Summary

Steve looks for Bucky, Bucky finds Steve, Steve tries desperately to put Bucky back together. Bucky tries desperately to let him. (Spoilers for Winter Soldier.)
Chapter 1

Steve and Sam call every hospital in DC, northern Virginia, and Maryland. There’s several John Does, but none of them have prosthetic arms, let alone metal ones, and even when Steve asks about amputees, there’s nothing.

The two of them spend four long days chasing leads and trying every safe house they know, interrogating the few Hydra members in custody, but none of them were anything near high enough in the ranks to know how the Winter Soldier operated, or where he was ‘programmed’ to return to in case of disaster, or if he even had a rendezvous location at all. When Steve lets Sam argue him into finally sleeping, he returns to his DC penthouse (courtesy Pepper), passing the armed guards and taking the elevator that requires an RFID card up to his floor, and if he were just a soldier and not a soldier with heightened senses of sight and sound, he wouldn’t notice the misplaced shadow standing next to the breakfast table.

_Bucky_, he doesn’t say, because he can’t even open his mouth to breathe. Instead Steve just holds perfectly still, his fingertips still brushing against his front door from shutting it, keys in his other hand. Neither of them move for a painfully long moment, and then Bucky steps forward, very slowly, moving into the soft light of the desk lamp by the door.

He looks terrible. The stubble does little to hide the scrapes of dirt on his face, and the hoodie, jeans, and gloves all look like they may have been salvaged from a dumpster. Bucky’s hair hangs in limp strands, some falling in front of his eyes, which stare almost purposefully at the spot on the floor between them.

"Bucky," Steve manages, and Bucky looks up, gaze startling in its intensity and exhaustion, and Bucky nods, as if maybe Steve wasn’t sure. Maybe Bucky wasn’t.

Tony picked this apartment himself. There are guards on the roof, guards in the lobby, guards that patrol the hallways. This apartment is meant for high-level witness protection and political figures with prices on their heads. Bucky, looking half-starved and underslept, is standing in Steve’s living room and Steve cannot begin to express his surprise.

"I’ve been looking for you," Steve croaks, and Bucky just nods again, like he knew this. "Everywhere." Bucky nods again. It’s a short, sharp motion, as if it hurts to move. Steve walks forward, dropping the keys to the floor, unable to contain the feelings rising up from his chest and threatening to tumble out, spill everywhere, but when he raises his arms to finally embrace his friend Bucky’s eyes widen in slight alarm and he practically vanishes, backstepping quickly out of the light and into the corner. Steve suppresses a noise of surprise and thinks quickly. Bucky didn’t leave, and he didn’t attack, he just backed away. He can handle this. They were trained for lots of things in the war. People freed from camps often came out like frightened animals… unable to speak, unable to trust even a friendly touch. And who could blame them?

"Bucky," he says quietly. "I. I missed you."

Steve lets the silence hang for a while, but the shadow doesn’t respond. He swallows his disappointment.

"Are you… okay?" That probably needs specifics. "Do you need a hospital?"

There’s a quiet sound, like maybe Bucky’s clearing his throat. “I’m fine.”
The sound of his voice, however raspy and monotone, does something to Steve’s chest. Bucky.
“Well,” he says, buying time while he tries to think. “Maybe you’re hungry.”

Silence.

Steve bites his lip. “Do you want to eat?”

Very slowly, Bucky takes a half step forward. His expression is tense, eyes darting left and right, almost shy, like he doesn’t know how to say yes. Steve takes a deep breath and makes himself move away instead of toward, walking around the kitchen island and to the refrigerator. “I have leftovers. The pizza place on the corner…” Steve’s mind flashes on the night before, Sam coming over and them eating together while arguing over maps and folders full of captured Hydra members, but he can’t think about alerting the others yet. He’s barely sure Bucky isn’t going to jump out the window at any moment. “Do you want to sit down?” Steve gestures at one of the two stools pulled up to the kitchen island and then kneels down to fish the half-empty box of pepperoni and olive out. When he turns around again Bucky’s moved a little closer, but looks hesitant, almost confused.

"Sit?” He tries again, and Bucky does. Steve smiles encouragingly and sets the box down between them, turning around again to find the frying pan so he can heat the slices back up, but he doesn’t even have the gas on before he hears the cardboard box shuffling open. Peeking over his shoulder, he watches as Bucky grabs a slice and devours it cold, barely chewing, already grabbing another. Steve’s heart sinks. He’s starving.

Steve puts the frying pan back down on the stove top and watches Bucky, almost completely ignored as the other man ravages his way through the box. He almost looks like he’s going to choke himself gorging on food, but Steve can’t bring himself to stop Bucky, doesn’t know how to tell him to slow down without risking the reaction of a dog whose bone is pulled away too fast. Steve thinks about Zola, and about Pierce, and for all the anger that builds up in his mind it washes away when Bucky looks up, cheeks full, and stops mid-chew. Steve blinks. Bucky swallows.

"Water?” Bucky manages, sounding very quiet and very hopeful.
Chapter 2

Bucky chugs down a glass of water as he finishes off the pizza, wiping the back of his mouth between bites and hunching his shoulders in. He's trembling a little. Steve watches him. He guesses it's exhaustion, adrenaline, all those things. Maybe withdrawal. What information he could get from Natasha's file and the men in custody hinted at a lot of ongoing maintenance to the "asset" - to his friend - and whatever they used to keep him calm, keep him pliant, he hasn't had any of it in a while now.

Steve tries to think of a way to ask Bucky to stay. He can't bring himself to think beyond making sure Bucky doesn't disappear on him again.

"Do you want to clean up?" Steve offers quietly, once he sees Bucky has abandoned the delivery box. Bucky looks up, his expression still flat but maybe just a little less tense. He doesn't answer. Steve tries again. "You're covered in soot, Bucky."

Bucky nods, like maybe this was a question. Steve's chest feels tight as he realizes that whatever state Bucky's in, he only seems to respond to orders. He doesn't want to be that person. He doesn't want anyone to be that person for Bucky, ever again.

"He's programmed to be a tool, and he has no mission right now, Natasha had told him. I know you think he's going to just snap out of it, but it doesn't work that way."

"Come with me," Steve says, and Bucky's on his feet in a heartbeat, following Steve down the hall to the bathroom.

"Let me show you how the shower works," Steve says as they walk in, because there was absolutely nothing like these controls back in his and Bucky's day. Bucky stops just inside the doorway.

"I'm showering?" Bucky asks, still monotone.

Steve blinks. "Um, yes." Bucky tucks his chin down and begins undressing, first the hoodie, then the gloves, and Steve opens his mouth to tell him to stop before second-guessing himself. Should he really tell Bucky what to do and what not to do when he's acting calm and not attacking anyone? Steve takes a moment to catalogue the bruises still healing, the discoloration along Bucky's ribs, jaundiced-looking greens and yellows that Bucky doesn't so much as flinch from as the hem of his shirt scrapes them coming off. The belt next, and as Bucky bends down to remove his jeans Steve panics and turns, busying himself with remembering how to turn on the water and put it on a gentle pressure setting. Behind him he hears the clink of a belt buckle hitting the floor.

"There's a clean towel on the back of the door," Steve says. "Come out when you're done. I'll find some clothes for you."

Bucky walks past him, stepping into the spray and tipping his head down to wet his hair. The water droplets cling and slide down the red star on his arm. Steve makes himself look away.

Because Tony never does anything by half, the closet's full of t-shirts, khakis, jeans, everything Steve would normally wear but ten times as expensive. Calvin Klein, Rag & Bone. Steve doesn't recognize most of the names. There's a bespoke suit in the back, although he has no idea when or where Tony got his measurements. He picks out a grey t-shirt and some jeans, gets a pair of boxer
briefs from the dresser, and walks into the hallway to see Bucky's already there, a towel wrapped around his waist and standing almost at attention in the doorway of the bathroom.

"These are for you." Steve holds them out and Bucky takes the folded pile, dropping the towel and stepping into the clothes one by one. Steve flushes and keeps his eyes above the waist. Bucky's still damp, and the t-shirt gets dark patches as he pulls it over his head and it clings to his chest. Steve worries at his lip. It's like he can't take care of himself. Or he's not aware of himself.

"Are you tired?"

Bucky looks like he doesn't want to answer, but finally jerks his head yes, eyes darting away.

"Okay. The bed's this way. I can sleep on the couch, it's-"

"I remember walking with you through a hallway."

Steve's mouth hangs open. Bucky's voice is raspy, unused, and he looks like he's forcing himself to speak, to confess something. He looks... scared.

"I was staring at you," he continues, "because you were tall. You were wearing your uniform. You were helping me get out."

"I was tall?"

Steve tries to catch his gaze but Bucky's refusing to meet his eyes, looking instead at a section of the wall. "The last time I'd seen you, you'd been frail. You'd always been frail."

Steve can't breathe.

"But you took me from there. I was trapped, and you got me out. And you were taller." Bucky finally notices that it's now Steve that's stopped talking, and he looks over, through streaks of damp hair, and examines Steve's face. "Did that really happen?"

Steve makes himself nod.

Satisfied with that, Bucky breathes out and looks away, out the window. DC is littered with streetlights and glows from faraway windows. Steve stares at Bucky as he looks over it impassively.

"You should sleep."
Chapter 3

Steve, by age eleven, has filled up a sketchbook or two in Bucky’s presence with no commentary or questions. Occasionally the light will hit a building just so, or he’ll spot a bird’s nest in a tree, and with careful bony fingers he will pull out the pencil and paper, tucking his knees up to his chest and drawing with more patience than a child his age should have. One day he is drawing a flowering vine in the park when a strong wind takes the biggest bloom from its stem and carries it a few feet away. Bucky gets up, putting his toy soldiers down, and retrieves the flower, scowling at it as if it should have known better than to move when Steve was trying to draw it. He brings it back and tucks it in between a leaf and a stem, as close to where it used to be as he can, and backs up, nodding a little and then going back to his soldiers. Steve has never had a friend before.

He’s about twelve when they’re sprawled out on the fire escape, skinny legs dangling through the bars and staring up at the hot New York summer sky, when Bucky looks over at him and pokes him in the side.

"Draw me."

Steve tips his head over and blinks. He’s never heard this request before. “Why?” He asks, before he can realize it’s a little rude.

Bucky shrugs his shoulders. “You draw everything else,” Bucky explains, and Steve thinks about it for a while, finally pushing himself up on too-thin arms and crawling back inside to find his sketchbook. When he comes back out Bucky is sitting up, fingers combing through his hair to try and sort it out.

"Don’t," Steve says. He crosses his legs and flips to a fresh page.

"It’s sticking up," Bucky grouses.

"It always is. If your hair looks tidy nobody’ll be able to recognize you in the picture."

**

They’re waiting for another division to join them before they move out, and it’s the third day in a glen in Germany where everyone is cold and bored out of their minds.

"The roads must be muddy," Bucky says, for what must be the second time just today. He’s lying on his back, hands folded under his head and legs crossed loosely at the ankle. Steve watches his chest rise high and tight before he lets out a slow, long-suffering sigh.

"I hear it’s chicken for dinner tonight," Steve says. He’d been holding on to that bit of information since he overheard the rumor this morning, and now seems like a good time to drop it. He contains a grin as Bucky’s eyebrows shoot up.

"You’re serious?" Bucky rolls onto his stomach, grinning at Steve and getting to his feet. "God, I’m so fucking tired of potatoes. Chicken. You better be right, Steve."

Steve hmms and goes back to his notebook, leaning back in his chair. He’s positioned himself so he can see right out the flap of the tent, out past the dirt road, to the small lake. It’s getting dark, but he’s still trying to get the bushes right, brambly sticky things that are huddled in groups here and there a few feet from the shore. He feels more than hears Bucky come over to him, peeking over his shoulder.
"You were drawing that yesterday."

Steve shrugs. "Can’t get it right."

"Hmmph." Bucky drops down on his sleeping bag, rustling around for a little while before clearing his throat. "Draw me instead."

"Hmm?" Steve doesn’t look up at first, the sentence not registering, and when he finally glances over his shoulder Bucky is lying on his side, elbow propping him up, looking at him expectantly.

"You draw people sometimes," Bucky says, as if in explanation.

Steve’s eyes flicker over the little details - the dog tags visible below his throat, the scuff marks on his boots, the lock of hair falling over his forehead. He can’t think of a good excuse to say no.

"You never stay still," Steve comes up with finally, but he’s already tucking a finger over the corner of the top page, nudging it over to start something new.

"I’m not fourteen anymore." Bucky’s grinning, rolling his eyes. He lifts his chin up just a fraction, and when he thinks Steve can’t see, he smoothes down the front of his jacket. "I can fuckin’ hold still."

**

Somewhere in the world, in the personal collection of someone very, very wealthy, are several old and delicate sketchbooks dating from the mid-20th Century. They contain several sketches of places in Brooklyn, New York which no longer exist. Sketches of a decrepit grocery store, with rough figures of old women hunched over boxes, of small children playing underneath the displays. Sketches of Central Park. Sketches of a young boy, with dark hair and bony shoulders, standing posed on a rock overlooking the water, looking off into the distance as if he is ready to conquer the world.
Chapter 4

Steve leaves Bucky in the bedroom, feeling unsure of himself and slightly sick as he pulls a quilt from the linen closet and brings it to the couch. Bucky looks lost, conflicted, like he’s battling something internally, and Steve’s whole body yearns to bring him in and embrace him, show him some kind of solidarity, prove he isn’t alone. There’s no way it’s safe, though, no way someone who’s only known violence for decades would take it for the gesture it was.

So Steve tucks himself into the couch, pulling the quilt up to his shoulder, and stares at the LED lights of the television and speakers. He knows he won’t sleep. On the other side of that door is the man he’s been separated from for 70 years. On the other side of that door is the reason he survived adolescence, the reason he had something to fight for for all those years, the reason he was ready to die not very long ago.

Steve’s phone beeps. He startles off the couch, almost tumbling to the floor, cursing as he rights himself and reaches to pick it off the coffee table. It’s an unlisted number.

*Nothing from Russia. I don’t think he’s left.*

Natasha. Even when she’s away from the group to rebuild her life, she’s still finding time to do some work for him, to call in more favors and god knows what else to get him what she knows he needs. For once, he knows something Natasha doesn’t. He knows exactly where Bucky is.

**

Steve actually drifts off around five in the morning, which means when Sam calls him two hours later, he’s not ready to get his thoughts in order at all.

"Steve Rogers," he croaks.

"Hey, I’m downstairs," Sam is saying. Every morning, he comes over at seven. They eat breakfast and talk strategies. Steve turns and looks at the bedroom door. "Hey man, are you okay? You don’t sound great."

He can’t feign sickness. Damn the serum. “I,” Steve pauses. Thinks it out, thinks about Sam, and realizes he can trust him with this. “I’m taking today off,” he says carefully, and he can hear the loaded silence on the other end of the line. “I’ve been working myself too hard, I think. I’m going to stop looking for a while.”

Steve waits, and he can practically hear Sam working it out. “Alright,” Sam says finally, drawing it out with a lilt at the end. “Should I … I’m gonna call Nat. Let her know we’re taking a break.”

"Good idea," Steve says, exhaling a little. "Talk to you later."

"Be safe, Steve." Sam’s voice is quiet. Steve hangs up.

Sam will call Nat and tell her. Nat will understand what it means. Both of them know that the only real reason Steve would stop looking for Bucky is if he found him. They’ll give him space, knowing he’ll need it, and if he needs anything, they’ll be there. For all the loneliness Steve feels crushed by sometimes, he knows he does have some people in this world he can rely on.

Steve gets up, knocks gently on the bedroom door, and opens it. The bed is untouched. Steve opens the door wider and sees Bucky lying on the ground in the corner, hands over his stomach.
"It’s a pretty firm bed," Steve says, trying and failing to sound lighthearted.

Bucky gets to his feet, and something about his affect is off, worse than last night, when he struggled through recalling a memory. His eyes flicker to Steve, the ground, the window. Steve’s heart sinks.

"Do you want breakfast?" Steve watches as Bucky’s mouth twitches almost imperceptibly, but he can’t interpret it and Bucky doesn’t give a real response. "Bucky?"

Bucky’s standing at something like parade rest, shoulders tight. Steve feels helpless, staring at his friend. His phone starts ringing. Steve flinches. Bucky doesn’t.

"I’m gonna," Steve says, and points out the door, and Bucky doesn’t move. Steve’s heart is somewhere past his stomach as he walks to the coffee table again, picking up his phone. Unlisted.

"Steve Rogers."

"You’re an idiot. Are you okay?"

Steve deflates. “Yes, I’m.” He rubs his forehead, fighting the urge to turn around and stare at Bucky, to pick out some sign of life. “He’s.”

Natasha’s brusque. “Is he violent?”

"No."

"Is he comatose?"

Steve winces. “More or less, but on his feet.”

There’s a crackle of something indistinguishable. Steve wonders, not for the first time, where Natasha actually is. “I’m calling Tony. He’s going to get you a jet-“

"Natasha,”

"-and you are going to fly him to New York."

Steve turns around to look at Bucky, who’s staring forward, at nothing. “I don’t know if-“

"Steve. Listen to me. You can’t help him alone."

"What can Tony possibly-“

"He can get that arm off of him without it killing Bucky, or worse."

"What’s worse than-“

"It could explode, Steve." Natasha’s raised her voice a little, and she sounds tired, too, maybe more tired than Steve. "Imagine how badly his handlers didn’t want him to be captured, how much they didn’t want someone reverse engineering that tech. There’s going to be a trick to getting it off of him the right way, and the sooner we figure it out the better, because there’s going to be a tracking chip in there that’s probably still sending an active RFID signal, and if we’re lucky, there are adrenaline and kill serums stored in there that aren’t on timers. I’d tell you to get to the nearest EMP to shut it all down entirely but for all I know it’s rigged to fail in that outcome."

Panic is rising in his throat.
"Steve."

"Yes."

"The jet’s coming in an hour to National. Cover him up and get him there."

"Yes."
Chapter 5

“That was a friend. We need to get you some… medical attention. Your arm.”

He expects Bucky to look concerned for himself, nervous, self-conscious. Anything.

"When do I leave?"

“*We.*” Steve’s voice almost cracks on the word. "*We have to go. Now.*"

Steve calls for a cab. He finds a grey hoodie in the closet, and Bucky puts it on wordlessly. The gloves Bucky came in with are covered in grime, so Steve gives him his bike gloves. Something flickers on Bucky’s face when Steve hands them over - “Take mine, okay?” - but it’s gone as fast as it came.

The cab ride is silent. Bucky looks out the window, ducking his head to look at the seat in front of him when they hit stop lights and come up next to another car. The cabbie, thank god, looks completely bored and pays no attention to them.

Steve never got any details on what desk to go to, who to look for, but of course he doesn’t need to - in the center of the long, echoing lobby is a woman in a perfect skirt and suit jacket combo, hair pinned back, with a sign that says “ROGERS”. He goes to her and she nods wordlessly, turning around and guiding him through an employee hall that takes him past the security checks. Steve keeps checking over his shoulder as they walk. Bucky doesn’t say anything.

"Is there any food on this flight?" Steve asks, actually more hopeful than his joking tone might let on. "We kind of skipped breakfast."

"*The Stark jet is fully stocked, sir. We’ll be on the tarmac momentarily.*" She badges past a few more doors, holding them open for them both, and all at once they’re walking outside, down a narrow stairwell that leads down ten feet. The wind whips at them both, vicious and cold, and Steve wonders if Bucky’s thinking about the helicarrier too.

**

Steve wasn’t at school, so Bucky walks to his apartment, arms folded over himself as the wind pulls at him.

It’s worse than he thought. Steve can’t take in full breaths. His frail body is wracked by the force of every cough, too exhausted but unable to sleep, weaker than ever but unable to eat. Bucky’s fifteen, so he doesn’t know how to do it politely, he just knows that he needs to - he goes to the stove, heats up the canned soup, and tells Steve’s mom he’s going to take a turn now. If it were a few years ago Steve’s mother may have looked surprised at this, at the notion of Steve’s best friend from school taking a shift when Steve is sick, but it didn’t take long at all, really, for her to see the set determination in Bucky’s eyes when he cleaned the blood off Steve’s face after fights, carried the books that were too heavy, watched Steve like a hawk as his health declined.

"*It’s chicken noodle,*” Bucky mumbles, holding the bowl in both hands and using his hip to shut the bedroom door behind him. Steve is lying on his side, curled in on himself, hair limp over his forehead. "*More noodle than chicken, really.*"

Steve takes in a slow, hitching breath. “Bucky.”
"I’ll do my homework after," Bucky says, and he’s so much taller than Steve now, puberty having done its work on only the one of them. He doesn’t feel huge standing over Steve. He feels like Steve is tiny and like he is helpless.

Steve begins to say something else but starts wheezing instead, and Bucky doesn’t really think about it, just sets the bowl on the bedstand and shucks off his jacket. He crawls onto the bed with Steve, behind Steve, hooking his hands under Steve’s shoulders to hold him upright like his mother says he needs to do. His airways. Something. Steve’s still wheezing, but it gets a little better, starts to stop, and Bucky peers over Steve’s shoulder to watch the rise and fall of his tiny chest stutter in and out, waiting until the motion smooths.

Steve shifts. “It must be really cold outside, huh.”

"M’I cold?"

"Your shirt feels cold. Your hands don’t." Normally Steve is so vehement about being independent, about not taking help, even when he so obviously needs it, but it’s Monday and Bucky hasn’t seen him since they played together on Friday, and he wouldn’t be surprised if Steve hasn’t slept since then, or not slept much. Steve’s leaning back into him and Bucky’s not sure he realizes it.

"Chicken noodle," Bucky says again, patiently, and he leans a little to the right to grab the bowl from the bedstand and set it in Steve’s lap, precariously balanced. It’s okay, though. Bucky’s got it.

"I had a roll this morning," Steve murmurs, and Bucky’s pretty sure he’s saying it as if that means Bucky doesn’t need to do this. Bucky pretends he didn’t hear, peeking at Steve’s hands - limp, unsteady - and grabbing the spoon himself, lifting it up to Steve’s mouth. Against his chest, he can feel the press of Steve’s back, ribs expanding and contracting, gently, still hitching every so often. Steve eats.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

1. I'm gonna be bumping the rating for this fic up soon. For anyone who might wanna bail because of that, now's your time. (For the rest of you, hayyyyyyy.)

2. I have a rare medical condition where I am actually kept alive by hits, kudos, and comments. From this fic alone, I feel like I will live til I'm 200. Thank you, guys.

A flight attendant, slim and made up, comes by and asks for their drink order. Steve asks for a Coke. He looks to Bucky, but he just looks straight back at him, like it's Steve's job to decide. Steve's shoulders slump a little. "And a water," he says, and the attendant nods and disappears into the front of the plane. Steve watches Bucky watch the window, the tarmac rolling smoothly under them, when his phone rings again. Stark.

"Steve Rogers."

"Are you in the air yet?"

"Nearly."

"Good. Is tall dark and metallic with you?"

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. "Stark."

"I'm taking that as a yes. Listen, nearly everything's set up. I need you to take a picture of his arm. His flesh arm. Take it next to, hmm, the flight card in the seat back. That'll give me a control to account for lighting."

"His arm?"

"Jarvis has the materials on rush order and they should be here in an hour or two, but I can't start mixing the dye for the - you know ballistics gel? Have I shown you Mythbusters yet? It's like that but with a lot of - forget it. I need to know what color to use for the arm. So take the picture. Okay?"

"Okay." Steve suddenly feels like he's being led almost as much as Bucky is.

"Has he said anything?"

"Like what?" He glances over to Bucky, telegraphing to try to show he's not trying to hide anything, sure that Bucky can overhear everything on the phone either way. If his serum was anything like Steve's, cell phones are irritatingly clear even across a room.

"I don't know, Cap. Locations of Hydra's weapons depots would be a great start. Any of their secret weaknesses. He's basically defected, right?"

Steve feels something like a knot grow in his throat. "I don't know if you can defect from a group you never chose to join."
"Right, yes, brainwashed, Black Widow told me. Okay." There's buzz and a loud thunk in the background, like a thick pipe being cut and then dropping to the floor. "Is there any phrase I should avoid to not get punched? Would you kindly?"

"Would I kindly what?" Tony never makes sense.

"Jesus. Forget it. Take the picture, okay? Send it to me?"

"I remember how," Steve says preemptively, and hangs up. He leans forward, fishing the Stark-logo flight card out from between several magazines, and turns to Bucky. "Can I have your right arm for a second? Just hold it out?"

Bucky lays it on the armrest, uncaring as Steve gently tugs the sleeve of the hoodie back to reveal his skin. Looking now, Steve can see pale lines, both straight and lightning-jagged, from old shallow scars. Several have the look of blocking knife swipes and some he can't identify at all. Steve swallows.

"I'm going to take a picture," he says, knowing Bucky didn't ask but feeling like he needs to pretend, pretend until Bucky cares about himself, "and send it to my friend. He's going to make you a new arm."

Steve looks up to see if there's any response, and to his shock there's something like betrayal on Bucky's face, wide eyes and mouth slightly open, but it washes away too soon, blank again, and Steve looks down to Bucky's right arm and takes a guess.

"No, it's - we're not replacing your right arm. We're not -" Christ. "-your left arm, your metal one, we're - we're going to make one that's safe for you. It'll look like this one. Okay?"

Steve reaches out and holds Bucky's wrist in an attempt to ground him, to get some kind of expression back in Bucky's face, wide eyes and mouth slightly open, but to no avail. He sighs, tucking the card next to Bucky's forearm and scrolling to the camera icon on his phone to take a picture. He goes to his contacts and sends it to Stark, putting the card back and looking at where Bucky has kept perfectly still.

"I broke mine, once," Steve says, quietly.

Bucky doesn't respond, but he's listening.

