back over to the passenger seat, considerably less graceful now than he was earlier.

Steve reaches after him. “Wait, don’t—”

“I’m not leaving yet, your target’s still at least twenty minutes out.” Bucky pulls something out of his inside jacket pocket and tosses it at Steve: wet wipes. Steve cleans himself up as best he can, wincing at the uncomfortable damp spot still left in his briefs, then tosses the packet at Bucky, who does the same.

“Enough time for a debrief then,” says Steve, and if it’s not quite an order, it’s pretty close.

Bucky shrugs. “Sure,” he says, then gives a disconcertingly toneless rundown of what he’s been doing, what HYDRA heads he’s been focusing on burning off. He doesn’t give much detail, doesn’t offer any explanations. Bucky’s clearly got a plan, but Steve’s not quite sure what it is. Steve watches Bucky’s profile, his familiar face turned strange and stern in the harsh streetlights.

“What’s the endgame here, Buck? All of HYDRA gone?” Who knows how long that’ll take. Steve wants to collect on that IOU before then.

“I’ll settle for being free of them. Your target’s here.”

Before he can ask what Bucky means, how he can help, Bucky’s gone.

He tells Sam and Natasha that Bucky made contact, relays all the information Bucky gave him. He does not mention any of the sex. When he’s done, Sam and Natasha exchange a wary, speaking look.

“So…you okay, Steve?” asks Sam.

“Yeah,” says Steve trying for sincere. He crosses his arms. Natasha’s eyes narrow just a tiny bit and Steve uncrosses his arms. “Yeah, I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?” Shit, has he given it away? Can they tell he and Bucky have been doing way more necking than intelligence swapping? Fuck, does he have beard burn?

“Barnes didn’t stay,” says Natasha.

“Like you said, he’ll come back when he’s ready.”

Natasha’s looking way too closely at him now. “And you’re sure of that?”

Steve thinks of the IOU with the messily sketched Bucky Bear folded up small and tight in his wallet.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

Steve’s not being reckless when he tells Sam and Natasha they should split up in the HYDRA base in Poland. The place is minimally staffed, and they’re only here for one thing: to find the prototype and in construction mind-wiping chairs, and blow them the fuck up. A surgical strike, in and out before anyone even knows they’re here. Splitting up to sweep the whole place for the chairs is fast
and efficient. If Steve makes that sound tactical decision in tiny part because, for just a second, he thought he saw the silver flash of Bucky’s metal arm, or because he thought he could feel Bucky’s eyes on him…well, that doesn’t make it any less tactically sound.

“Found ‘em,” says Natasha over his comms, and Steve is, for a second, disappointed. He’d wanted to find the evil things and have the satisfaction of blowing them up himself. “Setting the charges now.”

“Keep sweeping the rest of the base, I don’t want us to miss anything,” Steve orders, and keeps checking rooms and labs.

“Got it, Cap,” says Sam.

A few minutes later, he’s clearing a room full of what looks like janitorial and office supplies when Natasha says, “Blowing these chairs in one minute, be on the lookout for the HYDRA cockroaches scurrying out of their dark holes,” and then he feels it, a presence at his back, though he heard no footfalls.

“I had my own plans for this base, Rogers,” comes Bucky’s voice, strangely muffled, and Steve hears the door creak shut. “I set the ops room to self-destruct, it’ll take the whole base with it.” Bucky’s hand is on the back of his neck, a silent command. He squeezes, just a little. That’s all it takes. Steve already feels the rush of arousal.

Steve doesn’t turn around, just brings his hand up to the comms in his ear. “When?”

“Twenty minutes,” says Bucky, and takes hold of Steve’s hand before he can activate the comms. “We’ve got time.”

“Time for what?”

He hears the muffled explosion from Natasha’s charges. The shelves in the supply room rattle faintly with the force. Bucky turns him around.

“You know what,” he says, and then he turns Steve around and crowds him against the shelves. Steve sees now why Bucky’s voice sounds muffled. He’s wearing the black mask, the Winter Soldier mask he’d worn the first time Steve saw him again in this century, though the rest of his gear is light tac gear, just light body armor over a long-sleeved black shirt. Once he ditches the armor and the mask, he’ll be able to blend into any city within minutes, Steve knows. Natasha had made him and Sam outfit themselves similarly for just that reason.

Over the mask, Bucky’s eyes are hot and hungry, somehow more intense when the rest of his face is hidden. He slides a thigh between Steve’s legs.

This is a bad idea, but—twenty minutes. It’s more than enough time. Bucky comes closer still, and Steve can’t help it, his hips jerk. He wraps an arm around Bucky and drags him in. He should be asking Bucky questions, he should be making sure he’s alright, that he’s safe. And he will. Later.

“Yeah, we’ve got enough time,” says Bucky, and Steve can hear the smile in his voice, can see his eyes crease up with it. Yeah, Bucky’s alright. Steve moves to take the mask off, to kiss Bucky, but Bucky stops him. “No,” he says, and palms Steve’s cock through his pants. It’s enough pressure to make his cock start to fill.

“Buck, c’mon. Nineteen minutes and ticking.” Bucky just hums thoughtfully, then digs around in his pocket to pull out a small packet of something. Steve squints at it: it’s lube. “Prepared for every eventuality, huh, Sergeant Barnes?” Steve teases, but he’s impressed, and relieved. Steve’s
forethought is limited to keeping a couple condoms in his pockets.

Bucky narrows his eyes, but duly squeezes some lube onto his flesh hand, then shoves his hand down Steve’s pants. The touch is so sudden it makes Steve shudder, then he’s shaking because Bucky starts stroking, slick with the lube, his grip gentle and slow, almost exploratory, like he’s got all fucking night to wind Steve up.

“Oh, we don’t have that much time,” gasps Steve.

“Yeah we do. Eighteen minutes. You’re gonna come at ten minutes, Steve, alright?” Bucky says it low and sure as his thumb sweeps slowly across the head of Steve’s cock, smearing the precome already gathered there. Steve moans, eyes falling closed, before Bucky’s metal hand takes hold of his chin with a firm grip. “Then you’re gonna tell Wilson and Romanoff to get out of the base, and you’re gonna get out too. You’ll have ten minutes to get clear of the base, you got that?”

Steve tries to hold the base’s layout in his head, plot his route out, but god, Bucky’s hand feels incredible against the always sensitive skin of his cock, and Steve wants him to go faster so badly. It doesn’t matter anyway: Bucky’s planned this out. If he says they’ll have ten minutes, they’ll be able to get out in ten minutes.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Tell Wilson and Romanoff you’re going off comms,” orders Bucky, even as he speeds up the movement of his hand.

Steve glares, but he does it. “I’m getting some, uh, interference on my comms in this sector of the base. I’m gonna turn them off. We’ll rendezvous at the north elevator in—” Steve falters. He cannot do this math with Bucky’s hand on his dick.

“Ten minutes,” murmurs Bucky.

“—In ten. Copy?” Sam and Nat acknowledge the order, and Steve gets the comms off just in time for Bucky to start working him in earnest. His hand is hot and perfect, slick with the lube, and he’s going just that maddening bit slower than Steve does when he takes himself in hand.

“We’re at sixteen now, you gonna last?” asks Bucky. His eyes haven’t wavered from Steve’s face, and the weight of his gaze is as good as the touch of his skin. Six minutes seems like both an eternity and nowhere near long enough. Steve clutches at Bucky’s hip, his shoulder.

“Fuck you, I’m not some horny virgin,” Steve retorts, and in response, Bucky makes his grip just a little bit tighter. It’s still not quite tight enough, but Steve’s panting anyway.

Steve thrusts up against Bucky’s hand, and fumbles at Bucky’s pants, but Bucky stops him with his left hand.

“No,” he says, and Steve whines, “Buck, c’mon.”

“You’ll owe me one,” says Bucky, and okay, Steve can live with that. That means he’s going to be seeing Bucky again.

Six minutes, it turns out, is kind of a long time, longer maybe than he’s ever managed to hold off an orgasm in this new body, and god, Bucky knows exactly what to do with his hand, varying the pace and pressure to draw things out, taking Steve to the edge then pulling him back. All Steve can do is gasp and moan and writhe under Bucky’s grip, under Bucky’s implacable attention. Bucky’s eyes are fixed and rapt on him, and Steve can’t help but wonder, through the haze of desperate pleasure, if
Bucky remembers all the other times he’s had Steve like this, or if the reason for his focus is to commit it to memory again. It doesn’t matter: his hand is as welcome on Steve’s cock as Steve’s own, more than, and Steve is perfectly happy to make all new memories with Bucky, as often and enthusiastically as necessary. Steve’s missed this so fucking much.

“What do you need?” Bucky asks.

“Your mouth—”

“No,” says Bucky, but Steve presses forward anyway, mouths clumsily at the mask, where he can just feel Bucky’s hot breath blowing through the air holes, where he can breathe it in, the closest thing he can get to a kiss right now. Bucky’s eyes flutter closed, as if Steve really were kissing him. The downward sweep of his long lashes against his cheeks is as disarmingly beautiful as it’s always been. Skin, skin he wants Bucky’s skin, so he dips his head lower, tugs and tears at the collar of Bucky’s shirt until the hollow of his throat is revealed, and he presses his lips there, tastes the salt of his sweat. He feels it when Bucky moans, and he nearly comes right then.