"I think we'd been friends for a year or two. I'd grown a few inches... ganglier than ever, and clumsy, and we were taking a new shortcut to get to some sandlot and I got my ankle caught on the top of a fence. Fell hard and landed right here." Steve smacks the underside of his left forearm, smiling a little. "Hurt like anything. Mom was furious, but you swore it'd all been your idea, tried to take all the blame."

Bucky looks down at the floor of the plane, shifting slightly. They're accelerating, taking off. Steve keeps his gaze locked on Bucky.

"Do you remember any of that?"

Bucky shakes his head. Steve nods and looks away, containing his disappointment. There's time, he says to himself, knowing he could well be wrong.

**

An hour and several sandwiches later, they switch to a helicopter somewhere in New York, and the helicopter takes them to the roof of Stark Tower. Bucky lets himself be guided in by Steve, who
calls out as soon as they're inside.

"Jarvis, what floor is Tony on?"

"Hello Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes. Mr. Stark is in the secure lab on level fifty. Shall I take you directly there?"

An elevator door to the left opens, and Bucky walks in before Steve can even explain the British voice coming from nowhere. He must, again, not be interested. Maybe he's better adjusted to the future than Steve is.

"Do you remember Howard?" Steve asks, as the elevator doors shut. Bucky looks up sharply. "Howard Stark," he clarifies, and Bucky's face is strange, a little pained. Maybe he misses him. "Tony's his son. He's an inventor too."

"Stark," Bucky repeats, and is maybe about to say something else, but the elevator doors open to a chaotic lab room filled with workbenches and metal.

"Good morning to the geriatric duo," Tony calls from somewhere in the back. Steve picks his way through what could be called litter, if its combined cost didn't range in the millions, and finds Tony wiring something and wearing his Iron Man suit, save for the mask.

"Were you out earlier today?" Steve asks, and Tony gives him a look like he is an idiot.

"Some of us weren't injected with anything to make us virtually unkillable," Tony drawls, "so excuse me if I wear something a little less comfortable while Bucky Bear here is in his recovery phase."

He's brusque as always, but Steve has to remind himself that he's lucky to even have friends who will take him and Bucky in considering the clips being replayed on the news right now.

"How's it coming?" Steve tries instead.

"Well." Tony puts down the mess of wires and gestures out, bringing attention to the one cleaned-off worktable, maybe five feet by three feet, which is surrounded by tech. It must be the makeshift operating table. "I've laid out everything I can think of to help me remove what he's got now, but the one for later, that's not done. Hi, Barnes, can you do me a favor? Hop right over there and hold your squishy arm out. Like this." Tony sticks his arm out straight as an example, and, with none of the annoyance Steve would have had, Bucky walks to the spot pointed to, in front of some sort of scanner, and holds his arm ramrod straight to the side. Tony nods and gestures something up to Jarvis, who starts a scan.

"Complete," Jarvis says, and Tony gestures a twirl to Bucky, who stands motionless. He rolls his eyes.

"Now the other arm," Tony says, slowly, and a different scan starts, Steve noticing the way the light of the lasers is darker and straying longer on the bicep, the joint, the tips of the fingers.

"Several issues," Jarvis reports. "I will need more time to examine the lock mechanism at the joint."

"Fine. Barnes, lay back on the table please. Rogers, please stop looking like I'm about to perform open heart surgery on your newborn. It's going to be fine."

"Is there really a risk of an explosive?" Steve asks. Bucky moves to the table, hopping up, looking
slightly disoriented by something, and then slowly leaning back.

"Two," Jarvis chimes in calmly.

Tony sighs, and for the first time actually turns to look at Bucky eye-to-eye. "Do you know how to detach your arm safely?"

Bucky shakes his head, a tug at his lips like it's a stupid question.

"This is why you need me." Tony picks up the wiring again, and a mechanical arm pushes the scanning device closer to the 'operating table' so it can cast precise patterns of light over Bucky's shoulder, back and forth, over and over.

"A text from Ms. Potts," Jarvis says. "She would like to know why you canceled her flight back from Brussels."

"Tell her to take a few days off and enjoy Europe. Is London nice right now? She likes London. Buy her a ticket for London." Tony finishes whatever he was doing and lays the tangle of cords out flat, plugging it in to another set of cords, another, finally picking up the bundle and carrying it to a table with an array of small metal pieces. "Okay. Barnes? Are you with me?"

Bucky's voice is flat. "Yes."

"Okay. This is mostly COTS, so you have to promise me you're not going to try to lift any cars or punch through one of my very expensive walls. Got it?"

"Yes." A beat. "How am I going to -" He hesitates, looking conflicted. Steve can't stop himself from stepping forward, touching Bucky's hand.

"What?"

"Am I on leave until the new arm is built?"

"Wh- no," Steve says, suddenly angry. He's certainly not angry at Bucky, or even Tony (for once), but all the same he feels the burning in his chest like he needs to hit someone. "You're not an operative anymore, Bucky. You're free. You don't have to do any more ops."

Bucky looks at him blankly, and it's clear to Steve that none of that sunk in. The rage is fizzling into something like heartbreak.

"So annnnnnway," Tony murmurs, over the sounds of pieces clicking together, "I met with the president of Wakanda a couple weeks ago and he was nice enough to give me a sample of his country's sweet sweet vibranium... I should have a more punchy-breaky destructo-arm ready in a couple days."

"What does he need that for?"

"What does anyone need a punchy-breaky destructo-arm for?" Tony's gesturing at Dum-E to pass him something, yanking it out of a cylinder and rolling it gently over the metal contraption trapped between his knees. It's the skin, Steve realizes, a little sick. "And, additionally, I don't know his full backstory here, but just because he's retired, you know, without knowing it quite yet, that doesn't mean he might not have to defend himself from some people who remember what he got up to in the last, oh, half-century.

"Speaking of which," Tony continues, "you should live here now."
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

The kudos and comments have been successful. I am well on my way to becoming an immortal.

Steve argues almost automatically.

"He needs someplace stable," he snaps. "Someplace that isn't so... alien." He gestures around. It's not even that Stark Tower's the most modern place Steve knows of on the entire planet, it's that it's opulent. Everything's shiny and sleek and nothing like anything Bucky would remember from growing up, from his time in the war, from anything.

"Everything's gonna be alien to him, Cap." Tony lays the new arm haphazardly on top of the scanning device, gesticulating quickly in a way that makes a three-dimensional graph appear out of thin air. It looks like Bucky's shoulder, and Tony gestures again, stripping away the outer shell to focus on how the arm fits in the socket. "No offense, but you can't take him home when there's no home to take him to, and you can't exactly drop him off at a Holiday Inn."

"I'd never drop him-"

"No. Obviously. But my point is, I've modified this place to be as Hulkproof as reasonably possible. Do you understand how much work that took? I'm not saying that it's perfect, but Jesus, find me another place with autonomous and omnipresent AI that monitors guests' heartbeats and uses contextual evidence to determine if there's a threat." There's something like a series of screws lining the circumference of the socket, locking the arm in place, but as Tony taps them in various orders they flash red until he starts again. "Hmm. Simon Says there's a code to removing these so we don't blow up."

Bucky isn't watching. He's lying still, looking up into the middle distance. Steve watches, unmonitored himself, and is confused by the way Bucky's jaw is working as if in discomfort.

"Your twelve o-clock and then your eight, sir," Jarvis inputs at one point, and Tony hmms, tapping the three-dimensional screwheads in another order until they all go green.

"Okay, we're good to go. Um, last thing. Important." Tony squints down at the man at the table, head cocked. "Does your metal arm have, y'know, physical sensation?"

Bucky peers up at him, blinking slowly. He works his jaw a little more, to the point where Steve is tempted to ask Tony if he gave Bucky gum or something when he wasn't looking. Then, finally, "Positional awareness."

"Okay, that makes sense. They could pull that off in the fifties." Tony spreads his fingers out, zooming in on the cables. "So it's gonna really hurt when we disconneeeeeeect... this one, I'd guess."

Steve walks around the table to look closer. "Why?"

"Because I don't know exactly how the other ones work yet - remember, I'm kinda leaning towards identifying the threats and detaching them from your friend, but this one, at least? Is hooked up
to..." He scrolls over to Bucky's actual shoulder. "...yeah, a bunch of nerves. I'm not Banner, but that, that's some nerves right there."

Steve looks at Tony's face, and sees there's nothing for it. "Bucky, are you going to be alright?"

Bucky looks at him blankly and Steve hopes to God that given time, that reaction will stop hurting him so much.

"Do you remember anyone ever doing this?" Tony tries, as delicately as he can manage. "Do you want to bite down on something?"

That same flash of ... something ... comes across his face, and although he almost looks scared, Bucky doesn't move or speak. Steve grimaces and reaches out, grabbing Bucky's hand. It's the metal one. He doesn't care.

"If it hurts too much and you need him to stop, we'll stop," Steve says, although he can practically feel Tony's desire to argue emanating from next to him. "This is to help you, okay? Do you understand?"

Bucky looks at his metal arm, then the flesh-looking one dangling on top of the scanner. Back to his metal arm. Then to the hand holding his. "I..."

"Close enough!" Tony singsongs, reaching behind him to pull up a rolling stool. "Steve, buddy, you stay there and be ready for, um, twitching. Let's call it twitching. Dum-E, come over here with - no, not the goddamn fire extinguisher. You know which screwdriver I need."

Tony fusses with a few tools, bickering with his own machines and sniping up at Jarvis. Bucky keeps looking at Steve's hand in his, not uncomfortable, but not comforted.

"I'm right here with you," Steve says quietly. "Everything's going to be okay. I'm going to take care of you."

**

Bucky is so, so drunk.

Normally he can be well past tipsy and still make a couple girls at the dancehall giggle and blush, maybe even go somewhere quiet with him, but tonight he's too far gone to say anything close to smooth, isn't steady enough on his feet to invite anyone to dance. The whiskey was cheap and Bucky was buying, laughing, swaying into his chair and finally letting Steve tell him that they were both tired and should head home. Bucky finally agrees.

"Careful," is just about all Bucky remembers Steve saying, over and over, laughing, as they stumble back to the apartment. Bucky's memory on this is liquor-hazed and always has been, but he knows how distracted he was, leaning on Steve's shoulder and enjoying the closeness, his usual walls eased down. He's been thinking too much since he overheard how men have sex with each other. Slicking up, pushing in. It was a few nights ago at a bar, some too-loud conversation at another table, and he went home thinking about Steve, unable to stop, imagining pink cheeks and lips and little gasps, almost like a girl, as he pushed in and made it as gentle as possible. It had been a beautiful, guilty mental image until he'd realized that he could hurt Steve, that Steve was small and delicate no matter his personality, and he'd pushed the idea away until a sneaky inner voice had suggested he let Steve be on top instead. Now Bucky was walking home with him, fingers loosely fanned over the shoulder of Steve's jacket, imagining Steve's face as he crawled on top of Bucky and, slowly, pushed in.
"You're quiet," Steve says, glancing up at him as they came to the steps of their place. Bucky blinks. His mind feels like it is sloshing with liquor, side-to-side, jostling as he comes to an uneasy stop.

"I wanna go to bed with you," Bucky murmurs, looking down through his lashes and too far gone to do anything but confess it.

Bucky doesn't really remember Steve's face then, just that he was trying his best to read it, that as he tried he felt a weird mix of tension and lightness, as if he'd been holding on to those words for a few years now and they were finally out of him.

"If you say so," Steve says with a mild shrug, and threw an arm around Bucky's waist, keeping him a little steadier as he led them up the stairs. Bucky is sure he's heard wrong. "The heat's not going to get turned on for another week or so... maybe bunking up will help a little. We can double up on our blankets, too. That should be nice."

It actually takes a moment for him to realize what had happened, but when he does, Bucky can't hold back a groan. This wasn't at all what he meant.

"Easy, dummy." Steve nudges him, encouraging him to grab the rail. "You're not gonna be sick in the stairwell, right? Don't worry. I'm gonna take care of you."
Chapter 8

The process is agonizing to watch. Bucky strips down methodically, letting the hoodie and t-shirt fall next to the table. Tony puts his mask up, completely armored ("Just in case. Don't look at me like that."). and starts removing the screws in sequence. Bucky has no reaction to that, but as soon as the arm's pulled from the socket and wires start getting disconnected, his eyes are watering without him seeming to notice, and Steve's gripping his flesh hand now, hard enough to bruise.

"Halfway done," Tony mutters, and Steve knows it's more for him than for Bucky.

Bucky's staring up at the ceiling when his body starts spasming in fits and starts. Tony jerks his head toward him, and even though Steve can't see his face he knows what he has to do, has done it enough in trenches. He stands over Bucky and presses as gently as he can on both shoulders, keeping him more still.

"Still with us?" Steve asks, and he hears the click of the thickest cable unplugging and Bucky's eyes slam shut.

"Getting there." Tony's voice buzzes through the suit, and there's a startling clang as he drops the arm unceremoniously on the ground and starts lining up the new arm, fiddling to find the first cable to plug back in. Steve's stomach turns because he's looking at his best friend and there's a metallic socket attached to nothing, gaping and vulnerable, and he finds he can't look there or at Bucky's face anymore without feeling a sting of wetness in his eyes. He shuts them.

More clicks. Bucky lets out a sharp gasp and Steve automatically digs his fingers in a little tighter, thumbs rubbing circles over the warm skin. It feels like it takes hours.

"Okay!" Steve hears the familiar whirr of Tony's mask sliding back, so he looks up, painfully grateful that he's apparently finished. "I'd give you a lollipop for being a good patient, but I don't have any. Do you like scotch?"

Steve makes himself let go of Bucky and steps back to watch him sit up, eyes flickering over the place where the ring of metal meets the flesh color. He flexes his new fingers, tightens them into a fist, looks up at Tony.

"No feeling," he croaks.

"Well, yeah, I kind of made this in an hour. Without having seen your old one first. Can you at least pretend to be impressed? Kind of?" Tony rolls his eyes. "Nobody appreciates universal cable data transfer and good servomotors. Okay." He kneels down and picks up the old arm, plonking it down on a clean surface where the scanner can hover over it some more and gather more data. "I'll make you a better one later, but now you're 100% guaranteed not to blow up or get remotely injected with chemicals. Congrats. Just sit there a while and practice picking up, um," Tony looks around and narrows in on the screwdriver. "This little guy here. Cap, can we talk?"

**

In the hallway, Tony snaps his fingers in Steve's face, trying to draw his attention away from the closed door. "He'll be fine for two seconds," he says. "Jarvis is watching him. Like, permanently. Forever."

Steve forces in a deep breath. "Thank you," he begins, but Tony cuts him off.
"No no no. We're not doing that right now. Listen. I mean it when I say you should stay here."

"I know. That you mean it, I mean." Steve looks at the floor. "He's not ... he's not himself yet. I'm worried that we could scare him off again if we're not careful."

Tony waves that idea away. "We still need to get a blood sample. Brain scan. Banner's going to analyze them and see if there's anything we need to look out for."

"Like what?"

"Like him coming down from whatever drugs they had him on. Like him having brain damage, intentional or non. Don't look at me like that, Rogers, I'm not the one that did this, I'm just the billionaire genius trying to play doctor for you. Well, without the sex. Never mind. Don't look at me like that either." Tony sighs. "And I figured I should make sure you know you can trust me with him."

Steve is too overwhelmed by everything happening to even start to wonder what that means. "What?"

Tony rolls his eyes, and for the first time in the conversation something tightens around his mouth. "I'm not angry, or plotting something, it's not his fault. Natasha told me. When she called, she told me." He looks down, breathing deeply and looking as serious as he did when New York was crumbling around him. Steve stares at him until Tony looks up again, squinting. "You don't know, do you?"

"Tony, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"My parents. He - Winter Soldier."

Steve's stomach drops. "Oh my God." He looks back to the door again, taking a step back from it subconsciously. "Zola said your father was... I didn't put it together. I didn't realize it must have been him."

"Not must have, but really, Winter Soldier was active then, and I don't know of any other super assassins they had at the time that could flawlessly kill someone and make it look like an accident." Tony pushes his shoulders back and rolls them slowly. "Okay. Blood sample. Brain scan. You ready to go back in there, Cap? You were paler than he was when I was disconnecting the arm."

"Tony, I-"

"No. Shut up. Listen." Tony grabs his shoulder. "My dad used to tell me stories about you, remember? Too many. I was beyond sick of them. Barnes was in a lot of those stories. Running into battle together, risking your lives to save the other, the whole spiel." He points at the door. "And five days ago, the man in there beat you so badly you'd be dead ten times over if you weren't filled with patriotic steroids." Steve doesn't know what to say, so he just keeps staring, mouth open. "They told him to kill you and he very nearly did. That tells me literally everything I need to know about how much of a choice he had, how much - how in control of himself he was, when they ordered him to kill my family."

Tony leaves him standing in the hallway. In the other room he can hear the man's voice rise high, asking Barnes loudly if he's ready to get some more tests done and continue on the not-punching-his-doctor front, but there's a faint ringing in Steve's ears and blurriness to his vision that keep him from moving from that one fixed spot.
When Steve forces himself back into the room Bucky is sitting up, real arm curled and hand making a fist as Tony draws a vial of blood and then another. Bucky looks unbothered. He's looking down at his new hand, whose fingers curl around the screwdriver and lift it up, flip it end-over-end, and place it gently back on the table. He actually looks calm.

"Banner's on another floor waiting for this. Dum-E should be bringing the - here we go." Tony watches a service elevator open up. Dum-E is behind a large contraption on wheels and is nudging it gently along, whirring to itself as if coaching itself. "That's our brain scan. Steve, get a band-aid out of the first aid kit and stick it on his arm. Barnes, lay down again."

"What should I do with the screwdriver?" He sounds a little more like himself and that fact washes away more of Steve's panic from the hallway conversation than it should.

"Jeez. Give it here." Tony takes it and gestures as if to push Bucky onto his back. Bucky looks a little startled, but lies back regardless. Steve finds the first aid kit in the mess of tools and fishes a band-aid out, peeling the packaging off and coming back to Bucky's side.

"Feeling okay?" he asks, gently nudging the inside of Bucky's arm, finding the spot with the pinprick of blood and laying the plaster over it. His long hair is tangled over his forehead a little and Steve is fighting the urge to put it right.

"It doesn't hurt."

He sounds better, interested by his new arm and coming down from the pain of getting it attached. Steve goes for it:

"Do you remember anything else? About... before?"

Bucky looks up. He opens his mouth, shuts it again, opens it once more. "You were sick," he says finally, "and later. We'd. We'd go drinking together."

Vague but good, Steve thinks, and smiles widely. "I was really sick, all the time," he agrees, clapping Bucky on his good shoulder. "You'd take care of me a lot. You were a good friend."

"I helped you eat -" Bucky watches Tony taking the device from Dum-E and arranging it toward the top of the operating table. There's a rig that hangs over, as if to shade the face of the person lying down. Steve looks at it and then Bucky, frowning.

"It's an MRI," he explains, although he's not entirely sure that's exactly what it is. "It's okay."

But Bucky isn't listening, or he doesn't hear. He's staring at it, then at Tony's hands, which are flying over the buttons on the console, then at Steve's face.

"Heart rate past safe thresholds," Jarvis murmurs very quietly, somewhere above them.

"Bucky?" Steve prompts, anxiety rising up in his throat. "Bucky, talk to me."

Bucky doesn't. He looks betrayed again, terrified and resigned at the same time, and Steve can't bear it.

"Tony, put it away," he says.
Tony squints. "What? There's nothing wrong with it. Talk him down. We've already gotten past the hurting part."

"Still above safe thresholds," Jarvis says, and Steve gets up and takes one of Tony's hands, pulling it away from the machine.

"He doesn't like it. Put it away."

"If I had a nickel for - listen, if he's scared of it, you lay down and use it, show him it's-"

It happens very quickly: Bucky swings his legs over the table and puts himself between Steve and Tony, grabbing Tony by the shoulders and looking as if he's going to throw him across the room. Everything is still.

"No," Bucky says, forcing the words out of himself. "Nobody. Uses it. On Steve."

Tony is holding very still and maintaining as neutral an expression as possible. His suit whirrs as if preparing for something, but nothing happens, and Steve slips around from behind Bucky to try to capture his attention.

"Bucky, let go of him, it's alright. He wasn't going to hurt me."

"He's lying," Bucky says, voice cracking. "They tell you it won't hurt and it does, and it takes everything, it hurts you and it takes it all away and when you get anything back they take you back and it does - it does it again -"

Tony and Steve watch as Bucky's face crumples, eyes fluttering and then staying shut, teeth bared.

"- don't -" Bucky's inhale turns into a gasp as he fights for air. "Steve, I don't want to, I, please. I don't want to forget. I'm not theirs anymore, I'm yours forever, but please, I can't, I just want to,"

Steve pushes Tony out of the way and pulls Bucky in, holding him tightly and realizing that the wetness at the crook of Bucky's neck is there because he is crying against it.

**

For his first six missions, Winter Soldier asks why Rogers isn't included on the team. They find that upping the voltage fixes the problem.
Steve pulls Bucky to the elevator, asking Jarvis to take them to their floor. He doesn't know which room is supposed to belong to whom, so he just leads Bucky to the nearest door and sits him on the bed, covering him with the topmost blanket because if this isn't shock, it's something close to it.

"Are you with me, Buck?" Steve looks in his eyes. Bucky's still tense, shaking a little, eyes looking everywhere but Steve. "Can you hear me?" He tries again, being more specific.

"Yes."

"Do you think Tony and I want to hurt you?"

"I-" Bucky pulls the heavy blue blanket around his shoulders, left hand a little clumsy.

"We're not." Steve tucks a few strands of hair behind Bucky's ear, staying close, finally sitting next to him on the bed and putting his arm around him. Bucky's not a threat right now. Maybe he hasn't been since he showed up. He's just... fallen apart. "We're not going to make you forget anything. We're not going to put you on missions. No more missions." Steve chokes up a little, hates himself, and fights it. "Hey. Look at me. You're not theirs anymore. You said that?"

Bucky nods mutely.

"You said you're mine?"

Bucky nods again.

"I'm not your handler. Nobody is. No more orders. Nothing like that. I'm your friend."

Bucky doesn't nod, but he doesn't shake his head either, and Steve's got to take what he can get. He pushes his forehead to Bucky's, knees touching and Steve not caring anymore, not caring how this could look. "It's like before," he says quietly. "Do you remember when we were kids? Before the war?"

"I'd take care of you." Bucky looks lost. "I... I can't anymore."

"Yes you - you don't have to. You don't have to protect me. We can just be friends."

Bucky doesn't respond, just presses minutely closer. The blanket shifts and an array of faint scars are now exposed on his shoulder.

"Maybe it's my turn," Steve says finally.

"To what?"

"To take care of you." It makes him sick that he has to, that Bucky is so helpless and so scared, but he puts on a brave face because somehow he knows Bucky's eyes are open, staring at him. "Can
"I'll-" Bucky trembles a little, head lowering and then stopping as if he's fighting the urge to burrow in to Steve, to press in between his neck and shoulder. "I don't. I don't remember a lot." He smells painfully familiar, Steve realizes all at once, breathing in deeply.

"But you remember some."

"Yes."

"I'll help you remember the rest." Steve reaches around him slowly and unfolds the blanket some more, letting it drape down over the bed and pool around Bucky's waist. "C'mon, lie down. You can tell me anything."

"We... we were hungry a lot." Bucky lets himself be arranged, laying down on the pillow pulled down from the headboard, moving in closer as Steve fills the space in front of him and combs his fingers through his hair. There's a moment of hesitation, and then Bucky closes what distance is left to press his cheek against Steve's chest. Steve bites back a reaction.

"We were," Steve agrees.

"Your mom was small like you."

"She was."

"Our... we went to school a lot. I didn't like it?"

Steve laughs. "You hated it."

"You liked it."

"I liked it."

Steve waits for Bucky to say more. Slowly, the prosthetic arm nudges out from under the blanket, resting lightly on Steve's side. He can feel Bucky waiting, waiting to be told no, and so Steve strokes his fingers from Bucky's hair to the nape of his neck, as he'd seen his girlfriends do so long ago, rubbing gently until Bucky knows it's fine.

"They were always hitting you," Bucky says quietly.

"Yep."

"I hated it."

"Yep."

"You... you carried a little book."

"A book?"

"It was, it was thin, and brown."

"My sketchbook."

"Your sketchbook."
Another lull. Steve suspects the mix of no necessary eye contact and friendly touch is working its magic, at least as much as it can. When he sweeps his fingertips over Bucky's shoulder he can feel the bunch of muscles relaxing, even if it's only a little.

"I remember... women," Bucky says, a little unsure this time.

"Women you dated?"

Bucky shifts a little. "I think so." Steve feels the arm slung over his side move as Bucky flexes his new fingers, his wrist. "They... they smiled at me a lot. But they didn't pay attention to you?"

"Not very much, no."

Bucky makes a quiet noise that almost sounds like how he used to sigh when he was sulking. Then, "I don't remember yours."

"My girlfriends?"

"Yours," Bucky agrees.

Steve barks out a quiet laugh. "I didn't have any, Bucky."

"Hm." Bucky thinks about that a while and then gets a little distracted by Steve's hand stroking his neck. He pushes back against the fingertips and makes a soft sound, one that makes Steve's breath catch a little, although he has to pretend that it doesn't.

**

Steve had been brought up very well. He knew to be good to other people, to be polite, to try his best in class and to never disrespect women. He knew not to feel sorry for himself.

Not for being poor, for being sick, for being weak, for being small, for not being able to do what the other boys could do. By the time he met Bucky he was well-practiced in seeing things around him that he desperately, desperately wanted and could not ever hope to have.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I have achieved immortality through all your messages of encouragement and deep emotional distress.

Thanks to all of you for your continuing support.

Jarvis quietly announces that dinner is ready, so Steve blinks himself awake and disentangles himself from Bucky, who is pliant and warm from sleep. Steve pretends it is not difficult to pull away. He begins looking through the closets, then the dresser.

"What are you looking for?" Bucky asks hoarsely, sitting up.

"A shirt for you to wear," Steve frowns at the empty drawers. "A lot's changed since the forties, but people still don't sit at the table until they're clothed."

"I'll have some things ordered for you both, Captain Rogers," Jarvis offers. Steve nods and unzips his hoodie, tugging it off and handing it over to Bucky. Bucky puts it on wordlessly.

"It'll be nice for you to have your own clothes, I bet." Steve smiles. "We never did have the same style."

He waits for Bucky to reply that the difference was that he had style, but Bucky just looks down, uncomfortable, new fingers slow and careful as they hold the zipper steady and then tug it up.

**

Tony must have chefs in the building, because he sure as hell didn't make this himself. The table is set for two, with modern looking plates that for some reason aren't symmetrical, and in the middle of the table are two covered platters. It turns out to be steak and salt potatoes. Bucky's eyes go a little wide at the smell but still doesn't sit down until Steve says he should, still doesn't serve himself until Steve asks him why he hasn't.

Steve asks if Jarvis knows where Tony is. Jarvis says he's in the lab, working on the new arm, and also reviewing the new schematics that Ms. Romanoff sent over.

"Anything interesting?" Steve asks the ceiling, pretending not to watch as Bucky wolfs the food down, starving, as if Steve hadn't given him four sandwiches that morning for breakfast. He's becoming more convinced that Bucky's like him and needs way more calories in a day to keep going.

"Self-propelled aerial navigation unit," Jarvis replies. "It bears a strong resemblance to the prototypes used in the government's FALCON project."

"A resemblance?"

"To obtain and share classified government schematics would be a serious offense. The resemblance must surely be due to an unusual coincidence."

"Of course," Steve agrees mildly, and spears another slice of potato. "Coincidence." Steve wonders if Nat is giving the new wings to Sam as a gift, or if, in a more SHIELD-like fashion, the gift will come with strings attached, with an invitation to the mansion and the bizarre team they have going. The more Steve thinks about it the more he thinks Sam would come willingly. With bells on.

"The blood tests are back, and Dr. Banner has arranged a brief report, if you would like to hear it," Jarvis adds. "He is currently speaking with Mr. Stark about the value of an outside opinion, but Tony's personal doctor is currently on a scheduled vacation in Mumbai."

Steve looks to Bucky to see if he agrees or disagrees with listening now, but Bucky isn't paying attention, trying to cut his steak without slicing the plate in half. "Well, what does Bruce say?"

Readouts appear in front of him immediately and Steve nearly drops his water glass. There are... levels, and definitely some readings. "Jarvis, a little help?"

"Several monoamine transmitters are particular concerns, including -"

"Jarvis, please."

A beat. "Abnormally high white blood cell count, similar to your own. Not a concern. There is evidence of short-term malnourishment. Low concern. The cause of his hormone imbalances is not conclusive. Some stress hormones are understandably high while others are close to absent. There is evidence of several receptor antagonists, which would point to Sergeant Barnes having been heavily medicated until recently."

Steve looks over at Bucky, who has cleaned his plate and is now staring at it with a neutral expression. He hasn't put his fork and knife down.

"Do you want more?" Steve asks, trying to look fine.

Bucky looks up at him, conflicted, not apparently able to answer. Steve feels his chest go tight, not wanting to do this.

"Eat until you're full, and then stop."

Bucky immediately grabs the serving spoon and gives himself more salt potatoes, almost covering the plate.

**

The first Thanksgiving after Steve's mother died, Bucky watched as Steve insisted on helping cook, on helping set the table, on doing as much as possible to earn his place. As if he had to. Bucky watched as Steve tried his best to eat the food slowly, to not take too much gravy or give himself too much turkey, to make it look as if he wasn't as hungry as he was.
Chapter 12

Several pairs of pajama pants have appeared on top of the dresser, and clean white tees that say 'CK' where the tag should be. More hoodies, jeans, socks, boots and sneakers lined up neatly along the wall. Set aside separately on a chair are the clothes Bucky left in the lab, washed and folded. Steve is pretty sure that there's still cleaning staff manning the Tower like always, and that Jarvis is just directing them to make sure they never actually encounter him or Bucky.

"What do you think?" Steve sorts through the jeans, realizing quickly that only half of them are in his size - he picks out a darker pair of the others and holds them out. "Do you - no, you-" Bucky takes his hands away from his belt and looks up. "You don't have to wear them, now, I just meant." Steve looks down, taking deep breaths and trying to weigh his options, his wording. "Why don't you take a shower. We'll get ready for bed and tomorrow we'll... tomorrow will be a new day."

Bucky tilts his head a little, still maddeningly unlike himself, and disappears into the bathroom. Steve waits until he hears the water turn on to exhale, lying on the bed and pulling out his phone. 3 texts.

**

Tony Stark: Gonna need another blood sample tomorrow morning. Get ready for that fun.

Steve Rogers: Why?

Tony Stark: To compare. His DNA doesn't have all your bells and whistles but he metabolizes things faster, I bet we'll see some changes as the Calm The Fuck Down drugs work their way out.

Steve Rogers: So he'll be more himself?

Tony Stark: Probably, but if you think we don't still need to do a brain scan you are sorely mistaken.

Tony Stark: Also, put the Hydra arm in a Faraday Cage and took it apart. 2 remote-activated explosives, 1 of which is also hooked up to the release mechanism, 1 remote-activated electroshock device, 2 remote-activated serums hooked up to the blood stream, one tranquilizer and one adrenaline. Nazi cults are nuts. I love being right. Disassembled the explosives, rigging everything so any attempts to activate will be logged. If someone tries to blow him up or zap him or wake him up or knock him out maybe we'll learn something from the timing or the signal.

Steve Rogers: How do you text so fast?

Tony Stark: I talk, Jarvis types.

Steve Rogers: Are you still working? Are you going to get any sleep tonight?

Tony Stark: Depends on how long it takes to modify the portable MRI into a case that's as unscary as possible. I don't know what they used to do with him or with what tech, but I'm thinking a bright pink box with happy faces drawn all over is unlikely to resemble anything he's seen before.

**

Sam Wilson: 5 guys isnt the same without u
Steve Rogers: I don't understand. Who?

Sam Wilson: Not who! The burger place u liked! When r we going 2 share more cajun fries?

Steve Rogers: Is it a chain?

Sam Wilson: Yes

Steve Rogers: Do they have a restaurant in New York City?

Sam Wilson: NO :((

Steve Rogers: If I asked you to come to New York City anyway, would you?

Sam Wilson: yessss

**

UNLISTED: let him make as many of his own choices as possible. don't push him to remember if he doesn't want to or if it stresses him out. recovery isn't linear.

Steve Rogers: Miss you too, Nat.

UNLISTED: I can't come back for at least a few days. be careful.

**

Steve is picking out clothes for Bucky to put on when he hears the water turn off, and Steve frowns - that wasn't long at all, and when Bucky comes out with matted wet hair and a towel around his waist, it dawns on Steve that Bucky really, really doesn't know how to take care of himself. Steve's senses are heightened enough not to smell any soap, anything scented, anything but, well, Bucky, and he realizes he must have missed this the last time too.

(And seeing Bucky standing there with rivulets of water down his chest, mouth twitching in something like a shy frown, is something Steve needs to learn to live with.)

"There's, um." Steve tries to think of a way to say it without making Bucky feel like he's failed. "There's some really nice - the last time I was here, Tony had all these shampoos. They smell like apple, and - come on, I'll show you."
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Sincere thanks to people who NYC-picked the last chapter. I had no idea Five Guys had expanded that far north! Congrats on your locations. Sam will discover his error soon.

(And continuing thanks to everyone who leaves kudos and/or comments. It means so much to me. I'm fieldbears on tumblr if you want to come say hi. I always love finding new people who are also really into stucky feels.)

Steve feels a little like he's spinning as he runs the water, adjusting it so it fills the tub instead of coming out of the shower head. As an afterthought he goes back to the bedroom, grabs the pair of boxers he'd picked up for Bucky, and hands them over. "You can, um, wear these," he says, staring concertedly at the filling tub instead of Bucky's face. "Like swim trunks."

Bucky doesn't seem to need an explanation for the boxers, or even why he's going to be taking a bath right after a shower. Steve turns away and looks over the collection of expensive-looking bottles and he hears the towel drop to the floor, hears Bucky's feet step one at a time, the slow drag of the fabric up his skin. They're navy blue cotton, not white, and that should help a little. Steve feels like everything he does has to pass inspection, later - that someday, maybe a long time from now, Bucky will be better, and he'll be able to look back on how Steve took care of him. And Steve can't have a single black mark on his record. Nothing that could make Bucky look back and feel like he was taken advantage of, nothing that could make it look like Steve wanted something out of him.

There's soap, shampoo, conditioner, exfoliating scrub, and body butter. Steve leaves the last two, still not sure what they're supposed to be used for, and pours a bit of the soap in close to the faucet, watching the bubbles rise. He hears Bucky inhale slowly behind him.

"Lavender," Steve supplies, looking over his shoulder to see Bucky looking almost contemplative. Bucky looks at the tub, then him, finally kneeling down and putting his hands on the lip of the tub and leaning in to breathe deeper.

"Soap for your skin, shampoo and conditioner for your hair," Steve says, smiling a little. "Can't blame you for not remembering. We only ever really had the first one, and that was only when we could afford it."

Bucky's brows come together and he breathes in again, deeper, and then sits back on his heels. He shakes his head.

"I don't remember."

Steve thinks about it. "Ours didn't smell like lavender," he says. "Didn't really smell like anything." Bucky nods, apparently feeling less disappointed now. On a whim Steve grabs another of the bottles, tipping the cap up and squeezing it just enough that a puff of air comes out. The space between them fills with a citrus smell. "They all smell different. It's nice, right? There's a lot I really... really don't like, about the way things are now, but baths are definitely nice. And the tubs
here in the Tower are long enough you can stretch out."

Bucky leans forward again, from one end of the tub to the other, actually looking a little interested, but he looks to Steve, waiting for permission to get in.

"Let it fill up a little more," Steve says, and busies himself in arranging the bottles along the lip of the tub. Bucky inclines his head a little, folding his arms on the edge and propping his chin on it in a way that makes him look strangely young. Smells, Steve tells himself to remember, watching the way Bucky's nostrils flare to take more in. And, who knows, maybe bubbles too. Hell, Steve will go and buy one of those weird windmill bubble maker things he saw in a mall once if it will make Bucky happy.

Bucky's new arm clicks against the porcelain as he shifts, right hand lifting some bubbles floating toward him and watching them disappear one by one. He looks lost in thought.

"Remembering something else?" Steve asks, hoping it's good, but not wanting to push. If he says no, or doesn't say anything, or that he doesn't want to talk about it, Steve will drop it. It's hard, but Steve's willing to go days without another reference to their past if it means Bucky doesn't feel pressured.

"It's backwards," Bucky says quietly, spreading his fingers apart and then back together. Some bubbles strain to stretch with the webbing of his fingers, finally vanishing.

"How so?"

"It was strep that turned into... rheumatic fever. Smelled bad." His nose wrinkles as if in distaste, but his eyes remain distant and sad. Steve tries to look calm and not relieved that it's a story he can recall too. "You were too weak to do much. Couldn't sit up very long, so you weren't taking baths." Bucky's gaze flickers over to Steve, seeking verification.

"I was sweaty, and, as I believe you put it, ‘inventing a new kind of stink’." Bucky folds his arms back up on the tub. There's muscle definition in his arms and shoulders that was never there before, Steve can't help but notice. Even when he was fighting fit as they trekked across Europe, his muscles never looked like this. "You wouldn't let me help you."

"Hmm," Steve says noncommittally, not wanting to provide an explanation unless he absolutely had to.

"I thought..." Bucky presses his lips together, concentrating. "You'd be a little less sad if you got cleaned up. Your hair was like wet straw." He looks down. "And."

"Hmm?"

Bucky looks up from the bubbles to a middle-space above the tub. "Wanted… to take care of you. And maybe for you to." He doesn't finish the sentence, and for the first time Steve wonders if Bucky has his head together enough to censor himself. For Steve to... survive another bad winter? For Steve to... be a little less miserable to be around? There was a lot Bucky used to never say, back when any man would have been well within his rights to complain at least a little about such a sickly friend that made so many enemies and needed saving so often. Steve knew that.

"You were always willing to help more than I was willing to accept it, I think." Steve leans over, catching Bucky's attention, and tries on a gentle smile. "You were always a good friend."

Bucky clearly doesn't know how to respond to that, and tucks his chin behind his arms to look at
the water. Steve realizes it's several inches past high enough, and if he doesn't turn it off now Bucky will have an unintentional 'eureka' reenactment - he reaches over quickly and turns off the tap. "Bath's ready," he says brightly, Bucky gets to his feet and steps into it, slowly lowering himself down until he's completely seated. Steve wonders belatedly (idiot, he thinks to himself) about Bucky's left arm, but it's already half submerged and nothing's sparking. Of course Bucky wouldn't think of such a thing, and actually, of course Tony would think that far, even on a rush job.

"Not too hot?"

Bucky looks down and then at Steve. "How would I know?"

Steve feels something inside him cringe. "It. It would hurt." Bucky's skin is so much paler than it used to be, pinking up now, but Steve doesn't know if that's him getting warmer or him getting singed.

"My skin doesn't hurt," Bucky says mildly, and in a rare display of interest and self-motivation, raises up his right hand halfway out of the water to make a small swirling motion. The whirlpool is short-lived, but Bucky seems somewhat pleased by it.

"Okay. Good." Steve grabs a washcloth off the towel rack and adds some soap, dips it in the water, and hands it to Bucky - blessedly, it only takes a few moments before muscle memory or something similar kicks in, and he starts scrubbing. Steve scoots back a little and rests his back against the cabinets under the sink, collecting his thoughts. The food seemed to help. The bath too. He's communicating, at least - more than he was in the beginning. His eyes have a little more life in him. He's even asked a few questions.

"Will-" Bucky chews his lip, looks down, then to Steve, and it occurs to Steve that speaking up seems to be treated like breaking a rule.

"You can ask me anything, Buck. I want you to, actually." His laugh sounds as tired as he feels. "Tell me anything. Ask me anything."

Bucky nods slowly, eyes closing, trying to remember this. "Will I sleep all the time now?"

"Um. You can ask me anything, but I might not understand what you mean."

"I slept a little with you a few hours ago," Bucky says, and Steve wills his cheeks not to go pink because of how that sounds, "and before that, at your apartment, I slept. You told me to sleep."

"I- yes, I guess I did." Steve tries to work it out. "I mean, even with the serum, we have to sleep, Buck. Do you... not like it?"

Bucky shakes his head vigorously, arm stretched across himself to scrape the washcloth along his left arm. It looks a little strange, but it must be habit, and besides, there's nothing wrong with cleaning the prosthetic. "It's - it doesn't hurt. But."

"Did you not sleep before?"

"On long missions, when I had to be away for days. But. When I didn't have a mission, they would put me in..." He studied Steve's face, searching, determining something. "I'm not going to have ops anymore, but you're not going to freeze me."

What? "No, Bucky."
Bucky's frowning, eyes darting over different parts of Steve's expression as if cataloguing them. "Should I not... ask about..."

"No, no, it's not that. You can still - you can still ask me anything. I want you to." Steve pulls back the hand that was reaching for Bucky and puts it on his knee instead, restraining himself, wanting to punch through the tile floor. "I just. It's important to me that you know you don't have to do those things anymore."

"What things?"

Everything that's normal for you now. Killing. Being used. Being tossed in a warehouse somewhere when you aren't needed. Steve tries to take a steadying breath and it turns into something close to a sob, so he pulls his knees up, then his arms, taking a brief moment to hide his face and compose himself.

"Steve." It's still a little raspy, but if he doesn't look it almost sounds like his old Bucky. He doesn't trust himself to reply, feeling extraordinarily weak. When he looks up again Bucky has picked up the next bottle in the line-up, tipping the cap open as he'd seen Steve do, pressing gently until a gust of air comes out. His eyebrows shoot up.

"That's the shampoo," Steve explains, and forces himself to unfold and move back over to the edge of the tub. "Tilt your head back enough to get your hair wet."

"Apples," Bucky says to himself, and then puts the bottle down to bend at the knees and sink under the surface.
Bucky comes back up, nose scrunched a little as he tilts his head from one side to the other to get the water out of his ears.

"It's a lot cleaner than the Potomac," Steve says. "A lot warmer too. Don't know why you're making that face."

Bucky shifts his weight and says nothing. With his hair slicked back now and away from his face, he looks startlingly young, like he did before Steve lost him. Bucky's looking at the shampoo bottle Steve's holding out for him, unsure.

"We had a thin bar of soap and a rag, back then," Steve murmurs, trying to understand, trying not to stare. "I guess a bottle isn't really what you're used to." The water's dripping from his shoulders back down into the tub in rivulets that follow the lines of muscle on his chest. Steeling himself, Steve tips the bottle into his own palm, lathering it a little and then reaching out to work it into Bucky's scalp. Steve's never had long hair himself before, nor has he had to wash anyone else's - it's different, trying to gather up the long strands and make sure they get clean as well.

"Your mother always said you'd never hold still for this," Steve recalls, more to himself than to Bucky.

"I can hold still."

Steve feels something tug at his chest. He thinks again about Bucky in the tent, propped up and posing to be drawn. Steve smiles a little as he feels Bucky move underneath him, tilting his head to one side as if to encourage Steve toward a spot he's missed. "You're starting to smell less like seawater," Steve says encouragingly, and Bucky makes a small sound that Steve can't quite identify. It doesn't sound distressed, exactly. Maybe impatient. "Hm? Ready for this to be over?"

Bucky breathes in deeply and doesn't answer. Steve leans back out of Bucky's line of vision to spy a moment on his face - eyes closed, jaw set a little, and when Steve's thumb sweeps over Bucky's ear and then behind it, rubbing some of the soap in to try and root out all the grime, Bucky's shoulder jerks forward and a tendon jumps in his neck, and he presses into the touch, almost reluctantly, expression strained.

"...Buck?" Steve starts to wonder if he's starved for touch, recalling how quickly he folded himself up and pressed to Steve when they'd lain down.

Bucky forces his mouth into a thin line and seems to forcibly push his body back into the position it started in. "I can hold still."

Steve continues in silence and tries to think about other things. Nothing comes to mind to discuss - in his mind he's feeling the warm water seep through the material of his jeans, Bucky's mouth pliant under his as he crawls in and kisses him feverishly. Steve hates himself a little. He replays the day to try and find something.

"Dinner was good," he tries. "There's a lot of different kinds of food now, though. Thai is nice. I think you'd like it. Maybe we can order in tomorrow."

Bucky doesn't answer, but he doesn't look opposed to it either. His eyes are closed, which is probably good because the strands in the front keep slipping down in front of his face.
"Okay, tilt back again. Like before."

Bucky does, sliding down until his hairline is just submerged. The water doesn't look quite as sparkling as it did before, but it's still clear enough for Steve to look at the lightning bolt scars arcing away from his new arm, jagged and ancient. He doesn't let himself look anywhere else. He leans over the tub and begins stroking the shampoo out, unable to help himself from giving it more attention than it strictly needs, rubbing circles into Bucky's temples. Bucky's expression relaxes minutely, and so he keeps going, unable to stop himself, fanning his fingers out, working the suds out as tenderly as he can, digging his nails in very gently on the way back up.

The surface of the water ripples as Bucky's body tenses, hips snapping upwards almost too fast to see. His eyes flash open and Steve flinches back, instantly recognizing a step taken too far, and pushes himself up to his feet.

"That, um," Steve turns around and grabs a towel from the rack, folding it up and placing it on the lip of the tub. "That should do it. You, um. I'm gonna go clean up myself now. Dry off, and. Good. Okay."

If Bucky starts to say anything, or looks at him with suspicion (or want), Steve doesn't notice because he doesn't look back. When he makes it across the hall to the almost identical bedroom, he strips quickly, turning the shower to as strong a setting as it will go before stepping in and finally acknowledging how overwhelmingly, painfully hard he is.
Chapter 15

Steve aims the showerhead to the wall and cleans it off, cringing a little at how long it takes - he makes sure to wash himself off with every scented thing he can get his hands on, desperate to get rid of any incriminating smell. He realizes too late that he didn't think to bring any change of clothes with him, and steels himself, drying off as much as he can before wrapping the towel tight around his waist and returning to the bedroom.

(Bucky's bedroom? Steve's? Theirs?)

Bucky is standing in front of the dresser, wearing pajama pants, socks, and the tee and hoodie from Steve's old apartment. His hair looks uncombed but dried and when he turns his head to look at Steve, his face is unsure, as if waiting to see if he's done everything right so far in Steve's absence.

"Hey," Steve says, because he has no idea what else to say. Bucky moves out of his way as Steve goes to the neat piles of clothes, picking out boxers, a tee, and pajama pants for himself. Everything feels impossibly soft, so different from what he used to wear when everything he owned was worn thin but too cheap to fit right. He rubs the material between his fingers. "I'm going to go change." He gestures to the bathroom, and Bucky nods, face tilted down. Steve knows when he comes back out Bucky won't have moved from that spot. He's right, of course.

"I'm not - I don't know where I'm supposed to sleep." Bucky sounds uncomfortable.

"This can be your room, if you like it." Steve smiles. "The Tower is - it's a home, and you can have your own space."

Bucky nods that jerky little nod again, eyes looking away. "You have your own room too?" His tone is flat and hollow.

Steve looks over at the door, towards the hall. "I was thinking the one over there. No sense in being too far away from you. In. In case you need something." He feels strangely more naked than when he was wearing the towel.

"The bed is," Bucky says, and then stops, turns around completely, back to Steve, whose eyebrows shoot up in confusion and slight alarm. "This room. It's bigger than what we had."

Steve tries to follow this. "In Brooklyn?"

"I'm not going to. To leave again." Bucky's shoulders are curled in tightly. "You want me to be here, so I'll s- I won't. I won't disappear."

Steve wonders how obvious he was in his fear, especially back in DC. Bucky's barely in reality sometimes, from the way he can't quite engage with people, but apparently Steve's concerns are written on his face in big enough letters literally anyone can see it. "I do," Steve chokes out, and watches the movement of Bucky's left hand, fingers curling and straightening in a slow rhythm as if trying to wake up the muscles that aren't there. "I do want you here."

Bucky nods and moves back to the dresser, and as he starts to move clothing around Steve realizes with a rush of relief that he's picking out clothes for himself, putting them in the top drawer as delicately as he can.

"I want you to be okay," Steve says, the words tumbling out of him, and Bucky stops moving. "I don't - I don't know what that means, yet, or, or how to get there. I want you to remember who you
are. All the good things you've done for me, for our country. I really," Steve wills his throat not to tighten up, "I really want you to remember me. Us. I want you to feel safe and like you don't have to be controlled anymore."

Bucky's hands are completely still, eyes blinking rapidly and staring at nothing. Steve knows he's processing this, that he probably needs time, but he can't help himself:

"What do you want?"

Steve watches as Bucky fails to move, fails to respond, and Steve wonders if Bucky's waiting for him to reword it as he's so often done, or to make it a simpler question, but he can't. Now that the question's out he needs to know, he needs to know whatever answer Bucky can give him.

"Please," he adds, trying not to sound as desperate as he feels. Bucky's expression is hidden by a messy curtain of thick brown hair, but he moves, slowly, walking around the bed and toward Steve. Steve keeps waiting for the moment when Bucky stops advancing, the moment when Bucky stops short of invading Steve's personal space, but that moment doesn't come. Bucky stops only when he's millimeters away from Steve, chest brushing against his when he breathes in, and he's looking determinedly over Steve's shoulder. He's not moving and his expression is close to blank. Steve freezes in confused shock before he realizes, heartbreakingly, what Bucky's asking for. Steve raises his arms and wraps them tightly around his friend, burying his face in the other man's shoulder. He holds that position until he feels the body held tight to him start to tremble, then shake with quiet noises.
Chapter 16

Sam Wilson: good morning sunshine

Sam Wilson: i have good news. there ARE 5 guys in nyc. u now have no reason not to take me out when I get up there

Steve Rogers: You make it sound like you already have a bus ticket.

Sam Wilson: bus ticket? man, Stark industries doesn't send anybody BUS TICKETS

Steve Rogers: What did Tony send you?

Sam Wilson: 1st class baby. someone named pepper called and set it all up. who names their kid pepper??

Steve Rogers: Do you need a ride from the airport?

Sam Wilson: someone named happy is getting me. WHO NAMES THEIR KID HAPPY?? TALK TO UR PEOPLE STEVE

**

UNLISTED: Status report?

Steve Rogers: He's talking more. He asked me to stay with him last night.

UNLISTED: He asked for something. That's important.

Steve Rogers: I feel like I'm doing everything wrong.

UNLISTED: Did you tell him no? Or sleep with him?

Steve Rogers: Neither. God, Nat.

UNLISTED: Then you're doing your best.

**

Steve Rogers: If you house enough superheroes, do you qualify for some obscure tax break?

Tony Stark: The VA doesn't pay him enough and he's bored.

Steve Rogers: You know I don't think you should be spying on people.

Tony Stark: Didn't have to. VA underpays everyone that works for them, and anyone with any sense would be bored working a 9-5 after fighting evil with a national icon. When are you coming down to the labs?

Steve Rogers: Bucky hasn't woken up yet. When he does I'm going to make us some breakfast and then come right down.

Tony Stark: I'll have the staff make something, it'll be ready by the time you get to the dining room.

Tony Stark: I can see you typing forever and ever. I can see the dot dot dot. You're about to thank
me for food and all the other stuff, and don't. I can't stand politeness. Also, bring me some Belgian waffles and blueberries when you come down. I only have energy drinks down here.