“Twelve minutes,” says Bucky, breathless. “You want it faster?”

“Please,” whimpers Steve. “C’mon, c’mon, you gonna give me a countdown or what?”

Bucky lets out a sound that could be a huff of laughter from behind the mask. His hand speeds up, slick with lube and precome now, hot and tight, and yeah, fast. Steve can feel his orgasm finally approaching, the tight tight tight winding up of sensation that builds to a nearly unbearable peak.

“Just a little longer, Steve,” says Bucky, and Steve wants to sob, because he really, really has to come now, even if it has only been less than eight goddamn minutes and then, finally, Bucky says, right in Steve’s ear, “Okay, now,” and right on cue, Steve comes with a long, rolling shudder, throwing his head back against the shelf.

There’s no time for afterglow, no time to indulge his loose, relaxed muscles. Bucky pulls out a handkerchief from somewhere and cleans them up some, which makes Steve yelp thanks to his over-sensitive, post-orgasmic cock.

“You have two minutes to get to the north elevator,” says Bucky, but he doesn’t move away from Steve just yet. He brings his hand—the metal one—up to Steve’s cheek. Steve wonders what he can feel with it, if he can feel anything. He turns his head and presses a kiss to Bucky’s cool palm anyway. Bucky’s eyes crease up with a hidden smile, so maybe he can feel it.

“Buck. Are you alright? Can you—will you stay?”

“Not yet,” says Bucky, and Steve doesn’t know which question he’s answering. Bucky takes one step backward, gives him one last intense, heated glance, and then he’s gone.

Right. Two minutes to the elevator, eight more minutes to get clear of the base. Steve turns his comms back on, and staggers out of the supply room.

“Ops room is set to blow, we need to be clear in ten minutes.”

Steve, Sam, and Natasha make it safely out, with a minute to spare. When the base blows, it does so with a deep, booming whump that makes the base shiver, no showy flames and explosions. After a few seconds, Steve can feel the ground rumble under his feet, and the base begins to collapse. Steve watches, idly wishing he could vaporize the whole thing and every single instrument of torture inside.
He feels Natasha’s eyes on him: she’s watching him, not the base. “You seem relaxed,” she says.

He looks post-orgasmic, is what she means. He’s riding high on the hope of an IOU and a not yet. Not that he’s going to give that away. “Blowing up HYDRA bases relaxes me.”

Sam sighs. “Of course it does. You know, some people just have spa days.”

“Our contact’s not gonna show,” mutters Steve, wincing when he sees their waiter headed towards them again.

The waiter stops at their table for the fourth time in half an hour. He manages to fill their mostly full water glasses passive-aggressively, despite not spilling a drop. This restaurant is too classy a joint to outright kick them out, but the waiter’s sure going to make a good effort at annoying them into leaving. Steve gives him an apologetic grimace, trying to promise with his eyes that he’ll leave a big tip to make up for the trouble of saddling the poor guy with a table that just won’t turn over. The waiter is not mollified.

If they’re here much longer, Steve’s gonna have to start ordering his way down the rest of the dessert menu, no matter how full he is. Sam already looks like he regrets the hazelnut torte.

“Might as well wait until closing at this point,” says Sam.

“You’re sure Natasha said our contact would meet us at our table?”

They’re back in the States for a change, in DC even, thanks to a tip to Natasha from Steve’s former neighbor/personal surveillance detail Sharon Carter. Some terrified congressional aide has intel on Pierce’s still-extant and still in office HYDRA buddies, and they’ll only trust Captain America with it, and even then only in a public location away from the usual Hill staffer haunts. The whistleblowing aide is over an hour late for this meet though, and either there was a communications breakdown somewhere, or their whistleblower got cold feet, if HYDRA didn’t get to them first.

“You got the same text I did. If she didn’t mean at the bar or at a table, she would’ve specified.”

“I’ll just go check the back, and the bathrooms, do a perimeter check. You stay here. Order a coffee or something.”

Steve gets up before Sam can object. He darts past busboys and servers in the restaurant’s cramped back hallway. A quick peek into the kitchen reveals people in chef’s whites, and others in the black and white of the rest of the restaurant’s staff. A woman squeezes past him on her way to the women’s restroom, and when she opens the door, he cranes his neck to see if he can spot anyone in there. Before he can get more than a glimpse, a sharply dressed man in a dark grey suit exits the men’s room, and after a split second of appreciation for how the man’s suit shows off his broad shoulders, Steve recognizes him.

“Bucky?” he hisses.