**

Steve checks his email next, and finds a message from Ms. Potts, outlining an interesting website she found which has mp3s of old baseball broadcasts dating back to the late 1930s. The quality is lacking, she says, but they might prove relaxing. Steve reads it and immediately knows that she knows. Tony probably never even told her. After everything that happened in DC, and Tony suddenly stalling her in Europe, she’s too smart not to work it out. Steve knows he doesn't understand Tony as well as he could, but it makes an impression on him that he's protective enough of Pepper to keep her on another continent because of his current houseguest, and at the same time will do... well, everything he's done. Steve wonders if there really will be a machine in pink casing when they go down to the labs.

Bucky is still sleeping. Slightly tangled up in sheets and his own hoodie, he remains perched almost on the very edge of the other side of the bed, side rising and falling with silent breaths. It's almost nine now and Steve can't bring himself to wake Bucky or get out of bed, no matter how much pent-up energy he feels. This is good for Bucky. This is what he asked for. It was stilted, and mostly done in clipped stories of how they used to stay warm with cots pushed together in the winter, and then sleeping bags in the war, but it was a request and Steve couldn't say no for anything. And Bucky had stayed on the far side of the bed leaving Steve's worries unfounded. It was a relief.

Steve's stomach makes a prolonged and pointed complaint, rumbling loud enough that Bucky stills next to him in what must be alert wakefulness.

"Sorry," Steve says quietly, and sets his phone down on the bedside table. "I've usually eaten by now."

Bucky rolls over, hands tucked almost childishly to his chest and eyes a little bleary. "Steve."

Steve smiles weakly. "Hi."

Bucky pushes himself up a little on one elbow, looking at Steve and then the space between them, then the room. He sits up quickly, pulling his legs from the tangle of sheets and standing up. "I need to-" He points to the bathroom and Steve nods quickly, waves him on, and while Bucky relieves himself Steve gets dressed as quickly as possible. He starts to put on a pair of black boots, but they're far too small.

**

*Steve Rogers: Are half these clothes in Bucky's size?*

*Tony Stark: The modern word for that is 'duh'.*

*Steve Rogers: How in the hell did you get his measurements?*

*Tony Stark: Same way I got yours. From looking. Remember: WAFFLES. BLUEBERRIES. IMPORTANT.*

**

Bucky changes in the bathroom and nods when Steve asks if he's ready for breakfast. They're halfway down the hall when Steve starts to smell fresh fruit and warm food, pancakes, waffles,
maybe both - he's about to ask Bucky if he can smell it too when Bucky passes him, looking severely interested in those smells and eyes like saucers when he sees the spread.

"It's like this all the time?" Bucky asks, gesturing to the - the everything. Steve spots orange juice, something pink that smells like lemonade, the pancakes and waffles, and several bowls of fresh fruit and cream. There's meat in there somewhere too - it smells amazing. Steve goes to the kitchen, pulling a third dish out and beginning to plate it with the food for Tony before he forgets entirely.

"Um, I didn't stay long the last time I was here. I think the pantry's usually stocked full, and the fridge too, but this is... not totally unusual, either." Steve's not sure if Tony wants syrup or cream, so he puts a bit of each on the side and then goes back to the kitchen to find something to cover it with. Plastic wrap. Clint had called it plastic wrap once, it was in one of the cupboards...

"It's for us," Bucky says, still struggling with the concept but with a tone of disbelief that makes him sound more human than he has for a while.

"For us, and I'm making a plate for Tony, yes." Steve finds the rectangular cardboard box and begins struggling the stuff onto the plate. He should have gone for the tinfoil. He mutters a brief curse under his breath as he hears the quiet clink of silverware. When he comes out Bucky has already spooned several heaps of raspberries and blueberries onto a plate, then sliced strawberries, and he's currently tugging the bowl of sliced bananas closer.

"Skip those," Steve says, and Bucky looks up sharply with a questioning expression. "Just trust me. They're not what you remember. I learned the hard way."

Bucky's face twists a little. "I don't remember any of this," he says quietly, putting the spoon back in the bowl of banana slices and moving on to spearing a single pancake. "Not the, the fruit, anyway. I just remember wanting it all."

"When we were poor," Steve says, agreeing. "Between money and better trading between countries, this stuff is around all the time now. It's nice."

Surreptitiously, as if unsure if it's allowed, Bucky picks a blackberry from his plate between two fingers and eats it, testing. His eyebrows come together and he tries a raspberry next. Steve takes a seat and begins serving himself. He tries to act naturally, as if he isn't secretly pleased that Bucky seems a little more himself.

"When we were kids, it was mostly apples. We couldn't afford much fresh stuff."

"I remember getting you oranges once," Bucky says, around a mouthful of food, as if it just occurred to him. He looks surprised at first and then quietly happy with himself.

"You were trying to cheer me up after Lisa Whitechurch turned me down. I was moping around the apartment. God, looking back I'm pretty sure I was insufferable."

Bucky tilts his head, trying to hone in on details, but they seem to be eluding them. He swallows. "I just remember getting them," he says finally.

Steve still counts that as a victory. "You must've spent most all the savings you had."

Bucky shakes his head, already reaching for more pancakes. "Didn't have any savings," he's saying distractedly, pushing some of the fruit bowls away to make room for pulling the platter of bacon and sausage closer to him. " Took 'em."

"What?"
Bucky looks up at the question, eyes flickering from Steve's expression, side to side and then back down the food. "Took 'em," he repeats, fairly unrepentant. "You were looking pale, thought the vitamins might help. Plus Lisa Whitechurch." He examines the sausage quizzically a moment before holding it down to the plate, cutting it into pieces with his knife.

**

They eat pretty much everything that isn't nailed down, and when Steve brings up more tests, Bucky just nods, getting up and taking the dishes to the sink. It's almost mechanical, the way he does it without thinking, but the fact that it's an old habit from back when they were just normal people - Steve smiles and starts stacking the empty platters.

**

"Rogers, Barnes, hey, come in. Actually, don't come in unless you have the - ooh, yes, you added cream. Steve, you temptress. Hand that over." Tony ushers them into the lab, practically grabbing the plate out of Steve's hands and starting to tug the plastic wrap off. "Jeez, and syrup. Okay, my hands are already a mess. Cap, you helped fix people up in the trenches at some point, right? You can do the blood thing. Stuff's on the table."

Steve's used to the way Tony talks at a mile a minute. He suspects most of it rushes right past Bucky, who simply goes to the 'operating' table and obediently sits on the edge. "I took First Aid when I was in the war, but actually, SHIELD taught me how to do this." Along with several other random things that might need getting done during a mission. Steve hasn't had to fly a helicopter yet, but it's a strange comfort to know that he can.

"Yes. SHIELD. Great. Don't watch the news, by the way. Mm. God this is good." Tony looks up from a mouthful and sees that Bucky is staring at him a little. Tony looks unbothered. "Good, right? After I got kidnapped, all I wanted was a good hamburger. Ugh. Best burger of my life. You, I figure your comfort food is something boiled and appropriately meager, no seasoning, Depression era and all. You'll forgive me if I didn't destroy my chef's soul by telling him to make you unsalted gruel."

Bucky seems to be working to parse all that out. "After you were kidnapped," he repeats, slowly. Steve taps Bucky's arm and Bucky looks over for a second before making a fist, unbothered by the needle.

"Mmhmm." Tony chews happily. "Terrorists, you know, take over the world types. Dumber than yours, though. Mine stuck me in a cave and told me to make them tech. Didn't try to brainwash me or drug me, just, you know, threats of death and maiming and whatnot."

"So you killed them all," Bucky says, and it's more of a statement than an inquiry. His eyes look... strange, Steve thinks.

"With fire," Tony chirps. "By the way, my girlfriend - you haven't met her yet - she says you should see a doctor. You think you could handle that?"

"You're a doctor."

Tony laughs. "Helllll no. I'm an inventor with a basic knowledge of human anatomy. All this shiny around you? I'm usually building w- usually building other stuff."

"He's like Batman," Steve supplies helpfully, setting the vial aside and taping the bandage to Bucky's arm, "but much, much more annoying, and his butler is a computer."
"Oh." Bucky thinks about this a moment.

"What Steve is *trying* to say is that I'm incredibly rich and intelligent and mysterious, and that I fight crime. And that women love me." Tony pops a blueberry into his mouth. "Steve, put the vial in the thing."

"You know 'the thing' is not descriptive in any way."

"The thing, the -" Tony gestures at a small device that's wired to the wall. "The thing there. So Jarvis can look at it."

Steve does indeed put the vial in whatever it is, and a green LED light illuminates, which Steve is grateful for - the universal sign for success. "What does the hypothetical doctor need to do?" he asks, because he knows Bucky won't.

"Talk to him. Or listen. I don't know. I'm bad at going to doctors." Tony twists around and rummages through a pile of papers, sighing. "Pepper sent me a list of ones with clearances and background checks and... something... I dunno, but the talking kind."

Steve wonders if Tony actually can't remember the word psychiatrist or if he's avoiding the word because he knows that most people didn't go to one in his day unless they were almost beyond hope. Unsure, he looks to Bucky, who doesn't look defensive or even scared. That's a relief. "We'll look at that later and pick one out," he says, clapping Bucky on the shoulder.

"Good. Nice. Alright, Barnes, you ready for something new? It's like an x-ray but different. You had x-rays back in the Stone Age, right?"
The transportable MRI has indeed been recased in magenta, and there are small stickers in the corner of a white cat with a bow in front of one ear. Bucky seems confused but calm enough, holding perfectly still and then asking Steve, very quietly, who Dugan is.

"I think he wore a hat."

"He did." Steve smiles at him. "We fought with him in the war. Howling Commandos."

"Right, he was - his picture was in the museum." Bucky looks a little crestfallen that he'd forgotten, but Steve takes his arm and squeezes it, gently.

"You don't have to remember everything all at once, Buck."

"Ohhh that's not good." Tony is pinching a spot on the brain scan, pulling his fingers apart to zoom in on something. "That's, okay. I'm sending this off to an expert but we're, um. Yeah."

Steve looks up sharply. "What?"

"Well, it's." Tony gestures at something Steve can't begin to interpret. "I mean. That is to say." He clears his throat. "I know we're doing the whole not-talking-about-your-time-at-Hydra thing, Barnes, but by any chance, do you know the last time they erased your memories?"

Bucky's jaw twitches and he looks down, and it's not clear to Steve whether he's trying to remember or trying to collect himself.

"I asked... and then." Bucky's posture straightens, tightens. "It's because I asked."

"Baaarnes?"

"Give him a second, Tony, for God's sake."

"After the bridge. Before the helicarrier." Bucky slides off the table, standing and then looking at the exits, the floor.

"Okay, so this could, um." Tony raises his eyebrows. "That's good! I mean, not good that, you, listen, I suck at bedside manner, so you two can just pretend that I said something comforting there. The point is, this here is the spot where short-term memories hang out, then they get turned into long-term memories heeeere... and they're both fried."

"Fried?" Steve echoes, and whatever tone he was going for, it comes out scared instead.

"I guess I kinda assumed there was a drug cocktail, some kind of assassin roofie, but, this is localized, um, layman's terms? They used electricity in specific places." Tony squints at the readings. "Again, not a doctor. But, basic knowledge of the brain, this kind of scarring, it's not - they didn't cut, they just burned, the piece is still there, I mean, they must have needed certain parts to stay or he couldn't remember how to shoot people, no offense, Barnes, oh jeez, that's not a good - Steve."

Bucky's face is pale and he looks ready to either run or faint. His mouth opens to speak but nothing comes out, and when Steve walks towards him Bucky backs up twice as much.

"C-can I." Bucky points to the door, shaking.
"I'll come with you," Steve says, but Bucky shakes his head, retreating and heading for the elevators.

Tony waits until the second the doors are shut: "Jarvis."

"If he goes anywhere other than his living quarters, I will let you know immediately, sir."

"Good." Tony deflates a little, as if he's been holding in a breath since Steve came in. Steve realizes, very belatedly, that Tony's in a tank top and jeans, not the suit.

"How bad is it?" Steve asks, quietly. "He's remembered several things, he's - he's not himself, exactly, but he's not the man I fought, either. He-"

"Steve, I have no idea how bad it is. I don't know - I know Pepper's pushing me to get him to a specialist before his Winter Soldier memories kick in. I know Nat's telling me she's coming as soon as she can, and when she does it's gonna be with maps, maps she needs him to look at and tell her what he knows about Hydra bases, something so we can get a head start on fucking obliterating these guys. I know I haven't slept since Nat texted me to say you two were coming, and I need that to happen soon, the sleeping thing, and after that I'm going to do something brainless and PR-related so Pepper's happy with me when I finally let her back on the continent. Jarvis, give me something brainless and PR-related."

"There's always the local young man studying at NYU. He's been requesting an interview for his final project for some time now."

"The inventor kid? Sending me a hundred million emails?"

"Indeed, sir. A model student raised by his aunt. I suspect the media will find it a very presentable story."

"Set it up. Today, lunch. Is today a school day?"

"Today is Sunday, sir."

"Good. Lunch. Somewhere that serves good fish tacos. I'm gonna go sleep until then, only wake me up if something explodes. Steve, if you need anything, I have no idea what to do and I'm very tired so call someone else."

**

When Bucky wrote his report after getting rescued, it took a couple tries, a couple copies of the form, to get it right - his hands weren't shaking like he felt they should be, but when he read over what he'd written he'd see it wasn't linear, that the events were correct but jumbled.

Captured, identified as a sergeant, pulled aside with several others, physically tortured, starved, questioned for details. Didn't crack. Watched as many of the others wept silently, gave what intel they had, made some up, begged for water, begged for them to turn off the voltage. Bucky's silence frustrated most of the interviewers but one man with glasses looked almost delighted. He was small and piggish and balding and Swiss, Bucky thought, he sounds Swiss, he's talking to the others, having him pulled out from the interviewing chamber, relocation, new project, and Bucky tries to concentrate on taking full breaths as they drag him down the hall and discuss something about potential.

Bucky didn't write much after that part. It wasn't that he wanted to withhold something embarrassing, to leave out some weak moment. It's just that from that memory to when he saw
Steve's face, he doesn't have any idea what happened.

**

*Steve Rogers: I forgot to ask. When do you get in?*

*Sam Wilson: I land at 11:45*

*Sam Wilson: 1st class is awesome. I'm drinking wine and it's not even noon*

*Sam Wilson: everything going ok?*

*Steve Rogers: Not really sure, to be honest.*

**

Steve waits a little longer in the hallway, fiddling with his phone and trying to get himself together. He just heard the unmistakable sounds of vomiting, and while there's nothing he wants more than to go in immediately ask Bucky what he needs from him, he has to think rationally. Bucky wanted to get away from them. He wanted to be alone. Steve can at least give him a few minutes of peace before storming in and trying ham-fistedly to help.

He hears the tap, and then the sound of someone brushing their teeth. Steve decides this is as good a moment as any, coming into the bedroom and trying not to pace until Bucky reemerges. His eyes are red-rimmed and glassy and he looks pale.

"Hiya, Buck."

"Steve." His voice is raspy. "What if Stark's right."

"Right about what?" Steve telegraphs his movements this time when he steps forward, just one, and while Bucky doesn't move away he looks like he wants to.

"I might never... I might never be me again."

"He didn't say that."

"He meant it."

"Your head's already clearer than when you came to me in DC, Bucky, I can tell. You're starting to realize you're not a pawn anymore."

Bucky's mouth presses into a fine line and he looks away. "I've killed a lot of people."

"So have I," Steve says, suddenly bold, and waits until Bucky meets his eyes. "When they took you, they didn't recruit you, they used you. You know that."

"I know a lot of things," and there's so much emotion in his voice all of a sudden, so much bitterness. "I know Vietnamese, and how to take an M5 apart and put it back together, how to - how to prop you up to get your airways open when you can't breathe, because you can't afford the medicine, how to burn down a building and make it look like arson, but I can't, I can't remember what my first girlfriend looked like, or my father's voice, or how we met, or how many people I shot from rooftops, or who they were, or why I'm not supposed to - why I want to -" Bucky's fists curl and he looks like he might punch the wall, and Steve wants him to. Steve wants him to scream or cry again or whatever else he wants. "You're. You're my best friend. I remember you. I'm going to do what you say until I can keep myself together, ev- even if that doesn't ever happen."
Bucky's head is hung low as he walks past Steve and sits on the edge of the bed, hunched over and face in his hands. They don't speak for a while.

"Sally Hooper," Steve says finally, and Bucky doesn't act like he heard, but Steve keeps talking anyway. "I think she's the first one you really went on a date with. She had curly hair and brown eyes and bright new shoes, they were - they were some style all the girls wanted back then, I can't recall the name of them, but she was mighty proud of them, and her mom hated you." Steve laughs. "Saw right through you, knew you were taking her to the pictures because you wanted to steal a kiss." He takes the spot on the bed next to Bucky, not touching, just looking forward and telling him the rest. About his father, how Bucky saved him from getting beat in an alley and told him they were friends, everything he can think of until Bucky lies down, eyes still closed, still silent, but listening, definitely listening, letting Steve help him put it all back together. After a while Steve runs out of things to say and moves to sit against the headboard, wondering if Bucky will move closer. Bucky doesn't - he stays perfectly still and falls asleep at the foot of the bed, restless.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Bear with me while some plot happens. You guys trust me, right?

Steve doesn't remember being tired, let alone falling asleep, but Jarvis wakes him up nonetheless:

"Very sorry to disturb you, Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes, but I thought you would like to know that someone has attempted to remotely activate Sergeant Barnes via the removed arm."

Bucky sits up immediately, but his face is expressionless and he's not looking at Steve. Steve rubs his face and tries to gather his thoughts.

"The adrenaline?" Steve asks. "Have you told Tony?"

"I am attempting to, but he is not answering his phone at this time." A beat. "Please hold one moment. I am monitoring some live feeds at this moment and there are some disturbances in both Manhattan and East London."

"Just how many live feeds are you- never mind." Steve slides off the bed and picks up his gym bag before remembering that he did not pack his suit as it had been completely beyond repair. He grabs his shield from next to the bedstand.

"Mr. Stark has just activated his portable Iron Man suit. I will let you know as soon as I know more." Steve remarks.

"What's an Iron Man suit?" Bucky asks quietly, voice raspy. He's blinking hard and staring at the ground, reminding Steve of how he used to look when trying to sober up.

"Tony's uniform, it's - it's like a robot suit."

Barnes looks at him blankly.

"Sirs. Mr. Stark is alive and well. He is flying to the living room and is accompanied by the student. Sergeant Barnes, in the interest of your low profile may I suggest that you-"

"Bucky's staying right here." Steve breathes in deeply. "Please."

Bucky is still staring at the floor. "Yes," He says finally, and Steve nods and races for the living room. He's hardly reached it before one of the plate glass windows whirrs softly and opens at a forty-five degree angle.

"I didn't know they could do that," Steve remarks.

"They couldn't, until recently," Jarvis replies, tone stiff, "but Mr. Stark kept breaking them otherwise."

Iron Man's a speck at first, red and gold and a trail of exhaust arcing out from behind a skyscraper and then barreling toward the open window. Steve backs up a few extra steps, leaving Tony plenty
of space to come in and land in the center of the room with a thunk. The floor rumbles impressively and Steve watches as Tony releases a young black man in skinny jeans and a sweater vest from under his left arm. The Iron Man mask flips up and Tony resumes what must be the middle of the tirade:

"And I am not, I repeat not, getting bad press for going to lunch with a moron who wants to interview me but instead gets killed by trying to block an incoming motorcycle from-"

"-Mr. Stark, I had it-"

"It's Peter, right? You're a college sophomore, not goddamn Hercules. Jesus Christ, Steve, today sucks." Tony uses the young man's shock at realizing he's standing in a room with Captain America to grab the kid by the shoulders, frogmarching him into the coat closet and shutting the door after him. "Jarvis, lock it. That kid has a death wish and he hasn't signed a release form. Stark Industries doesn't need a lawsuit."

"Yes, sir. Wrongful imprisonment is indeed a milder charge."

"No sass."

"Of course not, sir."

"Tony, what the hell happened?" Steve gestures out the slowly-closing window, and Tony rolls his eyes, flipping his mask back up and leading him toward the ready room. Steve has a feeling there's a Captain America suit waiting for him there.

"You heard someone tried to activate the Winter Soldier? Well, almost simultaneously, some goons crashed my luncheon uptown, that kid would have died if I didn't stop him from trying to play chicken with a baddie on a bike, and Jarvis is calling Pepper nonstop because something's going on in London and I have a-"

"News, sir."

"Now."

"Ms. Potts is safe. She was dining with Wakandan President T'Challa when an attempt on her life was made. In related news, the local emergency channels are reporting several apprehended suspects left with severe burns."

"Was T'Challa in on it?"

"Unlikely. He disabled several enemy combatants himself and is currently escorting her to his embassy for optimal security."

"Keep an eye on it. Tell her I love her and am severely turned on when she sets people on fire." Tony pushes a button on the wall, causing a panel to slide back and reveal several backup costumes. Steve takes his and begins changing.

"What was T'Challa doing in London?" he asks.

"Oxford's having a shindig right now, and he's a graduate - I don't think he's the one we have to worry about."

"Tony, I am currently worried about everyone."
"I know."

"Sirs, Sergeant Barnes requested I provide him with a map of the greater New York area, and has populated it with all the nearby Hydra bases he is aware of."

Tony nods. "How many?"

"Three in the City, sir. One is a weapons cache manned with a skeleton crew to the best of his knowledge, but the other two are unknowns." An interactive map appears in front of Tony, which he scans through while making a tsking noise. Steve pulls his helmet on and joins him to look at the map. They're spread out decently.

"We're gonna have to split up," Tony mutters.

"Just tell me which one's mine," Steve says.

"Ditto," someone from the doorway says.
"Who the hell are you!?" Tony shouts, staring at the stranger. He has a slight stature, wearing a full-body blue and red suit. The mask has large tear-drop shaped black eyes built into it, and there's a network of black, web-like lines over the costume. He is waving as if he were a neighbor on the other side of the hedge.

"Sirs, Mr. Hogan has reported a disturbance en route to the Tower, but he is now safely-"

"Jarvis, shut up for a second. How did you get in here? Who are you?"

"Um, hi to you too?" He's looking around the room and making an impressed noise. "I'm Spider-Man! I heard something happened uptown and I-"

"Iron Man, how many superheroes are you collecting?" Steve examines the spider insignia, beyond confused.

"I did not collect this guy, I have never seen him before. Kid, I don't know what the hell you're supposed to be, but you look ridiculous and we have some important stuff to get to, so Jarvis, get security-"

"Aw, c'mon, I can totally help!" He spreads his arms out. "I can fight, and I know the city like the back of my hand. And that includes all the post-alien-attack changes, which, yeah. There are some new roads now."

"Iron Man, we don't have time for this."

"We absolutely have time to ask this nutjob how he snuck-" Tony stops mid-sentence, making a high-pitched indignant noise as Steve grabs an earpiece from the bin by the costumes and tosses it. The young man catches it and cradles it in both hands.

"Iron Man, you take the one in Red Hook. Drop me off in Crown Heights on the way. New guy, do you know how to get to this third location?"

"Sure! Terrible parking, great noodle places."

"Good. Go."

Spider-Man nods and runs out the door, presumably to an elevator or the window - who knows.

Tony growls under his breath, pressing a button that causes a skylight to tilt open. He locks his arms around Steve's middle, flying upwards and out. They only make it a few blocks before he's griping: "Cap, what the hell happened to worrying about everyone? Remember that generalized paranoia? Is it okay if I miss it?"

"Calm down, Tony, he's trying to help. Also, please stop flying so low."

"My flying is fine. Why did he help by breaking into my house?"

"You really haven't figured it out yet, have you?"
"We're continuing this conversation later. I'm dropping you now."

**

"OHHH," Iron Man says into his earpiece ten seconds later, on a closed channel. "Duh."

**

The location 'Spider-Man' checked out was completely stripped and abandoned, so he says he's on his way to Cap's location ASAP.

"This is Hydra, right?" There's a strange 'thwip' sound in the background every couple of seconds that Steve can't quite place.

"Yes, New Guy I Kind of Hate, this is almost definitely Hydra." Tony's voice is flat.

"Cool cool cool. Um, Cap, I caught up and I'm about seven stories above you, aaaaand did you know you've got a weird van following you?"

Steve looks up and sees a small dot on the side of a glass skyscraper. "How are you-" A gun goes off and he ducks.

**

Iron Man's location had just nine men, now incapacitated, and an intel station that probably has details of this last ditch multi-pronged effort by the stragglers left in North America. Captain America's location had eighteen men, fifteen incapacitated and three attached to the walls with a strange white sticky webbing, and a serious weapons cache that is probably what used to be at Spider-Man's first assigned location.

(To be honest, the fight feels worse than routine - it feels dull. Almost none of them are experienced in combat and Steve suspects that everyone, including those who usually spent their days at a desk, had been ordered to take up arms. If there was any opportunity to take out his rage at those that took Bucky from him, he does not find it standing over these men.)

"I'll take that earpiece back," Steve says, when the cops say they've got the rest under control and the scene is starting to crowd with curious onlookers, pressing against the yellow tape.

"Huh?" The kid cocks his head a little, and the big reflective black eyes in his mask look almost forlorn. "Come on, I did good! Can't we be crime-fighting bros?"

"That's not my call to make, son, and we've got a lot on our plates right now."

"Which is why you need more guys! You saw me, I'm really fast, I did that cool spinning jump off your shield which, I mean, write that on my gravestone, 'here lies Spider-Man, he did a jump off Captain America's shield once', and I can OOF." Iron Man has not even bothered to stop, simply swooping down and grabbing the kid around the middle to fly him back towards the Tower. "HEY! Easy! This suit's one-of-a-kind, dude!"

"You wanna be an Avenger? Awesome. Happy's back. You're gonna like him. He's my Head of Security. He's gonna have soooo much to talk about with you."

**

There's already a conference call started when Captain America makes it back to the Tower - Sam
is sprawled out on the couch, a dark purpling welt on his shoulder and his game face on despite his posture. Pepper is on one screen, seated next to a wealthy-looking black man with a cut over one eyebrow. Pepper is calm, but there's a bruise blooming on one collarbone. On the other screen, Black Widow is sitting at a desk and scrolling through a tablet, and behind her Hawkeye is bored, feet up on another desk and costume singed.

"Glad to see everyone's in one piece," Steve says. Sam rolls his eyes.

"Missed you too," Sam says, and gestures to the screens. "They've been catching me up. Pepper's at the Wakandan Embassy in London, and Black Widow's at the UN."

"What happened at the UN?"

"Nothing, officially." Natasha's not looking up from her electronic device. "The attacks on Pepper, Tony, and Sam were more or less a distraction to keep what's left of the Avengers and SHIELD distracted while they tried to raise hell in Geneva."

"And you two thwarted it," Steve says, looking at the two of them. More than ever he's impressed by how bored SHIELD agents (former SHIELD agents?) manage to look before, during, and after epic missions.

"In about ten minutes," Hawkeye says, and finally looks over at the screen, squinting at Sam. "New guy?"

"Falcon," Sam says.

Hawkeye makes a face as if to say, 'not bad.'

Steve tilts his head. "Why no attack on the Tower?"

"They can't begin to even try right now. Waiting until as many of us were out in the open was intentional... they may have also been hoping that activating the asset might have taken care of anyone inside."

"We can start, I'm here." Tony strolls in, plunking down on the couch next to Sam and kicking his feet up onto the coffee table. "War Machine's busy doing something governmenty on a German airbase but he says he's available to fly over here in the next hour if we need him."

"Tell him we'll rendezvous in Italy," Natasha says, tapping something out on her tablet. "I'll send him the details in a second. Pepper, you should get home on the next flight. Stark Tower's still the most secure option right now."

"And myself?" President T'Challa says. His voice is deep and calm. "I can be on the next flight to Italy if I could prove useful."

Natasha's eyes flicker up and meet Pepper's, and there's a two-second pause before she looks down at the tablet. "Florence," she says. "Don't worry about finding us. Hawkeye will meet you at the airport as soon as you land. Bring your workout gear if you've got it."

T'Challa nods, and so does Pepper. "I'll see you soon," she says to Tony.

"Be safe and don't start fires on planes." Tony gives her a little wave, but his eyes say something more serious.

The first screen clicks off, and Jarvis immediately pipes in: "Sirs, Sergeant Barnes is collecting
himself on the roof. I do not predict any issues, but-

"I told you to tell me if he left the living quarters, right." Tony waves it away.

Natasha sets the tablet down and looks up. "Sam, you and Happy are alright?"

"The car is not alright," Sam emphasizes, "but we are both fine."

Natasha nods. "Steve, Tony. The pictures coming from New York have a third man in the fight."

"His name is Peter Parker and he's super annoying," Tony rolls his eyes. "Happy has him right now. He wants to help but he's like twelve."

Steve cant his head. "It's been a while since I was in school, but a college sophomore is about nineteen, right?"

Natasha holds Steve's gaze a moment. "What do you think of him?"

Steve tilts his chin up. "His fighting skills are unrefined, but he's strong. Fast. I don't know what he's been pumped with, but he's got some superhuman abilities. I saw him stand on a wall and dodge a bullet that wasn't fired yet."

"Stand on a wall?" Tony squints.

Steve makes a "V" with two fingers and 'stands' his hand perpendicularly on the wall to his right, demonstrating, and Tony makes a face.

"That's not a superpower, that's a party trick."

"Says the badass normal," Sam remarks calmly. Tony shoots him a glare.

"Steve?" Natasha prompts.

"Parker's useful. He wants to help. He's not a threat."

Tony sighs. "We're still on the lookout for Hydra plants."

"Forgive me if this is blunt, but when I'm looking for undercover Nazi cult members, I'm not looking for African Americans."

Sam makes an amused snorting sound that Tony ignores. Steve crosses his arms, and finally Tony scrubs a hand through his hair, gesturing in the air and pulling up a blank screen in the air. "Jarvis, pull up Hogan."

The screen displays a room that looks not unlike an interrogation room, with one door and two chairs separated by a small table. Happy is leaning back, arms tight over his chest, and a young man in a costume is tapping his fingers rhythmically on the table. The silence is awkward at best.

"What's the spider on his chest mean?" Sam asks.

"Maybe he lays eggs," Tony says brightly.

Natasha rolls her eyes. "Cut him loose. We'll have Hawkeye, War Machine, and T'Challa investigating a lead in southern Europe by tomorrow. Tony, can you send the Jarvis suit prototype?"
"The what now?"

"Don't bother pretending."

"What's the Jarvis suit prototype?" Steve is interested.


Sam makes an intrigued noise.

"If it's ready, send it over." Natasha leans back in her chair, slapping Hawkeye lightly on the arm and gesturing out the door. He gets to his feet and goes to check something out. "That'll give us four."

"Five, counting you," Steve says.

"I'm getting on a flight to New York after this call. Tony, let the kid go, figure out how good those predictive responses are. By asking, not by testing," she adds, noticing his somewhat devilish expression.

"You know, I remember when I kind of ran this motley crew," Tony says almost wistfully.

Natasha ignores him. "The UN stunt was amateur at best and that worries me." She turns around and nods as Hawkeye reenters the room, blood that is not his coating one arm. He gives an 'all-clear' gesture. "No surviving major players were involved. They've likely gone further underground to work on something bigger."

Sam sits up a bit. "How long do we have with our ice packs before we get to expect more fun?"

"The party's in Europe, boys. Stay put and guard the asset. I'm coming to help Steve as much as possible with the recovery process. You, Iron Man, and the new kid should be more than enough to hold off any attempts on the Tower or the city."

Sam and Steve just nod, and Tony appears stunned into silence, so Natasha's screen clicks off and they're left with a moment of silence.

"Seriously," Tony says, "when did she start running this?"

"You're complaining?" Sam shrugs and gets to his feet, wandering to the window. "God, I'm exhausted. I'm in Stark Tower and I'm too tired to look for the Playboy bunnies or the infinity pools."

"Jarvis, tell Happy to let Spiderkid go home." Tony gets up too, swinging an arm around his shoulders. "The bunnies? Pepper kicked the bunnies out ages ago. C'mon, Wilson. I'll show you the pool."

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious about my headcanon fancasting, here's Peter and here's T'Challa.

And if you're wondering where Bucky is, hang on, I haven't forgotten about him. This
is still a feels fic.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Much love to everyone hitting the Kudos and Comment buttons, and to everyone reaching out to me on my tumblr. It continues to warm the cockles of my cold, black, immortal heart.

Steve changes out of his costume, returning to the bedroom on mental autopilot before remembering that Jarvis said Bucky wasn't there.

"Um, Jarvis," he says. "Does the elevator go as far as the roof?"

"Yes, sir. Speaking of Sergeant Barnes, I wonder if I might show you some live footage?"

Steve pauses, conflicted - having an intelligent computer keep an eye on his friend is one thing, but if he's looking without permission, without Bucky even being aware of it, that sounds a lot like spying. "I'm not sure I'd be comfortable doing that," he says finally, "unless there's - is he alright?"

"Yes, sir. He is simply about to encounter the newest member of the team, if Mr. Parker's trajectory continues."

"What? Show me."

A screen appears in front of him - it is split into quadrants, each camera focused on a figure that is crawling up the side of the building, left palm flat but somehow gaining purchase anyway. His right hand is pressed against his right ear in the gesture Steve has come to know means he must be using a mobile phone.

"No no, I - turn the tv off, Aunt May, I promise, I promise it - no, Mr. Stark got me out fine. I know it looks scary. Mr. Stark whipped out an Iron Man suit and blasted them all, I'm totally fine, not a scratch, I just gotta fill out some more disclaimers or release forms or whatever, they're gonna let me go here pretty soon, okay? Promise you'll turn the tv off?"

He does sound young, Steve realizes, thinking back to what Tony said. Two more screens appear suddenly to the right, showing Bucky leaning against the short concrete wall that borders the roof and looking out over the city. He's still wearing the t-shirt and hoodie, but has at least thrown on jeans and boots, even if they aren't laced. Steve watches the Bucky feeds and then the boy's feeds, seeing where this is going.

"Yeah. Yes. Yes ma'am. No, I won't. Yes, of course I thanked him. I'm gonna get a picture from the top of Stark Tower before I leave, it'll be good for the report, that's the last thing, then I'm coming straight home. What? No, we threw that out because it got fuzzy. I'll make us something when I get there. Do we still have some turkey?"

On the Bucky screens, Steve sees the man straighten somewhat, head tilting toward the sound and finally deciding to move toward it, not away. The boy, oblivious, climbing up the last fifty yards or so, raising his voice as the wind picks up.

you too! Jeez. Bye."

He tucks the phone away into a pocket somewhere, scrambles over the ledge onto the roof, and Steve stares at Bucky's stance, trying to decide if he needs to stop this from happening, if Bucky's going to mistake the situation, but to Bucky's credit he looks like he's deciding too, sizing up the masked figure that's landed a few meters from him and is rising to his feet, double-taking as he notices Barnes.

"Oh my GOD?"

"What are you doing up here?"

"Are you - you look just like -"

Bucky holds still, still sizing the boy up, and as he does the kid's hands to turn to fists, rising up to cover his mouth - Steve recognizes this pose. He still gets it when certain people recognize him.

"Dude, are you BUCKY BARNES?"

Bucky cants his head. The long pause that stretches seems to deflate the kid's enthusiasm somewhat. "You were at the fight downtown."

"Y-yeah. I guess you were watching tv too, huh?"

"The computer showed it on the wall of my room." Steve recognizes the way Bucky works his lip between his teeth. It means he's concentrating, trying to get something right. "You're one of Stark's friends?"

"Yeah, totally, I- I'm- I'm sorry, dude, can we get back to the part where you're not dead!? I mean, I knew Tony Stark had all sorts of cool stuff around, but, wait, were you frozen with Steve Rogers?"

Bucky's smile is empty. "I was frozen somewhere else."

"Wowwww." Spider-Man stares at him a minute, stuck in place, before shaking his head as if to clear it and sticking a hand out. "Um, it's, it's really cool to meet you. I'm a big fan. I wrote a paper about you in high school."

"A paper?" Bucky actually looks like he might laugh, and even takes the hand to shake. "What about?"

"About everything I could find from as many original sources as I could get my hands, on, man, I-" Spider-Man flings his hands in the air, suddenly animated. "I mean, I needed, like, a thesis, and history's never been my super strongest suit? But I put together an argument that you were a key player in winning the war and the more I looked up reports the longer the paper got. You were awesome."

"I was just another soldier."

"Steve Rogers had a list of chronic illnesses longer than my arm and you looked out for him when you were kids!" He begins to gesture wildly, not noticing that Bucky has turned away from him slightly. "And then Rogers got stuck doing the war bonds circuit, and the thing that propelled him into becoming a real soldier? Was when he heard you were in trouble. If you hadn't gotten captured he'd have never stolen a helmet and dropped out of a plane, he never woulda freed you and all the other POWs, the future Howling Commandos, he never would've accidentally found
one of the biggest armor and weapons depots that Red Skull had, and, you know, also blown it up, which, big help to the war effort..." Spider-Man laughs in a way that could be categorized as a snort. "And then you helped him get a bunch of other dudes together to run around Europe blowing up Nazi stuff. You are totally awesome."

Bucky doesn't say anything, blinking rapidly and looking twitchy enough that the kid can't help but notice.

"Are you... okay?"

"Yeah, I'm. I haven't been back for long."

"Oh, wow. Jeez. Is it still 1945 in your head? I mean, do I need to explain reality tv and texting and stuff?"

"I just, um." Bucky scrubs at his face and starts looking for the exit. "Don't mention you saw me, okay?"

"O-okay," Spider-Man says, and Steve is relieved to find that he actually believes the kid. "Well, I'll let you get back to your, um, your brooding, I just." He fishes his phone back out, pushing some buttons and then holding it up to take a picture of the skyscrapers. "Just had to get a picture while I was here, so I'll, I'll see you around, maybe." He backs up a little, waving awkwardly, stretching one arm out toward a nearby tower. A white line appears from nowhere, ejecting from what appears to be his wrist and connecting him to the corner of the structure half a block away. He hops up onto the top of the wall, leaning down and beginning to swing away as if he were Tarzan.

"I had a lunchbox with your face on it!" He yells, a last-minute confession, before disappearing into the distance.

**

Steve had forgotten that someone had bashed the butt of their gun into his face until Bucky walks in, eyes narrowing in on it immediately.

"I'm okay," Steve says quickly, raising a hand. "It only stings, it's nothing."

Bucky sucks in an impatient breath but he nods, turning away and walking toward the bedroom window. Steve gets the feeling he went to the roof for some feeling of space and wasn't happy that he had that time interrupted.

"I - Jarvis showed me what happened on the roof," Steve says, not wanting to hide anything from him. "You running into our new guy."

"He's just a kid."

"We were just kids, when we started fighting."

"Yeah, that didn't go too good." Bucky rubs at his eyes with the heel of his hands, and the motion slowly turns into him pressing his palms to the sides of his head. "God. Steve, I don't. Nothing feels right."

"What do you mean?"

"First I feel like I'm not supposed to - like I don't belong here, like I'm supposed to be in Brooklyn, like the bruise on your face means I should be getting some ice, making sure it doesn't swell up,
and then I look outside and I feel like I'm supposed to be in... in Hong Kong..." He leans his forehead against the glass. "I don't know what I did in Hong Kong, but I sure wasn't with you, so I'm betting it was bad."

Steve doesn't know what to say for a while. "The kid's right, you know. About everything you did. Helping me, working with the Howling Commandos." Silence. "You were a good person. You are a good person."

"It didn't sound like me."

"Well, I doubt there was any original source on how badly you sang when you were drunk, or the stupid jokes you used to tell me when I was too sick to get out of bed." Those things are so important, he wants to tell him.

A beat. "I. I threw up, earlier." Bucky actually sounds a little embarrassed. "Stark talking about everything, about how they used to..."

"It's okay to be in shock, Bucky. A lot's happened."

"A lot's happened and it's starting to. To come together, but it's too much. It's like waking up and remembering your dream, except the dream's longer than your whole life."

Steve thinks about this, looking at Bucky and almost hoping the other man will step into his space again so Steve can hug him. "Is there anything I can do?" He edits himself quickly: "I know I can't fix everything, Buck, but I, if I can help, if I can..." He holds his hands out, palms up. Bucky peels himself away from the window, sitting on the bed and then turning to lie down on it. Another nap?

"Can we have food again later?" Bucky asks quietly, in what has to be the vaguest and most heartfelt request Steve has ever heard in his life.
Chapter 21

Bucky seems alright with the idea of sleeping alone this time, so Steve goes to the second door across the hall. Just as suspected, he hears the shower running - Tony put Sam in the apartment nearest to Bucky's and Steve's as possible.

Steve lets himself in, walking past the two suitcases, the duffel bag, and, he is touched to find, a framed picture of a large extended family which has already been unpacked and placed on the dresser. Steve knocks on the bathroom door.

"Sam?" He calls.

"Let a wounded man rinse off!"

"Then those burgers I owe you?"

"Yes." Steve can't help but chuckle a little at the enthusiasm in Sam's voice. "Steve, man, you got nice friends."

Steve knows he's talking about Tony. "You took in Natasha and me, and that was when people were trying to find and kill us."

"Yeah, but my place didn't have all these shower settings." The water turns off. "Actually, I'm pretty sure I could fit most of my house in this bathroom."

**

The walk is badly needed. He's anxious about leaving Bucky alone, but it's not like Jarvis doesn't have his phone number if something goes wrong, and the restaurant isn't far. The sun's already fallen well behind the skyscrapers, and the not-quite-panic from the shootout hasn't died down yet. It's too dark and too hectic for Steve to have to worry about getting recognized. The baseball cap is more than enough.

Sam frowns. "Real talk for a second?"

Steve looks over, eyebrow quirked.

"You look like shit."

Steve laughs. "Yeah, I, uh. It's been a tough couple of days."

"I mean, you looked bad before you even found him," and Sam gestures, Steve is disappointed to find, not to his ribs or another spot that was still healing up, but to his face, "but now? Are you two doing okay?"

"He's," Steve starts, and then realizes he doesn't know how to finish the sentence. "When I found him in my apartment, I don't think he'd eaten in a few days, he couldn't... he didn't know how to act like a person."

"But did he know how to act like something that didn't shoot you?"

"No, he's never - he's never tried to hurt me. Or anyone," he adds quickly, because he doesn't think even Tony would count the time Bucky separated him from Steve in the lab as violence.
Sam nods and stops at the corner of the street, reaching out to grab Steve's arm as he sees Steve hasn't noticed the walk signal ended a while ago. Steve makes an embarrassed noise. "That's good, at least."

"But he's having to relearn so many things... how to take care of himself, how to ask for things, how to sleep. He's asleep right now. Two naps in one day after sleeping in late."

"He could be ninety-something, or he could be a teenager, got it."

"Jarivs doesn't seem to bother him like it did me, when I was, you know, 'new'. But he nearly lost it when Tony tried to perform a brain scan, and the more I think about what Tony was saying about his brain, the more I think that whatever machine they used to... to erase his memories... Bucky must have been reminded of it and just," Steve gestures unhelpfully.

"Yeah, Tony mentioned some pink paint and Hello Kitty stickers involved in the redesign." Sam sighs. "Listen, you're gonna hate me for this, but be grateful he's sleeping. Even if he gets nightmares. You don't wanna see the people who can't sleep and can't eat when stuff happens to them, man. They get worn thin fast."

"Oh, he eats." Steve laughs. "I think the bath and the huge breakfast were the most normal he's felt in a while."

"Probably because there weren't any baths or breakfasts back when he was treated like a machine. Boring human stuff is probably a really good idea right now." They reach the restaurant, and Sam waits as Steve holds the door for several women with children in tow. "What happened to low-profile? You're supposed to be a regular guy right now."

"I don't care what you say, I've seen other people do this." Steve spots a straggler with a sleeping toddler slung over her shoulder and leans back, continuing to hold it open. "I've seen you do this."

"Only because you were making me look so bad." They walk in and get in line to order.

**

When Bucky is sixteen he finds Steve getting beaten half to death in alley. It's worse than usual - he isn't getting a chance to get up, curled up around himself and trying to protect his chest as the other boy kicks him in the gut again, again, again. The boy standing over him is worse than angry, he's laughing, delighted, like a beast who has caught a wounded bird.

Bucky doesn't remember all of it, but he remembers his fingers curled around the boy's neck, slamming him into the brick wall to the left and then burying his fist in the already-bleeding face. He remembers the sound of the breath leaving the boy's body as Bucky uses all his weight to drive his knee into the boy's stomach as he collapses, pinning him against the wall and making him choke on the bile that was already coming up. It is more brutal than he normally is, but he's never seen Steve so broken before, and nothing else will do.

"Stop," Steve yells, breath rattling, and Bucky stops. Steve's face is purple and red and terrible, and when he gets him home and looks him over, his stomach and prominent ribs all match, and the sight of it physically pains Bucky. Worse is the way Steve is looking at him, disappointed, like Bucky hurt him worse than the bully did, and Bucky can't look him in the eye for

Later when Bucky is a little older he goes steady with Marla, not for long, but long enough to learn what she likes and to learn he enjoys giving it to her. She has dark hair in soft bouncy curls and a wicked smile, one of those dames that's too smart not to get bored quick. He never gets to take her
to his place but her apartment is nice, right by the college and she never lets him stay long, which is well enough because if he stays overnight he never gets any sleep, worrying about Steve back at the

Later the money isn't there and the war is looming, an inevitability like death, and some part of him knows that even if he doesn't get drafted he's probably going to sign up, probably go willingly for the money and for the escape, because there is never enough money at the docks or at the yards or anywhere and Steve isn't putting on any weight, and it feels like the longer it all goes on the more Bucky's resolve wears thin as he sees Steve's blue eyes and pink mouth and the delicate way he holds the charcoal, the way his voice carries from the next room when he asks Bucky what he wants for dinner

Later the tents are cold and there is always someone crying, always, and even when nobody can hear it they know, someone is weeping into their bedroll and praying for escape or death or anything that seems even a little possible, so never peace, they just want

Later he wakes up and Steve's jaw is broad like a boxer's, standing over him, smudged with dirt and Bucky says his name and

Later there's white everywhere and he can't feel his arm and he's staring up at

Later the room is dark and he's screaming

**

Steve opens the door and smacks the wall as hard as he can without breaking it, desperate to wake Bucky up without touching him, but it doesn't work. "Bucky, wake up." Bucky is on top of the sheets, thrashing, muttering under his breath and Steve can't bear to see it, so he crawls over and takes both hands in his, squeezing them and saying his name over and over:


Bucky pulls his hands free but sits up, eyes wild and terrified, even when he sees Steve and recognition lights in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Bucky croaks, and whether it's for having a nightmare or something he remembered doing, something he dreamt he did, Steve doesn't care.

"It's okay. I'm not angry. Come here."

Bucky doesn't hesitate, practically pushing himself into Steve's body and burying his face in the crook of Steve's shoulder. He's shaking, breathing deeply.

"It's okay. You're okay. I'm back, see? Jarvis told me you were having a nightmare. I came back."

Bucky isn't hugging him back but he's not pulling away either. He's so close, his smell so familiar. Steve rubs circles into his back.

"You're out of breath," Bucky observes, lips moving against the fabric of Steve's shirt.

Steve huffs out a laugh. "I ran here."

"You smell like food," Bucky adds, and the trembling stops. "Is there - can I-"

"Bucky, you can have as much food as you want, whenever you want. " Steve holds him tighter.
"And you can sleep whenever you want, and - and I'll talk to Tony, I'll get you a cell phone."

"What for?"

"To call me. If I'm not there."

"Oh."

There's a knock on the door, and Steve looks down, ready to disentangle himself, but Bucky snakes a hand around his bicep when he begins to pull away.

"Just a minute," Steve calls, unwilling to force the moment to end. Bucky squirms even closer, seeking out as much physical comfort as possible, and when he topples Steve over onto his side Steve just gives an 'oof' and allows it. Bucky feels warm. All the soft parts of him are gone, his waist and back now nothing but muscle, but he feels frail at the same time. When Bucky twists their legs together Steve has to remind himself what this means and what it doesn't.

"That's probably my friend Sam," Steve says, coming up with a strategy. "I left him with the bags of food when I came here."

There's a long pause, but the hunger wins out - Bucky tugs away just enough to look at Steve and say, very carefully, "Our food?"

Steve laughs and sits up. "You can have some, but promise to be nice to Sam, okay?" His hands feel empty now that they aren't touching Bucky. That's something he's going to have to learn to live with. "He, um, he was with me on the day with the helicarriers."

Bucky works his lip between his teeth. "Is it alright if I don't remember him?"

"Of course." Steve gets to his feet, straightening his shirt down from where it began to ride up on the side, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Bucky watching him and then mimicking the movement. When they get to the dining room, Sam is plating food, one mini cheeseburger already in his mouth as he tips a large brown bag of french fries onto a plate.

"Mmph," Sam greets, and Steve goes to the refrigerator to find some drinks - one beer, two Cokes. He pops the cap on the beer and hands it to Sam before sitting down and passing one of the cans to Bucky. There's a small flicker of recognition in his eyes as he studies the can.

"Sam, this is Bucky," Steve says calmly, as if this is completely normal. "Bucky, this is Sam Wilson. He's a new friend of mine."

Bucky doesn't say anything, eyeing Sam cautiously and waiting, Steve notes, until Sam sits down before tipping half of the platter of fries onto the plate in front of him.

Sam looks over at Steve. "Well." Steve tries not to look nervous. "I can see why you insisted on enough food for six."
Bucky eats, but it's in silence. He looks up at Sam when he thinks the other man is too preoccupied to notice, pouring more ketchup or getting his second beer. When Sam catches him at it, he says calmly,

"I had big wings last time you saw me. You broke them. I was also shooting at you, though, so we're, like, even." How Sam manages to say that in such an off-hand and almost soothing way eludes Steve.

Bucky takes a deep breath, preparing himself, and says: "I'm sorry I ripped your wing out."

Sam's eyebrows shoot up as if he wasn't expecting even the first two words, let alone what could be classified as a complete sentence, but he just nods and returns to the table with the new beer, grabbing another burger and beginning to unwrap it from the foil. "'Okay. They were on me like a backpack, you know that, right? Not," and he jerks a thumb over his shoulder to his back, and Bucky's eyes widen, like he just figured out that Sam didn't used to have wings surgically attached to his spine somehow.

"Oh."

"Yeah, that wouldn't hurt a lot more."

They continue eating in silence. The phone ringing is actually hugely welcome.

"Hi Pepper," Steve says.

"Hello, Steve." Her voice is warm. She always liked him, Steve thought, in the same way that Bucky's mom used to like him because she thought he would keep her son out of trouble. "I'm back stateside and on my way to the Tower. Could you and your friend meet with me? I have some teleconferences lined up."

"Teleconferences?"

"Tony's done what he can as far as helping out, and now it's my turn. Can you be on floor 32 in twenty-five minutes?"

**

Floor 32 turns out to be meeting rooms, and Pepper's picked out one of the more intimate ones, with a wet bar and several comfortable armchairs directed at a wall of screens. There's a plate of cookies from a nearby delicatessen, and the smell of it draws Bucky in immediately, glancing quickly at Steve for wordless permission before picking one out and trying it. Tony's brilliant, but Pepper is the true genius.

The next half hour is a blur. Steve signs paperwork allowing him to make medical decisions for Bucky. Bucky signs it too. Steve asks Pepper how any of this works when Bucky is legally dead, and Pepper smiles in a way that reminds him that, in her field, she can do absolutely anything.