Bucky jerks his head towards the men’s room, and goes back in. Steve follows. The bathroom is small for such a big restaurant, just two urinals and a couple stalls, plus a couple sinks, but what it lacks in size, it makes up for in unnecessary luxury. Everything’s pale, blue-veined marble, with plumbing fixtures that look more like modern art than usable faucets. Steve wonders how the hell anyone can bring themselves to piss in here, let alone anything else. Bucky widens his eyes in a brief I know, right? like he knows exactly what Steve’s thinking.

It absolutely shouldn’t be the priority right now, but it’s hard not to gape at Bucky, at his stylish, still
short hair and trim beard, his expensive looking suit. He’s neatly pressed and handsome as anything, like he’s walked straight off an old movie reel. He’s in full color though: the grey of his suit turns Bucky’s blue eyes especially icy and vivid. No one would ever mistake him for the man who fought Captain America just a few miles away. Steve supposes that’s the point.

For his part, Steve has opted for the unremarkable, slightly ill-fitting dark blue suit common among the hordes of young and hungry civil servants that swarm DC, and now he’s regretting it, even though he can still see a glint of appreciation in Bucky’s stare.

“Your contact’s not gonna show. HYDRA tried to take her out on the way here, she’s lying low for now,” says Bucky, voice pitched low to avoid an echo.

“Shit. She okay?”

“Yeah, I took care of it. Quietly, don’t worry.”

“Thanks, Buck.”

Bucky shrugs, gives him a small, lopsided smile. Steve steps close to him, and Bucky’s arms come up to loop around his neck and shoulders, loose and easy, like they have hushed liaisons in fancy restaurant bathrooms every day. Hell, maybe they ought to, if Bucky’s gonna get so dressed up for them. He runs curious fingers over Bucky’s soft beard, wonders if he’d still had it under the mask the last time they’d seen each other, over a month ago now. The beard makes him look older, more serious.

“This here to stay?” asks Steve.

“Why, you like it?”

“I like you any which way,” he says, because Bucky’s a beautiful man, no matter what.

Bucky kisses him for that, both of them smiling through it, slow and careful for once. Steve would be perfectly content to keep necking in this ridiculous bathroom, but he owes Bucky an orgasm. He presses one more kiss to Bucky’s soft lips, then sinks down on his knees onto the cold marble tile, and starts unbuckling Bucky’s belt.

“Steve—”

“I owe you one, remember?”

“And if someone comes in?” asks Bucky, low and breathy, as he moves to brace himself on the marble sink behind him.

Steve shrugs. “We’ll hear ‘em coming.”

“You’re such a fucking little shit,” says Bucky, affection in his voice and in the hand he uses to tug gently at Steve’s hair. Steve grins up at him, then gets to work.

For the first time in far, far too long, Steve takes Bucky’s cock in his mouth. It’s familiar still, the feeling of the delicate, hot skin against his tongue, the taste. He loves feeling Bucky’s cock harden in his mouth, loves it even more when Bucky fucks his mouth, sure that Steve can take it. Aware that they don’t have much time here, he goes straight for all the things he knows drive Bucky wild: taking him deep, teasing at his slit with his tongue until he feels and tastes precome gather there, sucking hard then licking soft.
Bucky’s trying to keep quiet, but even so, his fast breathing takes on strange echoes in the small space, and the way he says Steve’s name, hushed and straining, sounds reverent. Steve looks up at him, can’t help moaning at the sight of Bucky’s reddened lips and his heavy-lidded eyes, how undone he looks, so at odds with his sharp suit. When Bucky’s hand in his hair tightens and the thrusting of his hips flirts with being too rough, Steve knows he’s close, and Steve wants, with a sudden desperate hunger, to feel Bucky come in his mouth, to swallow it down. His own cock is hard and throbbing, but that doesn’t feel important right now.

“She, I’m gonna—” Steve glances up at him, tries to say I know, and I’m not going anywhere with his eyes, and sucks at Bucky’s cock, hard.

There’s a weird cracking and grinding sort of sound, then Bucky lets out a choked-off cry and comes into Steve’s mouth in one perfect, hot rush. Steve swallows it all, and happily, before Bucky pulls his cock free, then pulls Steve up to kiss him. They both groan when Bucky tastes himself in Steve’s mouth.

“So hey, what was that noise—” asks Steve between Bucky’s unhurried, lazy kisses. Bucky hides his face in Steve’s neck, where Steve can actually feel Bucky’s face go hot with a blush. He mumbles something against Steve’s skin. “What’s that, Buck?”

“The sink.” says Bucky more clearly.

Steve looks over Bucky’s shoulder at it. There’s a crack in the marble of the sink, and some finger-shaped dents along the edge, where Bucky had been gripping it with his left hand. Bucky maneuvers them both so Steve’s back is to the sink now, and the expression on Bucky’s face is hilariously the exact same big-eyed, grimacing oops as when he was seven years old and had broken something or other playing stickball.