Three specialists appear on the screens, each one speaking first to Bucky and then to Steve about everything they know in turn. They ask Bucky if he likes where he is, if he would like to stay there, and if he has any goals for his health. Yes, yes please, no. Is his new arm okay? Yes.
When Bucky's eyes glaze over a little and he begins focusing on a spot in the corner, the doctors don't seem to mind, nor are they surprised - they direct their attention to Steve, who is battling the overwhelming feeling of being out of his depth and the feeling of being completely, one hundred percent indebted to Pepper, who seems to have rounded up three people with clearances high enough to allow them to so much as look at Bucky in the first place. They tell him Bucky's DNA is similar to his, but it isn't like his, not really. Being strong and fast and in peak physical health are relatively simple compared to what else the serum does. One of the doctors has written several books on Erskine's work and the attempts at replicating it that followed, and says that Bucky will need to be studied closely.

Bucky doesn't look like he loves the sound of that, so Steve picks up a cookie, pretending to intend to eat it, so he can subtly nudge the plate closer to Bucky. Steve asks if they'll walk Bucky through everything and always ask his permission before doing anything, knowing the answer already, and they say of course.

They ask Bucky if he has any questions, but he turns to Steve immediately, deferring. Steve asks if they'll always teleconference, and they say of course, and if they need Tony to get anything else in the way of medical equipment, and Pepper interrupts to say it's all already ordered, and the woman who specializes in TBIs and POWs says that she is currently in another time zone but has a number she encourages Bucky or Steve to call should they need her. Pepper mentions that all their numbers are already programmed into Bucky's new phone, and she has written them out for Steve as well.

When the teleconference is over, Pepper pulls six 8x11 headshots of Captain America out from the bottom of her papers and hands Steve the stack, plus a black marker. She calmly recites the how to spell the names of the specialists' children, who will all apparently be overjoyed when she mails these.

"I'm paying Bucky's doctors, don't get me wrong." Pepper's mouth curves into a smile. "But promising these is what cinched the deal."

**

Bucky announces that he's going to take a shower, and Steve nods, pretending to be interested in his sketchbook and the notes Pepper gave him. Bucky moves hesitantly around the bathroom, fiddling with the knobs until he gets it right. Steve figures it's taking so long half because he hasn't had to do this in over half a century and half because their tubs never looked anything like this. When the water starts and finally comes out of the shower head, Bucky shuts the bathroom door and Steve finally exhales a grateful sigh. If he had to do a repeat performance of the bath, he might die.

The notes Pepper took include things he doesn't remember talking about, like the importance of routine and introducing him to new things in small steps. Giving him breaks from new things when he needs it. Not introducing him to too many people or doing activities that require him to juggle too many thoughts at once. In the margin, with perfect neat handwriting, Pepper has drawn an arrow to the note on breaks and added 'prerecorded baseball' and 'ask Jarvis about cloud'. Steve does indeed ask about a cloud, and Jarvis explains that Ms. Potts was referring to his collection of music, which can be accessed and played from anywhere Jarvis is.

"I have an impressive collection of music ranging from the 1930s to the 1950s which you have previously expressed interest in," Jarvis says, and Bing Crosby begins playing in the background. Only Forever. "I can of course accommodate specific requests as well."

"Thank you." Steve looks down at his blank page, thinking. It used to be that he got away from this kind of technology whenever possible, finding it unnecessary to the extreme, but now that it's
aimed at the purpose of helping Bucky, Steve is... seeing it in a different light.

Steve finds a tablet in the desk drawer and pulls up eBay, deciding to order a phonograph and some records. Some they'd owned, some they'd always wanted. Jarvis is a gift, but some tangible things would be nice, too. Jarvis doesn't seem offended and mentions a few music stores in the area that still sell 'vinyl'.

Artie Shaw is playing when Bucky comes out of the shower, towel around his waist and hair haphazardly dried off. Steve pointedly begins making random lines in his sketchbook, deciding on capturing the desk in the corner, while Bucky gets dressed. When Steve steals a glance - just at his face, pointedly just his face - Bucky looks lost in thought.

**

Europe felt like a lifetime. When Steve rescued him and they teamed up to chase Nazis around the map, the days blurred together, Italy looking like Austria looking like France. The cities had their own specific charms, even though everyone was the same kind of scared and the same kind of worn thin, but they were always in the forests, taking backroads, huddled together against bad weather and telling stories in as many languages as they could cobble together between them. Bucky remembers teaching Steve a little French. Gabe sang sometimes, a bit of blues and whatever they picked up from the villages or the radio. Bucky was following Steve, but after the third week he had to grudgingly admit that he'd gone soft - that he wanted them all to live through this. That it was important to him.

Befriending the others meant spending more time away from Steve, which was probably good. Steve had really stepped up to his crazy reputation, leading the way and calling the shots and winning the fights. Bucky had always fantasized about some magical way to make Steve well, to fix his bad chest that threatened his life every winter with wracking coughs, and here Steve was, damn near invincible and ten stories tall and winning the war he'd been dead set on fighting in.

Bucky hated it. Steve's traded one kind of risk for another. He was strong, but bullets were bullets, and one day one was going to bring him down. Bucky couldn't think about what it would be like if he were there to see it.

"Make room," Bucky muttered one night, and shifted until his bedroll was up against Steve's. They were near Switzerland.

"Mmm?" Steve shifted under the blanket, a massive sillhouette that still made some part of Bucky's brain feel off-kilter. Like everything was inverted.

"Cold," Bucky lied, and threw an arm over Steve's side, pulling in tightly, silently pretending he's doing this for Steve. That he was still needed.

**

Steve gets up to leave when he sees Bucky crawling into bed, but then Bucky reaches out with awkward prosthetic fingers to grab the sheets on the nearer side, turning them down. Steve looks at the bed and then Bucky, who is staring downwards.

"Cold," Bucky says curtly, and then rolls over to face away from Steve, refusing to say anything else.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

1) I love all of you guys. Your support continues to make me so, so happy.

2) This is ultimately a Steve/Bucky fic, but please stay tuned while the management works through the necessary Bucky/Food ship that must be addressed first. The lure of noms cannot be denied.

3) I had some apprehension about my Peter Parker character and how he'd be received, and I am very happily surprised by the reactions to him. Have I mentioned I love all of you?

4) This chapter includes detailed content involving panic attacks, dealing with sexuality, and 'out'ness. Possibly triggery.

Bucky initially started crawling into Steve's bed when Steve was literally too cold to fall asleep. He stayed over a few times when they were kids, yes, but it was different somehow when they were living together and the wind was loud and persistent outside, and every time the gales lulled, Steve knew Bucky could hear his raspy, uneven breaths, knew Bucky knew he was still awake and miserable.

"You gotta rest," Bucky had muttered, and gotten up, stripping his bed of every last blanket and piling them onto Steve. It was still a meager collection, but it was better, and Steve was about to ask how Bucky was going to fall asleep just lying on top of a mattress when he felt a second pillow pushing his over, and Bucky got in, huge and warm and a solid weight pressing against his left side. After a moment of fussing, Bucky pushed on Steve's shoulder until he was on his side, and Steve tried not to feel overwhelmed as Bucky's chest pressed tight against his back. Bucky was so warm. Steve forced himself to hold still, not to speak for fear of saying something stupid, something that would make Bucky leave or decide to never do this again.

**

The first few times Steve hears the knocking, he sighs and turns over, going back to sleep. Then his phone chirps, which he also doesn't feel like investigating. He rolls over again, stretching one arm out as he does so and feeling it connect with something firm and warm. He makes a quiet contented noise and rolls closer to it, nose pressed against sleep-warm cotton. This is better. This is much better.

"Captain Rogers," Jarvis says very, very quietly, "Mr. Wilson is waiting for you in the hallway."

"Mm?" Steve sucks in a deep breath and is pleasantly surprised at how good something smells - something familiar and soothing, like home. It shifts underneath his arm and he tightens his grip a little, encouraging it to stay.

"Captain Rogers." The way Jarvis says his name somehow manages to, in all its robotic smoothness, convey the importance that Steve realize that he is not sleeping in his own room right now.
"Oh! Oh." Steve sits up in a flash and looks down at Bucky, who is wrapped tightly in layers of blankets. His face is slack and partially covered by his hair - wasn't he a light sleeper? Maybe not always? "Okay, tell him - um -"

"Yes, sir."

Steve moves off the bed as gently as he can, trying not to disturb Bucky, and opens the door, slipping through it and shutting it behind him before looking at Sam's face.

As it turns out, Sam is standing there in a jogging outfit, one eyebrow quirked.

"Sam, I-"

Sam points across the hall at what is technically Steve's room. "Get dressed," he says, more sharply than Steve thinks he's ever heard him, and Steve decides it's best to follow the order and give himself some time to collect his thoughts. He already has some idea of what Sam is thinking about and it's making a rock form in his stomach. When Steve comes out with shorts and a clean t-shirt, Sam nods, walking toward the elevators and then saying "Jarvis, lock it" before Steve can ask where they're going.

"Steve, I like you."

"Sam?"

"Not like-you like-you. What I mean, for clarity, is I think you're an inhumanly good guy."

"Thank... you?"

"But Steve. I wake up this morning, I ask the computer, 'Hey, Jamie or whatever your name is, where's Steve's room?' And he tells me it's the one next to mine but that you're across the hall, and you come out with your hair as messed up as it gets and eyes all huge, so man, I gotta make sure." Sam pauses but Steve can sense he's not done yet, and Sam's not, because he steps closer and says, "Tell me you're not doing things he's not ready to do just yet."

Steve feels like he wants to die. This is the worst conversation he's ever had and it is miles too close to a truth he hasn't ever, ever been ready to share with anyone. "I know - I know what you're driving at, and no, I would never. He wants someone nearby, I think, so that's all it is. I wouldn't take advantage of someone who, who isn't quite themselves."

"Good."

"And he," and Steve takes a deep breath, trying desperately to think of a way to explain this so that it will never have to be discussed again, "Bucky, he's, he's not like that. He wouldn't. Even be interested. In." And Steve gestures as vaguely as possible, realizing too soon that only mentioning Bucky's lack of interest has implicated him by omission and his heart drops as he sees that it's too late to revise his wording, because something is dawning on Sam's face and Steve can't undo it.

"Steve."

"I'd never, ever-"

"Steve."

Steve needs the last two minutes to turn back. He needs to have said something different. He hates lying and he's always skated by with a combination of careful wording and only saying as much as
he has to, but he's too frayed and everything is falling apart. He turns to the elevator buttons as if he can pick out a place to escape to and feels Sam's hand on his arm.

"Steve, Jesus man, breathe." The tightness in Sam's voice has been replaced with something else. "You look like you're gonna pass out. You remember you're not in 1945, right? Things have changed."

"I haven't changed," Steve hisses, and the panic rising in him starts to form itself into words for the first time, never having had the opportunity or the need until now. "He hasn't changed. This isn't okay."

"Because he's not himself right now, or because he's him?"

"Both."

"Steve, I am serious about the breathing thing. I know you don't have asthma anymore but-" Sam cuts himself off and just pushes at Steve's shoulders, insisting until Steve lets himself slide down the wall until he's sitting. His chest feels tight as if it's being compressed from the outside and ready to burst from the inside all at once. Bucky. He's been so careful his whole life. He couldn't bear to lose him. Bucky. Bucky.

"Sam, you can't tell anyone." This has been one of his most important jobs for so much of his life. Keeping this contained, keeping it from being an issue, working around it every day of his life. He's feeling it slip out of his fingers and the weight of it isn't lifted, it's crushing him.

"I won't do that, I promise. Outing someone is like the tackiest thing you can do in the twenty-first century." Sam laughs weakly, kneeling down next to him and holding his shoulder to ground him. It's working, a little. "Let's go over the facts, okay?"

"Let's not."

"You really care about Bucky."

"Sam, don't." His throat feels so tight he's surprised the words come out.

"You've always cared about Bucky."

"Sam."

"Bucky doesn't know."

"Bucky can't ever know." Steve sucks in a breath and forces himself to look Sam in the eyes, to show him how serious this is, no matter how much he wants to disappear right now. "I just got him back, and he's scared and confused and I - I need to be there for him, he needs me, I can't have him worrying that I'm not the man he remembers. Or that he can't trust me."

Sam is silent for a while, finally turning and kicking his feet out, joining Steve on the elevator floor. Steve can feel his strange breaths filling the small space and tries to get his head together. He can remember every single word they used to use for people like him, the unrepeatable ones. Sam might come from a time that's evolving beyond that, but Steve grew up so, so long ago, and he knows Bucky did too. If Bucky ever suspected. If Bucky ever knew.

"Jarvis," Sam tips his head back against the elevator wall. "Can we get some fresh air?"

"Of course, sir." Steve feels the gentle rise underneath him as they're brought up to the roof. The
doors slide open to allow them out, but Sam doesn't move, and doesn't make any indication that Steve has to, either. The morning sunlight reaches in just far enough to touch Steve's bare calves, Sam's sneakers, and the air feels thin and cool. Steve can't look Sam in the face, so he stares out at what he can see of the skyline, silent.

**

"You ready to go downstairs yet?"

"No."

"It's been ten minutes. I think Nat's gonna meet up with us for breakfast."

"Another couple minutes, please."

"Sure, man."

"..."

"How's he doing?"

"Pepper assigned him doctors. They seem good."

"He remembering more?"

"Parts of Brooklyn, parts of the war. Not much else yet."

"He's got the important parts. He definitely knows you."

**

The breakfast spread is half demolished when they get there. Bucky is sitting up very straight across from Natasha, who must have somehow convinced him it was okay to start without Steve - Bucky's plate is scraped clean, only the tiniest crumbs and smears of syrup remaining. To his right is an untouched plate stacked high with pancakes and thick pads of butter, peeled clementine slices, and cut strawberries. Natasha is serene, picking out grapes and berries one by one and tossing them into her mouth.

"Good morning, boys." Steve can tell from the way Natasha's right shoulder is tucked in that she's healing up from whatever happened in Geneva, but her expression is one of the few Steve can read with certainty - she's legitimately calm.

"Good morning," Steve says, taking the seat in front of the filled plate and picking up his fork. Bucky looks at him nervously and Steve makes sure to smile, demonstrating his appreciation for the thoughtfulness. Bucky relaxes a little.

"Good morning," Sam says, and whistles low at all the food. "Natasha, you didn't have to put all of this together for me. It's too much."

Natasha snorts and leans back in her chair, grabbing a peach and biting into it with a slow and deliberate sink of her teeth. Bucky watches Sam intently as the man pulls the bowl of sliced bananas toward him and begins to add them to his plate, but Steve waves it away and so Bucky says nothing.

"Bucky and I were just talking about when we met about a week ago," Natasha says, as if that event did not involve a garrote. "I was saying we should spend the day making each other's
acquaintances again, start fresh, just the two of us."

Steve glances to Bucky expecting a strained expression, some indication that Bucky doesn't want to be with a stranger and doesn't want to be away from Steve, but it's not there. Bucky's chin is tucked down but he's looking up at Natasha in brief measures, examining, and Steve doesn't get a chance to think of a polite way to say that it doesn't sound like a good idea.

"That sounds like a great idea," Sam is saying loudly, and reaches out in a very telegraphed movement to pat Bucky's shoulder. "Natasha's been working with Steve for a long time, Bucky, she's a real stand-up lady. You'll like her."

"She's very hard to kill," Bucky says, as if fishing for a way to continue the thread of the conversation and add a compliment, and looks like he immediately regrets his choice. Steve holds his breath and looks over at Natasha, but she's grinning, taking another bite from the peach, like this is exactly what she planned for today.
Tony Stark: Bucky's new arm is gonna be complicated if it's going to do everything the old one did, so expect that to take a while. If he starts fussing with the intermediary one he's got or says it's uncomfortable, tell me.

Steve Rogers: I will. Thank you.

Tony Stark: Sam's not answering his texts. Is he with you? Tell him I haven't started on his wings yet. Too much arm. Wings later.

Steve Rogers: Yes, he's with me. I'll tell him.

Tony Stark: How's he liking the Porsche?

Steve Rogers: Local traffic is keeping him from achieving anything past 20 mph, but he's enjoying it nonetheless.

Tony Stark: Okay. No picking up girls with my car. If I can't you can't.

**

Steve and Sam 'hit up' a CVS, as Sam puts it and Steve's not sure what they're there for until Sam gets a basket and immediately drops a small notebook into it, then a pack of pens.

"He needs to get caught up," Steve says, understanding.

"Same as you did," Sam chirps. "How'd you do it?"

"A lot of hand-holding on SHIELD's part," Steve admits, and glances around at the aisle of calculators and stationary, wondering what else could be included in this impromptu gift basket. "There were a lot of ad-hoc workshops and manuals. Coulson put a lot of it together. And sensitivity training! God, Sam, there are some words we used to use for - for African American people -"

Sam starts laughing.

"No, Sam, I'm serious. We should - I didn't even think of that. There are - he's not a bigot, he worked with everyone when he had jobs on the docks and never had a bad thing to say, but the, um,"

"The vocabulary was a little different?"

"Yes."

Sam is still laughing, and there's clearly something about the alarm on Steve's face that is making it funnier. "I got it, I got it. If Natasha doesn't cover that today, I'll, uh, I'll sit him down and explain some things."

Steve nods, appreciative, and wanders toward the hair care section. On a whim, he picks up some trimming scissors, then a comb. Sam makes a 'good idea' grunt and grabs a set of hair ties, putting them in as well.

"You think he'll keep it long?"
Sam shrugs. "You know him better'n me. Can't hurt though."

"At least get the black ones."

Sam huffs and puts the pink and yellow striped ones back, grabbing the black ones instead. Steve can tell it's an act to get him to relax, but he has to admit to himself it's working.

"So Barnes isn't a 'product of his time', then?" Sam does air quotes.

"Huh? He was never-" Steve rubs the back of his neck, tugging his baseball cap a little lower as a group of tourists pours in through the front doors. "Not everyone from my time agreed with how things were. I never heard him say anything about anyone. Obviously the words we used aren't, ah, kosher anymore, but if he didn't like someone, it was usually because they judged us for being poor, or because they were bashing my face in." He smiles. "Our apartment building had every kind of person. There was a Jewish family upstairs, an unwed mother next door - I mean, she said her husband died in the war, but everyone knew, nobody said anything."

Sam nods.

"And he got along fine with Morita," Steve adds, kneeling down at the candy aisle and looking for something that isn't too sweet. Candy's changed a lot. "Learned a bit of Japanese, I think, although Jim didn't actually speak that much himself."

"How'd he feel about gay peop-"

"I think peppermints should be good. The chocolate's too hit-and-miss nowadays, but peppermints should be fine." Steve tugs a small bag of them off the hook and adds them to the basket with a forcibly steady hand.

Sam follows behind him a few paces behind as he checks his phone, seeing if there's anything from Natasha or Jarvis, then moves on to the next aisle.

"What does he like?"

Steve hmms. "Dance halls. Swing dance. Brunettes. Blondes. Redheads. Let's just say women." He walks past the makeup to the deodorant, then remembers that toiletries are taken care of at the Tower. "Steak, the five or six times in his life he had it. Bourbon."

"What does he like now, I meant," and Sam brushes past him to get to the cold drinks, grabbing a Coke for Steve and a lemonade for himself.

"Oh. Oh. Um." Steve has to think longer. "Scented soap? Scented anything? Every kind of food he knows he's allowed to eat?"

"Smells, foods, okay."

"He seems to like sleeping. Jarvis was playing old music the other night and I think he remembered it a little."

"Old music, naptime, check."

Steve shrugs. He thinks back to his fingers massaging Bucky's scalp, the way Bucky's face relaxed, but there's no way he's risking the conversation turning back toward... that. It had been an accident anyway, when he'd set something off and made Bucky move like he had, so he feels no compulsion to confess.
Sam said something and Steve missed it. "Come again?"

"I said, 'He was probably dehumanized'. There's not exactly a go-to playbook for people who kidnap and brainwash, but there's a general theme of taking away their name, sense of humanity, sense of self-preservation,"

"His fighting style certainly reflected that," Steve mutters.

"Right. So all the indulgent stuff, good food, naps, things that don't smell like some dank-ass Hydra dungeon or wherever, those probably bring him right back to times when he was a real person."

Makes sense. "I didn't think of it that way. Never leave me, Sam." It's said with a shy grin but he knows Sam can tell it's a serious statement.

Sam snorts. "I have driven one of Tony's seventeen cars. I'm not leaving the Tower until I get into the Bugatti at the very least."

"The red one? He's a little possessive of that thing."

"Then be a good friend and hot wire it. Natasha said-"

"You need to stop talking to Natasha."

**

*Steve Rogers: How is it going?*

*UNLISTED: He's good. He asked to be helpful, so he's helping me clean my guns while we trade stories about you.*

*Steve Rogers: You're sure that's a good idea?*

*UNLISTED: He's in a building full of superheroes. He's going to have access to worse than what I carry around.*

*Steve Rogers: I was actually more worried about him getting flashbacks.*

*UNLISTED: I've got my eye on it.*

*UNLISTED: How are you and Sam?*

*Steve Rogers: Good. We bought some things for Bucky and now we're grabbing lunch. He's definitely okay?*

*UNLISTED: Relax. He's calm. Very well-behaved. I'm considering filing for joint custody.*

**

Steve spots Bucky almost immediately - he's on the patio connected to the common area, sitting cross-legged surrounded by packages, expression serious. Steve's intercepted halfway to him by Natasha, who has a playful smile.

"Maid Marian?" she asks dryly, and it takes Steve a moment before he drops from confused to put-upon, sighing as he allows her to take the shopping bag from his hand to investigate it.

"You're taking advantage of his lack of filter," Steve accuses, only half-meaning it.
"Oh, he realized the story was embarrassing to you." She rifles through it, pulling the scissors out. "But not until he was halfway through telling it."

Steve rolls his eyes and looks out to the deck. "What is all that?"

"Pepper, probably." Natasha pulls the bag of peppermints open, popping one in her mouth and striding toward the French doors. "I think it's all clothes."

"Steve!" Bucky sits up, expression brightening. It's not a smile, but he's clearly glad he's back, and something in Steve's stomach does a flip.

"Hey," Steve says, and settles on the edge of one of the deck chairs to survey the damage. Bucky's got a knife in one hand (looks like one of Natasha's) and has already cut open a few boxes. There's haphazard piles of jeans, slacks, and long-sleeve shirts to the side. They look even more expensive than the basics Tony gave them, but Bucky abandons the project immediately when he sees the plastic bag Natasha's holding. "How're you feeling?"

"Head hurts," Bucky reports distractedly, unbothered, and takes the bag when it's offered to him. He pulls the heaviest thing out first - the scissors. "You want me to cut my hair?"

"I want you to be able to cut it if you want to," Steve corrects, and smiles as Natasha sits next to Bucky, shoulder brushing against his. He expected to feel some kind of jealousy, but the sight of Bucky receiving human contact from someone else can't be subsumed by anything else, apparently. "How badly does it hurt?"

"Not as bad as before I. Before I came to your apartment. Where's Sam? He got clothes too." Bucky gestures to one of the piles - a mess of camel and cream, some burgundy, and Steve has learned enough about the stuff Tony and Pepper buy to know it probably shouldn't sit on the ground like that. He slides down to sit on the patio floor as well, lifting each thing up in turn and laying it flat at least.

"Calling his sister," Steve says, and looks up when Natasha makes a noise of appreciation at the hair ties. Bucky seems stumped by the piece of cardboard until Natasha tugs one black circle of elastic off, gathering her hair with one hand and tying it back with the other.

"Those are for girls," Bucky remarks slowly, suspicious.

"They're for anyone now," Natasha says, and pops another elastic off, handing it to him. Steve watches as Bucky tries to mime what she did, but the prosthetic isn't nimble enough - or he's not coordinated enough with it, Steve has no idea which - and his expression twists into something like disappointment and then shame, head tilting down lower and mouth forming a thin line. He thinks back to when he handed Bucky clothes before, when Bucky immediately disrobed to put them on. The elastic pops off his fingers as he tries to open it wider, and Natasha catches it mid-air.

"I got it," she says, and leans back, touching Bucky's shoulder for an instant before combing his hair back with her fingers and gathering it up into a ponytail. Bucky looks uncomfortable, but holds still. "There. Try it out for two minutes. You've still got some bangs, but it's off your neck."

The elevator door swishes open, and Sam squints at the mess. "Is Bucky going into modeling?"
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

My inbox is so full of nice comments. *wraps you all up in blankets and feeds you cookies*

Bucky seems adequately entertained by watching Sam sort through what Nat calls his "Stark-patented friendship bribery". Steve isn't sure how to spot Armani sunglasses at a glance, but Sam clearly can, and he's happy about it. Natasha gets to her feet and asks Steve to help her put some drinks together.

"How did you do that?" Steve asks, once they're at the wet bar and far enough out of earshot. From where he's standing he can see Bucky still has his new blue wool coat in his lap, unwilling to put it aside just yet.

"What?" She puts the two sodas together first, then something for herself that involves a brand of vodka Steve doesn't recognize.

"He talks in front of you. To you. You put his hair back."

"You loosened that jar for me, Rogers."

"Nat."

She gives a little shrug, but he keeps waiting, trying to make it clear how much he needs to know. "I made it really simple. I said we've known you since you woke up, and we care about you. You're family." She gestures outside. "And you two have been family since before any of us were even born, so now he's in too."

Steve can't help but smile. "It took a lot, but someone finally managed to get you to share your feelings."

"I was saying it in Russian while cleaning firearms, so I was still in my comfort zone."

**

It's two steps back that evening when Bucky comes back from his teleconference with the psychiatrist. Steve saw this coming, at least a little, and timed an outing with Bruce to get Thai food so that it would be ready in his room by the time Bucky's session was over. There's a tiredness around his eyes, and he's gone back to being laconic, asking which box is his and then sitting across from Steve on the floor to eat it. He looks exhausted.

"Does your head still hurt?" Steve asks, after watching Bucky take a few bites of drunken noodles.