“I’m gonna have to leave such a big tip,” whispers Steve, and then they both clutch at each other as they collapse into quiet giggles.

They only get a hold of themselves when Steve’s phone buzzes: a text from Sam. if u aren’t back in 2 mins i’m coming after u. Wtf r u doing. Agt 13 says contact spooked, no show 2nite.

Bucky kisses at Steve’s neck, then drops to his knees, his hands already making quick work of Steve’s belt buckle. “Buck, I’m not sure we have the time...” Bucky just glares up at him, which is an extremely appealing look from this angle, if Steve’s being honest.

“Make the time. I’m not letting you leave like this,” says Bucky, unzipping him and nosing at his hard cock through his briefs.

Steve texts Sam back with shaky fingers. Perimeter clear, i’m just in the bathroom. Christ, he can feel the heat of Bucky’s mouth through his briefs, can feel Bucky lick at the damp spot from his precome. He’s scarcely sent the text before Bucky’s got hold of Steve’s cock and swallows him down, and Steve swears, lets his phone clatter into the sink behind him.

Bucky hums happily around Steve’s cock, making a sweet kind of vibration, then he sets about teasing and licking with his tongue. Before the serum, just Bucky’s mouth usually wasn’t enough to get Steve off, but Bucky’d liked to suck Steve off anyway, long and leisurely, had liked how it made Steve go loose and high with the buzz of slowly building but never peaking pleasure. Now, there’s nothing slow about it, but Steve still feels that almost tipsy warmth. He pets clumsily at Bucky’s hair, whispers nonsense encouragements like you’re perfect this is perfect I missed you I missed this, and lets the cold marble of the sink hold him up, because his spine’s about as helpful as a wet noodle right now, and his knees are weak just from the sigh of Bucky’s downturned eyes, the graceful
sweep of his thick lashes. When Steve comes into Bucky’s mouth, eased into it by the patient and appreciative movements of Bucky’s clever tongue, he comes in one long, inevitable unwinding.

“Can’t believe it’s been seventy fucking years since I last did that,” says Bucky when he stands, a satisfied smile on his red lips and a glazed, dreamy kind of look in his eyes. He kisses Steve quick and close-mouthed, then slaps lightly at his cheeks, back to business within seconds. “Hey, your brain come back online yet? Focus, Rogers, I gotta tell you something.”

“You’ve got a high opinion of your cock-sucking skills,” Steve grumbles while he grabs his phone and gets his clothes back in order, like he’s not still riding high on a post-orgasmic daze.

Bucky raises an unimpressed eyebrow as he helps Steve buckle his belt, before he buckles his own. “I’m pretty sure I’m really good at it.”

“Yeah, you are,” Steve sighs, and Bucky smirks. “Okay, I’m listening, I promise, what did you need to tell me? Can I call in that IOU yet?”

“Not yet. But soon. Hopefully. That’s what I—” Bucky stops, licks his lips. “Listen. If I don’t come back to you in two weeks, tell Romanoff this. Exactly this, Steve, you hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Tell her what?”

Bucky rattles off a set of coordinates, a couple unfamiliar Russian words, and a name: Karpov. “Repeat it back to me,” he orders, and Steve does, mangling the Russian only a little. The coordinates are familiar, but none of the rest of it is.

“Aren’t those the coordinates of that base in Siberia you blew up?”

“Yes.”

Steve waits a beat for more information, but Bucky doesn’t offer any. “Are you...going there again? Why tell Natasha?”

“No. Romanoff will know what I mean. Only tell her this if I’m not back in two weeks, Steve. Promise me. She’ll know what it means, what to do.”

“I promise. Buck, what are you—what’s—”

“This is the last thing I gotta do on my own. You have to let me do it on my own.”

There’s no give in the words, just unyielding certainty, and between that and the solemn intensity of Bucky’s eyes, there’s something of the Winter Soldier in Bucky right now. Steve trusts Bucky, he does, but there’s so damn much he doesn’t know. What’s Bucky doing?

Before Steve can object or ask for more details, they hear Sam approach. “Steve, I swear to god, what kind of super dump are you taking in there?”

In what can’t be more than two seconds, Bucky disappears into the nearest stall, not even his feet visible, and Steve turns to the sink, as if he’s just been washing his hands. Sam enters the bathroom.

“Sorry, Sam,” Steve says, and turns to him. “Let’s go pay the check and get out of here.”

Sam narrows his eyes at Steve, then looks around the bathroom. He lets out a low whistle. “Alright. I get it. You were poop shy in here, huh? All this marble would make any man feel like he’s taking a dump in some ancient temple.”
Steve’s pretty sure it’s only his super soldier ears that catch the very small inhale of breath that’s Bucky’s attempt to hold in a laugh. He considers denying it to Sam, but honestly, he probably would be nervous about profaning this bathroom with a dump. A couple of blow jobs on the other hand...well, those had felt pretty fucking holy.

“The echo’s pretty awkward too,” is all he says, and Sam bursts into laughter as they walk out.

Two weeks. It’s not long given how long he’s already waited. But now that he has an uncertain countdown to either Bucky’s return or his alarming absence, the wait becomes much harder to bear. It only takes a couple days to get their whistleblower contact safely situated, and then Steve’s at loose ends, unwilling to follow up on any leads in case they could blow whatever op Bucky’s working on, or entangle Steve and the others in a mission when Bucky’s deadline is up.

So he tells Sam and Nat, “Let’s take a break. Take a couple weeks to regroup, come back fresh.”

“Oh thank fuck.” Sam claps Steve on the back, and immediately goes to his bedroom, still talking. “I’m headed to my mom’s place, and I am not goddamn moving from her couch unless it’s to eat her cooking or play with my nieces! Don’t fucking call me unless the world’s ending!” He comes back out with an already packed bag. “You two can stay here if you want, mi casa es su casa and all that.”

“What, you’re leaving already?” asks Natasha. She doesn’t look inclined to move from her sprawled out position on Sam’s armchair.

Sam flops back down onto his couch. “Soon as I book a flight, I am,” he says, and pulls out his phone.

“Don’t worry about closing the condo up, I’ll take care of it,” offers Steve. “I’ll stick around here for another couple days, see Peggy. Think I’ll go pay Tony a visit at the Tower after that. You sticking around too?” he asks Natasha.

She shrugs, casual, but her attention on Steve is keen as a blade. “No, think I’ll go pay Clint a visit. You seem...less intense than usual, Steve. You okay?”

“I’m fine. Ready to take a bit of a break, that’s all.” Sam and Natasha exchange a significant, concerned twitch of their eyebrows.

“Not giving up on Barnes, are you?” asks Sam.

“Never. HYDRA’s on the retreat though, I’m a little less worried about them getting their hands on him again is all. He’ll come in when he’s ready.”

Hopefully in two weeks.

Steve goes to see Peggy and hopes, selfishly, that she’s having a good day, that she’ll know him and remember what year it is without Steve having to tell her. He wants to finally be able to give her something approaching good news about Bucky, and have her understand what it means. The fall of SHIELD had hit her hard. Maybe news of Bucky would brighten her spirits some.

Peggy greets him with a beaming smile and an outstretched, if trembling, hand. “Steve, darling! I’m so happy to see you.”

“Me too, Peg,” he says, and takes her hand, presses a kiss to it, then to her lips.
“Though really, you ought to have told me Bucky was back too. He paid me a visit yesterday. Or was it the day before yesterday? It’s so hard to remember, all the days here start to seem like the same long day—”

“You saw Buck?” he asks, before she can lose her train of thought.

She takes the redirection in stride and gestures towards the exquisite potted orchid now taking up the better part of the table beside her bed. The flowers are the exact same shade of red as Peggy’s lipstick used to be.

“Yes, and he brought these by, then tried not to cry all over my shoulder, the poor dear. I asked him if my wrinkles were that terrifying, and then it was all apologies and the two of us trying to scrape together some memories in our ancient, scrambled brains.”

“I’m sorry I missed it. Been too damn long since I’ve seen my best girl and best guy together,” he says, and hopes the tears aren’t too obvious in his voice. Peggy takes tight hold of his hand, so maybe they are.

“Now that you have him back, Steve—”

“Not yet. I don’t have him back quite yet. Thirteen more days.”

Peggy glares fiercely at the interruption, and there’s a look that hasn’t changed in seventy years. Steve shuts up, chastened.

“Well, now that you will have him back, darling, promise me. Promise me you won’t spend your time together weeping and wondering over me, or over what we all might have had.”

To let go of that dream now, when it’s more perversely attainable than ever, is a strange sort of agony. Like the way ice burns as hot as fire against bare skin, and sticks to it, unwilling to let go. Here they all are, in the 21st century, and none of them got here by the same route. None of them could quite keep the unspoken promises of after the war. Steve supposes he ought to let that go, by now, even if that persistent dream is going to take a few layers of his skin with it.

“I promise.”

Steve goes to see Tony next. He has eleven days and counting, and if Bucky’s going to come in, Steve has to know if they’ll be safe with the Avengers, or if they’re going to have to run.

Steve’s willing to run. He’s willing to do a lot to make sure Bucky’s safe. He just hopes he won’t have to.