"No." The silence stretches on, and Steve tries to think of something to say, something he can do, but Bucky looks overloaded and tired and guilty and the fact that he's safe in his room eating and not being overstimulated is all Steve can think of to provide. He's pretty sure he's not supposed to ask Bucky what he was discussing with his doctor.
"If it hurts again, or anything does, please tell me." Steve takes a breath. "Or your arm."

Bucky jerks his head in a nod and, somewhat alarmingly, puts the carton of food down to stare out the window instead. He looks so tired. Steve decides against intruding on Bucky's thoughts and finishes his own meal, wondering if they should try listening to a baseball game after this. If Bucky's going to have to remember his life, at least Steve can make sure there's some focus on the good things.

**

The baseball helps.

**

The next afternoon Bruce sends a text to Steve, saying he doesn't think The Other Guy is likely to make an appearance and he'd like to meet Bucky if that was okay. Bucky still hasn't shown any intentions of hurting or breaking anything other than the microwave (and Sam sat him down and explained about the little metal handles in takeout containers, so that likely won't happen again), so they make use of Tony's entertainment room and pop in the remastered version of *The Wizard of Oz*. Bucky seems to remember it somewhat, judging from his expression as he flips the blu-ray case over and over in his hands, and when Tony dims the lights and gestures for everyone to grab a cushy theater-style seat, Bucky's eyes get wide, mouth twitching in that way Steve's come to learn means he's remembering something.

"Hmm?"

"Betty," Bucky says slowly, scratching the stubble on his cheek. "Betty... Sanderson."

"I won't say this often, but whatever you're remembering right now, don't tell me." Sam snorts behind them.

**

"I'll be right across the hall," Steve says that evening, and for as nervous as he feels he can tell Bucky's much more scared, nodding, silent, pretending to be unbothered.

Steve tosses and turns most of the night, feeling guilty, hating himself for feeling guilty because he can't win. If he sleeps next to Bucky he feels like he's taking advantage of him somehow, knowing bone-deep that the way he enjoys the closeness isn't right. Bucky always sleeps in, now, and seeing the mess of hair and slightly slack mouth isn't something Steve should spend so much time looking at before finally sitting up and getting ready for the day.

But knowing Bucky's alone when he doesn't want to be, that he's trying to be strong and pretend he's unbothered when he clearly is, that's. Worse.

The next morning he sees Bucky is already at the breakfast table, listening to Tony rambling on about something to do with robotics and cyborgs and how it's unfair that his girlfriend won't let him have any mechanical limbs. Bucky isn't nodding along with the conversation. He's sitting perfectly still, distracted, eyes miles away, and Steve knows he didn't sleep much. He resolves to think of an excuse to stay late in his room that night and 'accidentally' sleep over. It's not selfish if Bucky can't get any rest any other way.

**

"Catholic?" Bucky echoes the next day over lunch, eyes huge and looking to Steve for
verification. Steve nods.

"It was a bit of a big deal at the time. But he was a very popular president, all things considered."

Sam throws his hands up. "I just told you we have a black president in the White House right now, but this is what shocks you?" It's obvious he's upset that Natasha's factoid is being met with more disbelief.

"They're both surprising," Bucky says, picking up on the rivalry and clearly not sure what to do about it. "But. Catholic."

**

Natasha wets his hair in the sink, sitting him in a chair in the kitchen and tilting his head forward with one gentle hand. Steve watches from the dining room table. Beside him, Pepper is working on something on her laptop.

"Where's the boy that makes the..." Bucky bites his lip, trying to arrange the right words. "The ropes?"

"Ropes?" Steve echoes, unsure. He tries not to watch the way Bucky tilts toward Nat's hand as she tucks the towel tighter around his neck. When she starts cutting, Bucky doesn't flinch. It's only the split ends, a 'test' of sorts, but for all the sharp scissors and everything, he seems pretty underwhelmed.

"White ropes," Bucky adds. "I never saw his face. He wore red and blue."

"Spider-Man," Pepper supplies after a moment.

"That's an odd codename." Bucky watches a strand of dark hair tumble down his shoulder and fall to the floor.

"He doesn't live here," Natasha explains, and Bucky makes a sound like that doesn't make sense. "Everyone else lives here."

Pepper grins, amused. "I've talked to Tony about providing Mr. Parker with a 'paid internship'." Her tone makes it clear that Tony didn't agree with the idea.

"The Bugle hates him," Natasha remarks. "Which, to be honest, makes me like him more."

"Who's The Bugle?" Bucky's clearly had it with bad codenames.

"It's a newspaper," Steve clarifies, then turns to Pepper. "The 'paid internship'... it'd be a cover for him to come to the Tower?"

"Yes," she says, and taps a few keys on her laptop. "But Tony says he's too young to be of any use. Oops!"

"What?" Steve sits up straighter, leaning to look at her screen.

"My finger slipped. Internship offer sent."

**

After Bucky's teleconference, Sam tries to get him to try the pool. Bucky agrees, changing into his
new swim trunks. He changes his mind at the last minute.

"Later," he says, and lays down on a chaise instead, wrapping a towel around his shoulders. He turns away from the conversation Bruce and Pepper are having a few feet away. Sam shares a confused shrug with Steve, but it's probably best to leave it for now.

**

"This is the brain scan Mr. Stark took of you several days ago." The specialist gestures with a stylus and the picture comes up. "This is the scan Captain Rogers took of you about an hour ago." The other scan. They look almost identical to Steve, who's leaning in and trying to determine what he should be focusing on, but the specialist is already on it - zooming in to the same location on both pictures, to a strange little cluster that is uniquely ridged and strange. Well, more so on the left. Actually, now that he looks...

"Sergeant Barnes, would you say you have been feeling more distracted recently?"

"Yes," Bucky says flatly, head tilting down minutely as if admitting a defect.

The specialist smiles kindly. "The damage you sustained destroys connections between long-term memories. This is a very rough guess, but in the first picture, your connections are about 15% of what is typical in an adult. It's closer to 30% now."

Steve stares. "How?"

"The boons of Dr. Erskine's serum aren't limitless, Captain Rogers, but I assure you there are days when I'm not so sure." The specialist zooms in closer and circles two spots - almost all black on the left and much more vibrant on the right. "Sergeant Barnes is sleeping quite a lot, correct? I encourage this. The brain repairs and reorganizes when we sleep. Because of his unique DNA, he can repair a lot more than the average human being, and there's a lot to fix up."

**

Parker comes over the next day, wearing street clothes and carrying a backpack. Natasha pulls him into the hallway after the initial meet-and-greet of everyone in the Tower, and just as Natasha had told Steve he would, Peter comes back in looking at Bucky with a forced everything-is-fine kind of expression. Bucky, thank god, doesn't seem to notice, because Bruce has finally gotten around to explaining what it is he does.

"Green?"

"Green," Bruce confirms, smiling a little sadly.

"How big, though?"

Peter edges around the room to come back to Steve, and Steve can still see it - that edge of starstruck awe in Peter's face, even when he's still processing what Bucky is, what he was made to do.

"So, uh." Peter chews his lip. "Hydra, huh?"

"Yeah," Steve says, and his voice is light and firm at the same time. *This is your opportunity to get past it. If you don't, this won't work.*

Peter nods, following Steve's gaze to where Bruce is raising one hand higher and higher, finally
gesturing up to a point in the high ceiling where the Hulk's head would be, and Bucky's eyes are as wide as saucers.

"But he's, like, cool now." Peter puts in that strange modern inflection that makes it a question.

"He's a good person," Steve says. "Who's been through a lot."

"Okay." Peter tilts his head, as if recalibrating a little, then looks excited. "Has someone told him about Obama yet?"

"Sam did. He was more surprised by JFK."

"Really?"

Steve holds his hands out, shrugging. "Everyone seems to forget how much America distrusted Catholics."

They watch the first Star Wars movie that night, and Bucky likes it, and even jokes that C3PO's fussing reminds him of Steve when they were kids.

"Just so you know, pop culture note?" Peter holds one finger up to ensure he has Bucky's attention. "Literally every person in the world wants a light saber when they're a kid."

"Clint still wants one," Natasha remarks wryly, getting to her feet and giving in to a catlike stretch. Steve can tell Peter's engrossed in showing Bucky his best 'light saber moves' because he doesn't notice.

"Tree branches, yard sticks in class, sometimes markers stacked up even though they fall over halfway through..." Peter takes on a faux-fencing stance and swings an invisible weapon down, making a sound effect. "This is the most important thing you need to catch up on. Forget everything you've learned up until now."

Bucky actually laughs a little, watching Peter with amusement until he ripostes. Bucky gets up. "Not like that," he says sharply, and Peter freezes in place, blinking. Bucky stands behind him and uses one bare foot to nudge Peter's ratty Converse sneaker out further, fixing his stance, and then Bucky grabs one elbow to straighten out his arm.

"If you stood like that, you wouldn't have any strength when you needed to block." Bucky looks him over with a concerned frown.

"I don't fight with weapons," Peter explains.

"But you don't know how to use them? Who taught you?"

"Taught me?"

"To fight."

"Um." Peter grins nervously, shrugging his shoulders before putting them back in the way Bucky arranged, and Steve puts a hand over his face. Of course. There was no reason to assume the kid had any training before he got powers by accident. He's been getting by on super agility and luck.

Bucky scowls a little and sighs, backing out of Peter's space and looking over to Natasha. "Is there a gym somewhere?"
"Three floors down." She's very carefully not smiling. "Why, you going to train him?"

"Someone has to. Tomorrow," Bucky says firmly, pointing to Peter, and then disappears into the elevator. Peter blinks at the elevator doors after they close, then at Natasha, then Sam, then at Steve.

"One of us will chaparone," Sam says, giving Peter a thumbs-up. He doesn't look calmed.

"Am I gonna die, though?"

"Probably not," Natasha murmurs, flashing Steve a quick smile.

"I'm gonna die."
Peter doesn't die. He's late, because there was a shootout in Bed Stuy, and by the time he makes it into the gym there's a small audience in one corner. Tony has brought bowls of popcorn for everyone to enjoy, and Barnes looks more or less like he's willing to put up with it.

"Is that a gun?" Peter squeaks. He's staring at what's at Bucky has in his hand, then over to the others, mouthing 'you had one job'.

"Paintball gun," Bucky corrects, and gestures Peter over to the mat. Peter tosses his backpack in the corner and follows. "Tony suggested it. Your most common problem is getting shot at, right?"

"That and my terrible PR, yeah."

"Public relations," Steve calls out automatically, no longer thinking before translating.

Bucky rolls his eyes. "Do you want to stretch?"

"I'm already stretchy. I am the stretchiest."

"Okay. We'll start with something simple - take my gun away."

It takes about half a second for Peter to shoot a web that connects to the side of the gun, and another half second for Bucky to turn his body, pulling the web taut and dragging Peter forward until he hits the mat face-first.

"Remember that some people will be stronger than you," Bucky tells him.

"Barnes 1, Parker 0," Tony chirps, displaying the score on his tablet.

Natasha leans over and peers at it. "You gonna do this through the whole thing?"

"I asked Pepper to put on a cute outfit and Vanna White the scoreboard, but she said she had a meeting."

"I think that's the Pepper Potts equivalent of 'washing my hair that night'," Steve muses, watching as Bucky gets the last of the webbing off of the paintball pistol. When he says 'Again', Peter sprays a web in Bucky's face instead, but when he reaches for the gun Bucky sweeps a leg under his feet and pins him down regardless.

**

An hour later, after Peter has showered the paint off and switched into some oversized loaner clothes from Sam, the three of them sit down by the pool and talk.

"You did good, for a beginner," Steve tells him.
Peter scowls. "I just washed three separate 'headshots' out of my hair."

"He likes you, though." Sam beams in that overdone way that means he is being purposefully annoying.

"Did you have to do this?" Peter asks, and Sam laughs.

"Man, I'm air force. Even without my wings I could kick your ass."

"I'd take you up on that, but I still have a boot-shaped bruise on my back, soooo."

"You have super-healing, right?"

"What? No, dude."

Sam laughs again.

**

They watch the Disney version of *Robin Hood*, because Natasha is a rude person and it is her turn to pick. Sam and Peter do competing impressions of Lady Kluck, the chicken character. Steve watches Natasha and Bucky laugh, near tears, and makes a mental note to draw Sam with a beak later. Sam might not appreciate it, but Bucky will.

**

The next morning Pepper texts Bucky and asks if he has an open slot in his training schedule, and Steve shows him how to type back 'yes', but only after making sure Bucky understands that he must, must, must be nice with Pepper, and that she can do Fire Things, and that he must be careful.

"She could have just as easily asked me," Steve says to Sam, later. Sam rolls his eyes.

"It's a gesture. She trusts him."

**

*Peter Parker: Old timey question! What's rum low mean?*

*Steve Rogers: What?*

*Peter Parker: Google and urbandictionary aren't helping. Is it like whippersnapper?*

*Steve Rogers: Bucky said it?*

*Peter Parker: He said it when I messed up a kick*

*Peter Parker: And then he looked like he felt bad for saying it*

*Peter Parker: Ugh it means something really mean doesn't it, you aren't even going to tell me*

**

Tony finally announces that the arm's ready for testing, confessing in private to Steve that it was partly due to having to emulate someone else's work and partly because he really, really wanted to overtest it before putting it on Barnes, not sure if he'd ever say if it hurt or felt wrong or didn't quite work right. Steve appreciates it more than he can say.
"Alright, my favorite patient, what do you think?"

Bucky's holding the arm awkwardly in his lap, inspecting it, looking about as uncomfortable with it as Steve feels. It looks real. It's the right shade, with the same muscle tone as Bucky's real arm, and when Bucky holds his palm up to it there's a perfect match.

"Barnes?" Tony prods Bucky for some kind of response, but Bucky just looks up at Steve, waiting for him to answer for him.

"If you try this new one, you get some spatial awareness back. Plus it'll be stronger, for when you train with Parker."

"Parker's miles off from being able to hit me," Bucky murmurs, but he looks like he's considering it, lining his left arm up with the one on his lap, comparing them, breathing getting measured and deep before, finally, he nods.

**

The nerve connection hurts more than any of the others. Tony curses and rushes through the rest of them as fast as he can, and when he's done Steve sits on the operating table next to Bucky, holding his flesh hand. He watches Bucky twitch and cringe his way through it, teeth gritted. It's not long before he gives in to Bucky's desperate, heartbreaking tugs on Steve's wrist, laying on his side and holding on to Bucky as tightly as he can. Tony makes up some bullshit excuse and says to text him if the pain doesn't subside in an hour, but Steve isn't really listening. Bucky's stattaco wet breaths are hot against his chest, and he's sweating under Steve's hands. Bucky is pressing in so tightly, practically trying to burrow inside him and it's taking every bit of strength Steve has not to press his lips to the crown of his head, to murmur how everything's going to be okay, because he doesn't know for sure that if he started he could stop.

**

When Steve is eight, the summer break feels like a glorious kind of season that will last forever. It is something that has fallen over the entire world like gentle weather, warm and inviting, where school stops and the world is open to explore. His mother is working night shifts but he is there in the day to see her when she is awake, and she sings to him, runs her fingers through his hair while they listen to the radio together. When it is time for her to get some rest before work, he meets Bucky in the wide, open expanse of the park, and they go on adventures.

Bucky doesn't have many toys either, but it doesn't matter. They've both been reading adventure books at the library and decide they are in Sherwood Forest, merry men, robbing the rich and giving to the poor and free from the city life.

Steve is following Bucky up one of the better climbing trees when his foot slips and he falls hard on the next branch, catching it barely as he drops further and then scrambling blindly, finding he is only hanging from the back of one knee. Bucky yells for him, scrambles down fast enough to scrape both legs over the rough bark, and Steve watches helpless, upside-down, as Bucky runs to the spot underneath him and yells, "Fall!"

It probably isn't as long a fall as it feels like.

Bucky catches him, of course - he stumbles a little, but he is already almost a head taller than Steve, and whipcord strong. He smiles widely to show off the gap in his teeth.

"Maid Marian, you're saved!"
Steve scowls. "I am not Maid Marian, I'm one of the merry men."

"If you were a merry man you could climb trees. You must be Maid Marian."

"Put me down!"

"Aren't you supposed to give a kiss when you get saved?"

Steve stares at him for a long moment, then begins struggling furiously to get to his feet. Bucky shouts and loses his footing, falling backward with Steve landing hard on his chest. Steve stands up, mad, and begins wiping the dirt off his clothes in fast angry swipes.

"You're not playing fair," he tells Bucky, face still scarlet.

"You're the one who got saved and didn't even give a kiss. You're a terrible Maid."

He thinks it's over, after they decide on pirates instead and play until the sun falls behind the trees. Bucky walks with him until he makes it to his apartment building, talking with him about what they should do the next day, how he's been saving up some coins and they should go pick out a couple sweets. Steve suggests peppermints and Bucky doesn't respond, falling quiet as they reach the steps. For a strange moment Bucky stares at him, eyes huge and mouth screwed up tight. Steve doesn't get a chance to ask what's wrong - Bucky leaps forward, pressing his lips to Steve's cheek, before turning on his heel and running home.
It gets worse before it gets better. Steve trembles a little, holding Bucky in close on the table and not daring to look down at his face. He already feels nauseous.

"Should," he stutters over the words, "should we take it off? We can take it off, we can put the other one back on. Or, or no arm. Anything."

"Nnn." Bucky pulls his new arm in protectively against his chest, and from where Steve's shirt has ridden up a little he can feel it against his own skin. It feels soft but uncanny. It's because it's not warm, he realizes after a moment, just room temperature.

"You're sure?"

"I remember," Bucky says, and then stops, and Steve breathes deeply and forces himself to wait. "The first one. It hurt a lot. I screamed."

"And then it got better," Steve says, guessing the end of the story.

"Yes." His breathing is ragged.

"How long did it take?" He doesn't want to hear the answer, not really. He doesn't want to think about it.

A small sound escapes the back of Bucky's throat. It sounds like an animal whining. Steve holds him tighter.

"We can try painkillers. They're in a needle, like when we drew your blood. They don't work for me, but, but maybe,"

"No."

Steve nods and goes quiet.

Minutes pass: at three, Bucky's breathing evens out. At four, his body relaxes somewhat, burrowing more into Steve as if preparing to rest.

"Bucky?"

"Mnn?"

"It's been a while. Are you ready to get up?"

"No." He shifts and Steve can feel warm skin brushing against his stomach. He wants to tug his shirt down but he feels scared to move.

"Is your arm feeling better?"
"Yes."

"All the way better?"

"No."

Bucky presses his nose into the V in Steve's t-shirt, huffing out a deep sigh. His breath is hot and makes Steve shiver involuntarily.

"Cold?" Bucky asks, sounding confused.

"No, I-" Steve can't bring himself to move away first, but he has to do something. Soon. "The table's not very comfortable. Um. Not much room."

"You won't fall." Bucky hooks his new arm around Steve's middle and curls his new fingers into the material of Steve's shirt. It's probably supposed to be a comforting gesture, not an arousing one. Steve feels like he can't breathe. Bucky's still not wearing a shirt, is still hot to the touch, muscles twitching intermittently under Steve's hands like his whole body is trying to re-calibrate itself somehow. This is unbearable.

"Tony might want his lab back."

"Bed?" Bucky asks, and he can't - he doesn't realize what that sounds like - and Bucky finally lets go a bit, just enough for Steve to squirm away and get to his feet, smoothing his shirt out and looking guiltily toward the doorway.

"Um, yes, that's - come on." He doesn't tell Bucky that he has no plans of getting near him once he gets Bucky to lay down. He's getting a lot of use out of lying through omission lately.

**

Bucky puts his t-shirt back on because Steve hands it to him, and they're silent in the elevator, Steve staring forward and not looking at Bucky until he's sure he won't be caught. Bucky's expression is unreadable, concentrated, still with some lines of pain around his eyes and mouth. They reach Bucky's room and in what must be the most cowardly move he can recall, Steve flees to the restroom while Bucky gets into bed, runs the tap a moment to buy time, and then leaves, wishing Bucky a mumbled 'good rest' and hating himself.

**

"This isn't working," Sam says, and Steve can't disagree. Sam taps a few keys on his tablet and then sets it next to him on the duvet, looking across his room at Steve. He looks serious. "He needs you in his vulnerable moments."

"I can't-" Steve scrubs at his face and looks away, leaning forward in the chair.

"You can't imply you're gonna be somebody's big spoon after a surgery and then run. That's rude."

"What was I supposed to say?"

Sam sighs. "I need to talk to him."

"And say what?" Steve shifts.

"The same shit you won't listen to. That it's okay to want to cling on somebody. That he could do it even when something terrible hasn't happened in the last ten seconds. That it's okay to be a human
"He's not - he doesn't have feelings," Steve snaps. He knows how that could sound out of context, but Sam knows exactly what they're talking about, and it's stupid.

Sam puts his hands up in surrender. "Fine. Fine. Bucky doesn't have feelings."

Steve leans back somewhat petulantly and stares at the ceiling.

"Are we admitting you have feelings, though?"

"I have, although people try to tell me otherwise, a lot of flaws." He says it slowly and with a new knot taking up residence in his stomach. Even coming this close to admission feels wretched.

"Feelings are flaws. That's a really good starting place for a healthy psyche." Sam pushes on before Steve can get annoyed. "Hey, I know what you're going to say. Things were different, things are still different, you two might as well come from another country. I get it."

"You don't," Steve mutters.

"You think today's army is exclusively enlightened people? Every last one of them took that sensitivity training to heart, really believes in inclusion and diversity and holding hands and singing around a campfire? That I spent my life in a liberal bubble of LGBT-friendly safe spaces and I don't know what the real world's like?"

"We could have gotten arrested."

"Or beaten up, or beaten to death... those two still happen sometimes."

"I know."

Sam frowns. "Why is it you're constantly trying tell people you aren't perfect like everyone says you are, and at the same time you're bending yourself backwards trying to be perfect?" Sam rolls his eyes when Steve crosses his arms. "Your idea of perfect, that is. I bet you'd defend Natasha's honor to hell and back if she slept with women. You wouldn't think a bit less of her. You know Tony slept around, and you only get annoyed with him when he's pulling on your tail. But the second you have some honest-to-god emotions that don't match up with a cutout of a selfless man whose only focus is his duty,"

"I'm not like that."

"Exactly, you're not like that. Nobody's like that. You're not even covering up a real flaw. Caring about someone isn't a flaw. Hell, wanting someone isn't a flaw." Sam glares at him. "And you're damn right you shouldn't try to start something when he's freaking out and shivering, but this whole 'I must be stoic forever' thing is eating at you."

"Eating at me?"

"You can tell he needs to trust you and you feel like you're lying to him."

"I did it for a long time before I met you."

"And it sucked, I bet."

Steve doesn't answer.
"So, let me make sure I've got this right. You care about him so much... notice I am avoiding the L word here, just for you... that it kills you to see him in pain and anguish and you want to fix it all with unspecified actions that I can definitely guess at. But you have no plans of ever telling him about how you care about him."

"He's sick." Not really, it's not an illness, but Sam knows what he means.

"So when he's better, you'll tell him?"

"When he's better, he'll be himself." So, no.

Sam crosses his arms. "What happened to 'Bucky, Official Non-Bigot'?"

"You don't have to be a bigot to not love someone back," Steve says, and when he grits his teeth as if that would help him take the words back. He is both furious at himself and so, so painfully grateful that Sam doesn't make any acknowledgement of the slip.

"Frankly, someone would have to be an idiot to turn you down, man or woman, but I doubt that'll sink in, like, ever." Sam grumbles something under his breath and picks up the tablet again, tapping a few more keys, reading, then setting it aside again. "So, let's walk through your fear here. Let's pretend you do tell him. It's later, he's feeling better, he's a little bummed that fridge magnets don't stick on his arm now but otherwise he's fine. You tell him one day. What happens."

Steve stares at him like he's an idiot, because he doesn't know what to say. "It - it ruins everything," he says finally, after a long stretch of silence. "He can't trust me anymore."

"Because you care about him?"

"Because I hid it from him, because I - because I care about him like that."

"He cares about you enough to trust you with his freakouts and to ask you to stay with him at night."

"He doesn't have anyone else."

"He's got a whole Tower of people." Sam gestures around him. "In fact, I think he's figured that out faster than you have."

Steve looks away.

"Think about it, man!" Sam sounds like he's ready to throw a pillow. "Not a damn day goes by I don't think about when I asked you what makes you happy. You remember what you told me?"

Steve nods, a bitter admission, and Sam points to his bedroom door. "He's across the hall. He's here, he's alive, and he wants snuggles."

**

Steve sleeps in his own room.
Steve follows Bruce to the gym after an amiable breakfast together, and in the elevator Peter joins them. He's wearing gym clothes and carrying two long pieces of rebar.

"What are those for?" Bruce asks, as if he doesn't know.

"I have no idea, I just bring what he tells me." He looks like a man resigned to his fate.

The training goes pretty well. Tony didn't bring popcorn this time. Sam and Natasha seem to be having some kind of gesture-heavy debate that they keep quiet enough that Steve cannot overhear. Sam hoots appreciatively when Peter finally lands a glancing blow on Bucky's shoulder and then rolls away without getting hit back.

"I have a building full of weapons, and Bucky tells Peter to go rummaging at a construction site for practice tools?" Tony looks a little miffed.

Bucky heard it. "If Brooklyn has foils and sabers lying around in the street waiting to be used as defensive weapons, let me know." He sounds firm, tough. He always does when he's training Peter, gruff like the Howling Commando he was before, but there's a tightness in it today that wasn't there before. He feints with the bar, swiping it away at the last moment and swinging a kick down aimed to connect with Peter's shoulder. Peter drops into a kneeling stance and uses the bar to block, rolling away and getting a decent swipe at Bucky's other leg while he's unbalanced. Bucky rolls and re-positions. "Good. Again."