Tony’s busy actually working for most of the day, then he drags Steve on an impromptu children’s hospital visit, which definitely isn’t the time to bring up what Steve has to talk to him about. But, after some protracted negotiation/argument about it, Tony concedes to a dinner of Chinese takeout in the Tower’s rarely used Avengers’ common area, and then demands an update on how the “Nazi hunting” is going. For a wonder, Tony listens closely to Steve, with few interruptions. Steve doesn’t know if that’s just because Tony’s stuffing his mouth with food, or if he’s just that interested in what Steve has to say.

“I know you’ve been trying to keep a low profile since SHIELD fell, but you know I’ll give you whatever you need to take all these Nazis out, Cap. And your floor’s still yours, you know.”

“Thanks, Tony,” he says, then shakes his head. “And I appreciate the offer, but you and Rhodes are
doing more than enough right now. There’s something else I needed to talk to you about.”

“Your investment profile?”

“My what?”

“Never mind, go on.”

Steve’s spent a lot of sleepless nights wondering how he could ever talk to Tony about this. He’s put it off, reasoning that some taunts from a digital Zola and some suggestive HYDRA files weren’t confirmation enough. Steve hasn’t even had the chance to ask Bucky about it yet. But all that, Steve suspects, is cowardice talking more than prudence. If Bucky’s going to come in, if he’s going to be safe, Steve needs to do his part.

“Say your parents didn’t die in an accident…” Steve starts, watching Tony’s face carefully. “Say they were murdered…”

“Wouldn’t be a surprise to me. I thought for a while Obie might’ve arranged it,” interrupts Tony. “Now I think it might’ve been HYDRA. But okay, continue with your…hypothetical.”

“Say the person who did it was like Clint, when Loki had control of him. Would you want to know who did it?”

Tony opens his mouth, then closes it. He stares hard at Steve, and Steve meets his eyes. “Hypothetically.” Steve nods. It is, very technically, still hypothetical. Steve’s not sure the Winter Soldier did it. “Depends. How sure are we…hypothetically…about the meat puppet status of the murderer? And is said murderer still a danger?”

“Very. As sure as we were about Clint. And they’re no more of a danger than Clint.”

Tony takes that in for a long moment, his jaw clenched and the skin around his eyes tight. Steve’s pretty sure it’s the longest he’s ever seen Tony think about what he’s about to say, and it’s actually faintly terrifying. Eventually, Tony answers.

“No. No, I wouldn’t want to know.” He bursts up from his seat, and paces. “It wouldn’t be the relevant data, would it? *Fuck.*”

“I’m sorry, Tony.”

“Don’t be. Just—I don’t wanna know, huh?”

“Don’t think so.”

“You gonna stop me if I go looking for who ordered it?”

“No. I’d even help, if…” Steve offers hesitantly. He can’t quite tell if Tony’s mad at him or not.

“Right,” mutters Tony, then scrubs rough hands through his hair. “*Right.* I’m gonna—I’m gonna go—deal with this in a marginally psychologically healthy way. You staying?”

“Yeah. If that’s alright. And I, uh, might have someone staying with me soon.” *Eleven days.*

Tony’s already walking to the elevator, and Steve joins him.

“What, Falcon with the wings? Sure, this isn’t a dorm, I’m not your RA. You can have guests. Hell, get Falcon to join the Avengers, and he gets his own floor.” The words spill out of Tony in a
distracted patter, his voice sounding normal, but his eyes suggesting that a good two-thirds of his attention are taken up with something else.

“Not Sam. And not a guest. A, uh, roommate?”

They get in the elevator, JARVIS already taking them to Steve’s floor without being asked. Suddenly, as if with the flip of some internal switch, the majority of Tony’s attention returns to the here and now, and he studies Steve, like Steve’s the latest glitch with his armor.

“You’re not actually an unemployed twenty-something, Steve, you don’t have to live with a roommate. But it’s fine with me if you want to LARP as a millennial.” The elevator stops on Steve’s floor, and Tony gestures towards it, a messily showy flailing of his arms. “I am a benevolent landlord.”

“Thanks. Really.”

“Don’t worry about it,” says Tony, breezy. Then he smiles, an unhappy baring of his teeth. “But you’re taking me on your next HYDRA hunting trip.”

At t-minus ten and nine days, Steve walks around Manhattan, making sure he’s seen and photographed, so Bucky will know where he is. He tells JARVIS about Bucky, makes sure he knows to let Bucky up to his floor if— when he comes. He putters around his apartment in the Tower, moving and re-arranging furniture around for lack of anything better to do. He puts Bucky’s IOU note up on the fridge, smoothing out the folds it’s acquired from living in Steve’s wallet. He looks up the Russian words Bucky had told him, trying incorrect spelling after incorrect spelling, until JARVIS tactfully interrupts him. I believe the words you are attempting to translate are “trigger” and “conditioning,” Captain Rogers. So then Steve spends some time trying to figure out what the hell that means, what Bucky could be doing. He’s not that successful.

He still has eight days left. He’s going to go fucking insane.

At seven days left, he uses every single piece of equipment in the Avengers’ gym, and breaks an embarrassing number of punching bags.

When there’s still six days left until Bucky’s deadline, Bucky comes back.

Steve’s staring at Bucky’s IOU note on the fridge and contemplating if he should bother to make breakfast when JARVIS announces Bucky’s arrival with a polite, doorbell-like ding. “Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes has arrived, and per your request, I am directing him to your floor.”

“What?!”

“Sergeant Barnes has arrived, and per your—”

“No, I mean, is he—how is he, is he okay, does he need—”

“Sergeant Barnes does not appear to be in need of medical assistance.”

Before Steve can ask anything else, there’s a knock at the door. When he opens it, Bucky’s standing there, a pack on his shoulder and a weary smile on his face. For just a second, Steve can see the old Sergeant Barnes in his perfectly pressed Army uniform and his cap titled at a decidedly not regulation angle, and he thinks this is how it always should’ve gone. Bucky coming home, after a too-long war. The Bucky standing in his doorway now isn’t in uniform though, just in jeans and a
sweater, looking like any other guy Steve might walk past on the streets.

“Hey. You can collect on that IOU now,” Bucky says, voice raspy and tired and still the best damn thing Steve has ever heard. They’re in each other’s arms almost before Bucky’s finished talking.

“Are you okay? Is this—are you staying?”

Bucky nods where he’s tucked his face against Steve’s neck. “I’m okay, just really fucking tired. And yeah, I’m staying. For as long as you’ll have me, anyway.” Steve just grips him tighter.

“That IOU means I’ve got you for life, Barnes. I don’t intend to let you go.”

What tension was left in Bucky’s body leaves so swiftly Steve briefly thinks Bucky’s passed out in his arms. But no, Bucky moves to kiss Steve, and it feels, maybe, like a new kind of kiss from Bucky: a kiss without reservations, but still gentle, the movement of his lips and tongue both patient and reverent.

“Good,” murmurs Bucky when he finally pulls away a little. “Now, I wish I could say ‘take me to bed’ in a sexy way here, Steve, but I really just wanna go to actual bed.”

Steve laughs and lifts Bucky up into his arms, while Bucky wraps his arms and legs around Steve with a happy sigh. “That’s alright, I don’t mind. We’ve got time for the rest.”

One week later:

“Alright Steve, I am rested, refreshed, and ten pounds heavier from my mom’s cooking, and I am ready to kick some HYDRA ass and find your boy—what the fuck.”

“I’m found!” says Bucky, far too cheerful for a man who’s just been caught with his literal hand down Steve’s literal pants. Steve scrambles off of Bucky’s lap.

“Sam! Hi! Uh, how was your trip?”

Sam stares at where Bucky’s still sitting on the couch. Bucky smiles and stands, waves. “Hi. I’d, uh, offer to shake, but you just saw where my hand was, so…”

“Right, no, we are not shaking hands right now, no. Steve. What the fuck.”

What the fuck’s not really a question Steve knows the answer to. “Bucky’s back. Obviously. Uh. And you said not to call you unless the world was ending? So.” Sam glares. “I called Natasha!”

It had been kind of anticlimactic. She and Bucky had a rapid, tense conversation in Russian, then she’d sighed and told them to enjoy your sex vacation, debrief next week, then hung up, sounding some mix of exasperated and disgusted. She hasn’t stopped mocking him via text since. The latest text was a screenshot of his contact name in her phone: Captain Honeypot.

“Uh huh.” Sam crosses his arms, clearly waiting for additional information.

“Bucky’s, uh, fine, obviously…” tries Steve. He wills his hard-on to go away. It doesn’t listen.

“100% completely unbrainwashed! Still a little spotty on the memories.” Bucky pauses, bites at his lower lip. His very red lower lip. God, focus Rogers, he tells himself. “Sorry about all that attempted murder. And your car.”

Sam just shakes his head, already beating a retreat. “You know what, whatever. Whatever! Welcome
back, Barnes. Steve, I’m happy for you. I’m gonna go, you two go back to...yeah.”

Steve collapses back onto the couch, groaning in mortification. Bucky’s unbothered, and just climbs onto Steve’s lap.

“Last time someone caught us in the act, we had a threesome, didn’t we? Shame it couldn’t go that way this time,” says Bucky.

“I heard that!” shouts Sam from over by the front door. Steve closes his eyes. Of course. Of course Sam heard that. “You dirty old horndogs!”

“Offer’s open, Wilson!” Bucky shouts back at him as he grinds down on Steve’s very interested cock.

“Oh my god, bye!”

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