**

*Steve Rogers: We haven't talked for a while. Would you like to go to lunch somewhere?*

*UNLISTED: Sorry, I'm already having lunch with Barnes.*

*Steve Rogers: The kind of lunch where others can't join?*

*UNLISTED: He said he was pretty sure you were avoiding him and that he wanted to give you space.*

*Steve Rogers: Just a shot in the dark. Are you mad at me right now?*

*UNLISTED: No. Just working on clean-up.*

**

They watch The Fifth Element, because it's still on both their lists. Natasha takes the spot next to Bucky on the couch, guiding his hand into her lap to hold when his eyes start to glaze over in what's probably another triggered memory. It happens more often now but he doesn't seem to get distressed, just distracted, coming back to himself after a few moments or sometimes a few minutes.

Peter, balancing an ice pack on his knee, pulls something out of his backpack and offers it to Steve - M&Ms. Natasha grabs a few as well and tucks them into Bucky's hand, smiling.

**

That night is a little easier.
There's an unspoken ban on public discussions of the news, but Tony breaks it over the sprawl of takeout with a photo from Serbia that's made it onto the front page of CNN. It's a firefight involving the whole group, although Steve suspects that not many people realize that the small blur on the rooftop four buildings to the left is Hawkeye.

"How does the media always do this?" He asks, jabbing a finger toward the title. "First they decide I'm Iron Man, which is like the most stupidly ironic name ever considering my whole schtick is being technologically forward."

Natasha and Steve exchange the glance of 'and then he went and took the damn name'.

"-and now they give Jarvis a name! He's never even done an interview!"

"The media is a wily creature, sir." Jarvis sounds largely unbothered. Bucky chews and swallows, also unphased, reaching for more szechuan chicken.

"T'Challa's outfit is certainly... fetching." Pepper quirks an eyebrow, pinching the screen and splaying her fingers out to zoom in on the man. He's mid-kick, and the black outfit is certainly form-fitting. Steve hmms, knowing Tony's making an affronted face before he even looks.

"That man saves you from one bad dinnertime assassination attempt and you're gaga over him!"

"What can I say? A charming, wealthy entrepeneur with a flair for justice..."

"Me. You are describing me."

"Actually, I think you'll find she said 'charming'." Steve schools his face into serene innocence, and Pepper's grin is worth Tony's scowl ten times over.

Pepper and Bucky start training, too, but there's no audience for that, and the times aren't written out on the living space whiteboard.

(Peter's are. Steve's quick sketch above the calendar of Bucky glaring at a spider with a startled exclamation point over its head has been well-received.)

Sam said he offered to hang out if Pepper wanted, but apparently she thanked him and said no.

That night isn't easy. The bed feels too big, the room too empty. Steve reminds himself he's survived worse.

The big screen tv is good for baseball games. Sam joins them, bringing hot dogs from the vendors forty flights down covered in every side they've got. Bucky makes both an appreciative noise and a complete mess.

"So is it like way back when?" Sam gestures to the players on the screen. Bucky snorts.

"No steroids back in our day." He points at the pitcher's arms, and Steve hums in agreement.
Sam smirks. "Cuz you two are all-natural buffness over there."

"We weren't breaking rules to do it," Steve retorts, and Bucky says something under his breath about 'tried to enlist six times' and 'repeatedly lied to the government' that Steve pretends not to hear. Sam laughs.

By the third inning, Bucky's picked out new favorites. If he looks a little distracted, a little tense, it's probably because he has a teleconference in a few hours.

"No, again."

Peter lets out an exasperated noise. "I can't hit you when you do that!"

"You can. I'm leaving the same opening every time." Bucky straightens up, looking to the 'viewing gallery' and, after a pause, giving Natasha a questioning look. She smiles primly, sliding to her feet and slipping her shoes off. "Black Widow and I will show you."

"Rematch!" Tony crows, and Pepper laughs and hushes him. Peter backs off of the mat and stares like he's about to see Batman and Superman duke it out.

"Ready?" Bucky looks way more nervous than Natasha does. She just nods, standing across from him and waiting for his signal. When he swings, she dodges left, grabs his second punch with both hands and pulls it over her shoulder, so much smaller but using her weight wisely to rechannel his forward momentum. It's over in a flash.

"We can do it slower if it'll help," Nat says to Peter, offering Bucky a hand up off the floor.

"No, I see it now." Peter's grinning. "You guys know you're, like, really incredibly cool, right?"

Thor visits Earth again, and Pepper only discovers this through an email from Darcy complaining that Jane and Thor have not left the apartment for two days, and there are noises, and could she stay over at the Tower for a few days, please.

Steve and Nat and Sam talk it over and tell Tony it should be fine, and the unspoken ring of People Who Are Trusted With the Ex-Assassin widens a little more as Darcy comes over with a duffel bag and a long-suffering huff, saying, "Someone is taking me to Starbucks, and I do not care who it is."

Pepper smiles and gets her coat. Nat, sensing some good gossip incoming, gets hers too.

Jane starts visiting once Thor heads off to Europe to help out. Spiderman's inconsolable that he didn't stop by the Tower first. (Steve thinks, privately, that Thor would have gone to Europe immediately if not for having a girl who's suffering from a very, very long-distance relationship. Thor is boisterous and sociable and friendly, but he also has a decent understanding of the urgency with Hydra, and his skills are irreplaceable.)

"So you're Thor's... friend?" Peter asks, tilting his head a little.

"Girlfriend," Jane corrects calmly, and this exchange is just long enough for Darcy to get her hands on Peter's phone. She grins.
"Who's the cutie on your lock screen, dude?"

"HEY!"

"I like the red stripes in her hair, super cute." Steve has noticed something like a teasing sibling vibe between those two, and today's no different.

"If you don't give it back I will web it back, and then you will have sticky white stuff all over your hand."

Darcy's smile turns evil, and Steve knows where it's going before it even begins. "Do you get sticky white stuff all over your hand when you think about- Ow! Ow! Okay! Take it! Jeez!"

**

It's the fourth night in a row he's slept in his own room. Steve isn't entirely shocked when he hears the door open; he's imagined petulance, a demand for him to return, and, a more painful thought, a pale and shaky Bucky who can't form the words to ask for him to come back.

Bucky resembles neither. He rushes in and drops unceremoniously on the bed next to Steve, gripping his shoulders and hauling him up until he's sitting.

"Steve, Steve, wake up." He sounds like himself, but he sounds terrified.

"I'm awake, I'm awake, what is it? What's wrong?" He makes an aborted move to reach for his shield leaning against the bedstand, but Bucky grips him tighter, wheezing, and Steve realizes with no small amount of horror that he's either crying or having a panic attack or both. "Bucky?"


"I know," Steve says, and he moves to take Bucky by the shoulders, to offer some kind of comfort, but Bucky flinches away and makes a pained noise. "Bucky, it's okay. It." It happened a long time ago, he wants to say, but that's terrible, it's hollow, it's meaningless for both of them. To Bucky everything was a lifetime away and is happening right now at the same time. It's all swirled together, and no matter when it happened, Howard was an ally and Steve's friend and he's dead all at once.

"I did that." Bucky curls up on himself, hacking in breaths where he can get them, and Steve wrenches out from under the sheets to try to follow him to the other corner of the bed. "There was - I remember the car, I remember watching it, making - making sure -"

"Buck."

Bucky swipes almost violently at his own face and heaves in and out. Steve wonders if he should call Sam. Natasha. If Jarvis has already done it. He reaches out and touches Bucky's knee, which is trembling under his touch, and can at least feel relief that his awful vice isn't rearing its ugly head at a time like this. He feels nothing but panic for Bucky right now. "It wasn't your fault."

"We're in his house. We're eating his food and living in his house and St-Stark, Tony, he's here, he's, he talks to me every day, he fixed my damn arm, he-"

"He knows, Bucky. It's okay."

"How can he know?" Bucky's shouting now. "How can he know and still look at me? How can an- any of you know, know half of what I - of what I did and still -"
There's a pounding on the door that is distinctly Natasha, and Steve barks for her to come in just as Bucky drops into a heap and starts to shake like he's having convulsions. Natasha bolts in and drops immediately on Bucky, limbs around him and face pressed into his shoulder, and Sam's in the doorway, face grim and watching.

"Bucky," Natasha says quietly, and he doesn't respond. She says something in Russian, and then something else, and somewhere in the pile of them Steve can hear Bucky crying.
Natasha kicks them out. Sam makes coffee.

"I don't know what to do," Steve confesses, leaning heavily against the counter.

"Do what I did. Accept that it's two in the morning and you're not going to be able to go back to sleep." Sam's wearing worn-thin plaid pajama pants and a Clash t-shirt, scratching at his stubble and watching the coffee drip from what Steve can only assume is a very expensive machine.

"We should arrange something with the psychiatrist."

"Yeah," Sam agrees, and tilts his head up. "Jarvis, can you schedule something ASAP?"

"Composing a high-importance email presently, sir."

Sam sighs and hangs his head again. He looks tired. "You don't know Russian, do you?"

"A few words." Steve shakes his head. "No idea what she was saying."

"Not our business, maybe." Sam shrugs.

"Thank you," Steve says, because he should have said it already.

"Of course, man." Sam's smile is a little bitter. "You know we soldiers get trained to run toward the shouting."

"Not just that. For before, when." Steve busies himself grabbing a second mug out of the cabinet as he sees the first one's already full. Ever the saint, Sam trades him the full one for the empty one. "When I came in and poured all my troubles on you and then ignored your advice."

"Don't worry about it." He fills the second mug and then ushers him over to the table, where they both groan a little sitting down. Fit or not, 'underslept' doesn't suit either of them. "I mean what I said, but I don't expect you to to get through your stuff overnight. Take your time with yourself. Just," and he gestures, trying to find the right words. "Make sure you're still there for your friend in the meanwhile, okay?"

**

*Pepper Potts: Are you still awake?*

*Steve Rogers: Yes. I'm shocked you're up.*
Pepper Potts: I'll be in the kitchen in five minutes. I'd like to talk with you.

**

The sun's just starting to rise when Pepper strides in, still pinning her hair up. Sam is out on the patio, relaxing by the pool and checking his phone, and Pepper glances around to make sure that she and Steve are alone before grabbing a protein shake from the fridge and gesturing for Steve to sit down.

"Jarvis says you requested a teleconference for Barnes ASAP."

Steve inclines his head a little, unsure what else to say. He's pretty sure it's obvious from the lines under his eyes what happened, more or less.

"I get reports from that psychiatrist, just so you know." She holds up a hand. "Very. Vague. Reports."

"Reports," Steve echoes.

"Mmhmm." She twists the bottle open and takes a sip. "I have some very simple yes-no questions that I ask her. Is he liable to be violent to himself or others. That's been a no every time I ask." She leans back, pulling her arm behind her head and stretching it as far as it will go. "Does he remember any of who he was before the war. Yes, always. Does he remember any of what he did with Hydra. No, no, no. Then one day, yes."

Steve looks away.

"So he's been remembering missions, or parts of them, for at least a few days."

"So you're thinking tonight was something in particular," Steve says, and lets it show in his tone that she's right.

"Maybe something specific." She waits a while, giving him time to say something, and then takes another drink and continues. "I'm going to tell you something."

Steve sits up a little straighter, forcing himself to look away from the window to her face. "Okay."

"Tony didn't tell me at first. He didn't need to tell me Barnes was here - I'd worked that out on my own. But what he'd done, to Howard and Maria. He waited until I was off the plane, and he gave this whole... review, 'he barely speaks unless Steve's nearby', 'he looks like he wants to run but his feet are nailed down', 'you think he's empty but then you realize he's scared'." She gestures 'and so on' with one twirling hand. "Then he tells me."

"You must have been upset."

"Oh, I wanted to burn him alive." Pepper sighs. "I've known Tony for too long not to know what losing his family did to him. And I've also known Tony for too long to think that his family was perfect, but nonetheless, I heard that there was a man in my house who had taken Tony's family from him, and my first reaction was to kill him."

Steve wonders if he's supposed to act like this is a confession, but he feels no animosity towards her about this. He can't blame her. Tony's her priority and, however long ago and however indirectly, Bucky hurt him very, very badly.

"You know what he asked me the other day?"
"No," he says.

Pepper smiles. "If 'brasierres' still had metal in them." She breaks into a giggle. "Should've seen how nervous he was. He'd finally convinced me to start sparring with some of the Extremis power, the fire, and he was worried I'd get scorch marks on my chest when I cooled back down to normal if the underwire was still superheated."

"Was he right?" Steve asks, hoping that's not too personal.

"I explained what a sports bra was, and then we were good." Pepper tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She looks a little sad again. "The guy who thinks he's going to get smacked for mentioning a girl's undergarments? He's not the same person who was killing people in cold blood, no questions asked."

"No," Steve agrees, and wishes he knew how to tell her he's sorry. For Howard and Maria, for what Tony lost. Too quickly, she gets up, draining the last of the bottle and gently touching Steve's shoulder as she walks past him.

"Tell me if we can do anything to help. I'll be in a meeting for an hour, but my phone is always on."

**

Steve Rogers: Are we still banished?

UNLISTED: Yes.

UNLISTED: He's getting better. Give him some more time with me.

Steve Rogers: Thank you.

**

Bruce Banner: Peter is in the gym asking if Bucky is coming.

Steve Rogers: God, I'd forgotten. Tell him I'll be right down to sub.

Bruce Banner: He's asking if he can add your number to his phone. He promises not to 'stalk'.

Steve Rogers: That's fine.

**

Steve throws on some gym clothes and jogs to the elevator, trying to come up with a lesson plan on three hours of sleep. He's had harder challenges.

What he's not ready for is their faces - Peter, openly concerned and fidgety, scared to ask but wanting to know what's going on. Bruce is more reserved, giving Steve a wave from the chair by the wall and tapping his tablet intermittently. It makes sense that Sam isn't there - hopefully he went back to his room eventually to catch up on sleep. Tony, he's not sure. Maybe Pepper asked him to sit this one out.

"We're understaffed, but we'll do fine," Steve says, bringing as much command into his voice as he can put together. He notices that Peter stands up a little straighter. Good. "Bucky's been teaching you how to disarm opponents and how to use weapons from your environment, right?"
"Right, um. Sir."

Steve nods. "Then let's work on basic hand-to-hand. Get three good hits in today and you pick lunch."

**

Peter gets *four* good hits in. He's rough around the edges, but he's fast, and he's starting to figure out how to use that to his highest advantage. Steve can't help feeling a little proud on Bucky's behalf.

Parker decides he wants to go to the schwarma place. It doesn't escape Steve's notice that it's one of those restaurants that serves enough that you basically *have* to take half home and eat it later. Combine that with the one set of gym clothes and the constant rotating set of threadbare sweaters and Steve thinks he sees what Bucky sees - a poor Brooklyn kid, not a million miles off from how they started out.

"Is he okay?" Peter asks as they take a booth. He looks nervous, like he knows he shouldn't get too detailed in public, but also really wants to know.

Steve buys some time tugging on the tab of his soda, listening to it hiss open. He feels far too tired for just an hour of simple exercises. "It's not linear," he says, remembering Natasha's words for it.

"Huh? Oh, getting better. Yeah." Peter puts his hand in his chin and props his elbow on the table, looking a little morose. Steve recognizes that look.

"You wish you could help."

Peter frowns. "Yeah."

Steve smiles a little. "Me too."

**

*Steve Rogers: How is he?*

*UNLISTED: The self-hatred has finally cropped up, but I gave him a homework assignment and he seems to be doing okay. Telecon in five.*

*Steve Rogers: I'm going to take a cat-nap and then go see him. If custody paperwork allows.*

*UNLISTED: That checks out.*

**

Steve walks Peter to the subway and takes the long way back to the Tower. The wind is nice, and there's some music coming from one of the shops that has its door propped open. He and Nat had been talking about taking Bucky out for a stroll sometime soon. That might have to wait for a while, and Steve pushes down the feeling of disappointment about that.

When he gets home, he works methodically to take off his shoes, set an alarm for an hour on his phone, and lay down in the middle of the bed. He feels slightly sick, and he knows that's just the adrenaline running out and the tiredness kicking in. Not bothering with the sheets, he falls asleep after a few deep breaths.

**
There's a stream somewhere just inside the Austrian border.

"We smell terrible, and we're ahead of schedule anyway." Monty insists, and Morita backs him up. They need to set up camp regardless. There's no reason why they can't take a break.

Steve volunteers to keep watch while they bathe. Dum-Dum points out that it's clear for a mile in every direction, and "serum or no, your stink's just as bad as any of ours," but Cap insists. Bucky, bless him, distracts them enough to drop the subject by mentioning he's still got half a bar of soap left if anyone's willing to use it when he's done. Monty makes an appropriately disgusted face and begins disrobing with the rest of him.

It's nice, actually. Steve looks out over the sunlit water, tempted to pull out his sketchbook but worried about the joke that might draw out of the boys, and settles for watching the trees instead, the way their leaves rustle with the passing breeze. Jones says something in a low, devilish voice that sets the others off into gales of laughter, and Steve smiles. He didn't catch the joke, but that doesn't matter. It's just nice to hear them being happy.

Hours later, Bucky takes his spot with his back against the tree while Steve bathes in solitude. The men are a ways off, counting rations and cleaning weapons.

"A hundred pounds later, a head taller, and you're still shy?"

Steve looks up, blinking at what he can see behind the tree - Bucky's legs stretched out and crossed loosely at the ankle, foot tipping back and forth with some unheard tune. "What? Oh." Steve glances a look down at himself. He's bright pink from the chill of the water, but otherwise, he's starting to look clean again. He keeps scrubbing with the rag. "I suppose." He glances up at the shirt and trousers hanging on the branch to try, almost comically huge, really, and sighs. "Every time I pick up my own clothes I still think I must've gotten somebody else's by mistake. That I could fit three of me in that one damn shirt."

Bucky snorts. "Probably," he agrees. Then, quieter, "I miss the old you."

"The old me?"

He sees just enough of Bucky's shoulder to spot the shrug. "The real you."

"This is the real me now, Buck." Steve runs a hand through his hair, cringing as he unwittingly dislodges a clump of dirt. Jeez. He steel's himself, kneeling down in the water and getting just far enough down to rinse it out properly.

"Well, I liked the old real you just fine."

**

The quiet tap on the door is far less frantic than what woke Steve up last time, but he bolts up all the same, running to it and yanking it open.

Bucky is standing there, hair messy as ever and wearing one of his new long-sleeve shirts. He's tugging at the wrists of it and looking at his feet.

"Hi," he mumbles, sounding more like himself than Steve expected.

"Hey." Steve waits for Bucky to say something else; his mouth is opening and shutting again, struggling with the process. He opens the door a little wider. "Do you want to talk?"
"No," Bucky says quickly, and then clamps his mouth shut like he didn't mean to say that. Steve shrugs and opens the door still wider.

"You can come in anyway, if you want."

Bucky does. He hasn't seen Steve's room before, but it's the inverse of Bucky's, nothing special. Bucky looks around anyway, taking in the details, before sitting in the chair in the corner and drawing his legs up. He folds his arms overtop his knees, making a convenient wall. Steve, unwilling to stand over him, sits on the edge of the bed a few feet away. He gives it a minute.

"Nat said you had a teleconference this morning?"

Bucky nods mutely, not contributing anything further. Then, all of a sudden: "I'm sorry I lost it last night."

"Everyone understands."

Bucky inclines his head a little and continues to not make eye contact. He works his jaw, arranging the words in his head. Steve waits.

"I'm sorry I touched you."

Steve blinks. "What?"

"I'm sorry. When I got the new arm, I. I was. I shouldn't have been on you like that." He hides a little more behind his wall and Steve takes a deep breath.

"You were in a lot of pain, Buck, and you haven't done anything wrong." He feels like this conversation is backwards somehow but he doesn't know how to fix it. If he should.

"I don't want you to think..." Bucky sighs. "I don't know how to say it."

Steve has a good idea of what wrong idea Bucky doesn't want him to get, and he'd do just about anything not to hear it. He already knows. He doesn't need verbal confirmation. "Parker did really well today," he says, hoping to brighten the mood.

Bucky's eyes widen, then slam shut. "Thursday," he says, realizing.

"I took over." Steve smiles. "I don't think I instilled the same fear in him you do, but he's hitting harder than he used to. His form's better."

"Kid's gotta learn to kick with his whole body."

"He's getting there. He's got a good teacher."

"He's trying." Bucky pulls his right hand free of the wall to run it through his hair, sorting it out a bit. "Reminds me of Stevenson," he says, almost embarrassed.

Steve tilts his head. "I don't think I remember Stevenson."

"Good heart. Eighteen, enlisted as soon as he could, sweetest kid you could ever meet. Excited to help." Bucky looks grim. "You never met him. Died two weeks in."
Chapter 30

Four days pass. Bucky feels restless in the Tower, it's clear, but he makes absolutely no noise about wanting to go into the world. Natasha suggests more time around the pool. Some sun and fresh air should give him a little relief.

It's a good turnout, too. Jane and Bruce are more or less working remotely, tablets in laps and discussing theories in two chaise lounges pulled up next to each other. Darcy is laughing like a maniac, having convinced Peter to stick to the end of the diving board while she shakes it. Peter's laughs are devolving into giggles, not budging no matter how hard she pulls and releases the board.

Natasha, to Steve's surprise, is wearing a two-piece swimsuit, relaxing under a large hat and enjoying a brightly colored drink. Bucky is sitting almost dutifully by her feet, his legs dangling in the water.

Steve Rogers: I was right.

Natasha picks up her phone as it chirps, a small line forming between her eyebrows as she texts back.

UNLISTED: ?

Steve Rogers: You look terrible.

Natasha actually snorts, drawing the attention of Bucky. He doesn't ask, though, turning away again instead.

UNLISTED: I promise I'll wear a cover-up next time. Also, who TEXTS the person sitting next to them? Are you finally becoming one of us?

Steve Rogers: Should I have said it out loud, and have Sam deck me because he doesn't know the context?

"Whatcha lookin' at, Buck?"

Steve looks up from his phone, curious about Sam's sly comment. He follows Bucky's gaze before he can turn away. Ms. Lewis's... decolletage... is bouncing in her bikini top every time she grips and bounces the diving board. Having been caught, Bucky looks very slightly mortified.

"You're becoming yourself more and more every day," Steve comments serenely, and Bucky cups a bit of water out of the pool to flick at him. Steve flinches and laughs.

Sam lowers his voice a bit. "Darcy's single, you know."

Bucky's alarm returns, and he shoots a dirty look at Sam as if he were rude for even suggesting such a thing before turning away. Sam leans across Natasha to give her a significant look (they have been giving each other more of those recently).

"Bucky," Natasha says calmly after a few minutes, and Bucky perks, turning. "Will you help me?" She holds up a bottle of sunblock. His mouth twists but he gets to his feet, settling into the space she makes from scooting up the chaise and taking the bottle from her hand.

Steve watches because he is unable to look away. Bucky frowns at the bottle a moment, then at his
left hand, finally deciding to squeeze with his left hand into his right and rub it in one-handed. He
starts with the shoulders and works down, moving efficiently, never lingering in any particular
place. Distantly, he hears a splash accompanied by an undignified sound from Peter.

"Done," Bucky reports finally, and hands the bottle back to her. She smiles and he gets up,
frowning at his hand a moment, then going inside. Probably to rinse it off.

"The experiment continues?" Sam quips. In the pool, Peter is getting dunked repeatedly. Jane has
noticed and is chiding Darcy for not playing fair. Steve doesn't have an opportunity to ask what
Sam means. Bucky's already back, drying his hands on his trunks.

"Your turn," Natasha says calmly, pointing to the ground in front of her and twirling her finger
around. Bucky hesitates, torn between an order and an argument, before sitting down with his back
to her and arguing at the same time.

"I don't think I can burn with the serum."

"Why risk it? Sunblock's cheap." She plants one foot on either side of him, calves gently brushing
against his arms, and pours some lotion in her hand before stroking it into his shoulders, neck, and
back. Steve watches with carefully contained panic.

What's strange, Steve realizes by the time Natasha is almost done, is that for all the contact, all the
touching, Bucky is just... fine. Holding still because he's expected to, unaffected by the smooth
bare leg brushing against his right arm, the soft hands on his skin. When she pats him on the side
to indicate she's done he gets, up, looking a little calmer but certainly nothing else, mind already
back on the conversation.

"Why don't you ask her?" Bucky asks Sam, head quirked.

"Me?"

Bucky shrugs. "You have photos in your room, but they're all your family."

Sam smiles. "Not really interested."

"Oh. Because she's white?"

"Bucky!"

Bucky looks at Steve, confused by his embarrassment, but Sam waves it away. "No, no. Nothing
like that. That's not nearly as much of a thing anymore."

"Oh." Bucky examines Sam, then Darcy in the pool, considering. "I... don't see what the problem
could be, then."

Sam shrugs and tips his sunglasses down, waiting, until something dawns on Bucky and he raises
his eyebrows, shocked. "Because - are you-"

Steve realizes he's actually not sure himself, as it's never been his business, and looks over at Sam
with what he hopes is the most neutral, non-judging face ever known to man. Sam shrugs.

"Yeah, I like men. Women too. I just never want to sleep with them."

"What?"

Natasha calmly pulls her phone into her lap, and Steve immediately knows she is pulling up the
The betting pool on The Thing That Will Absolutely Floor Bucky About the Future.

Bucky looks furtively over at the others who might be in earshot, obviously concerned for Sam and not sure if this information should get out. Sam waves a hand at him. He's been doing that a lot lately. "Relax, man."

"You don't - who doesn't want sex?"

"Asexual people." Sam looks like Bucky's face is pushing him towards laughter more and more by the minute, and he's having trouble holding back.

"Ase- Steve, are they making things up again?"

Steve chews his lip and counts off his fingers as he recalls the SHIELD brochure. "Um, I remember heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual. And sometimes bisexual is used interchangeably with pansexual...?"

"It's complicated," Natasha murmurs serenely. Her thumbs are flying over her phone screen.

Bucky is looking at them like they've told him there are five moons.

"Biromantic asexual," Sam says. "It's a mouthful. No big deal. I'm not really on the dating scene right now anyway, and you're not my type, so. Don't worry about it."

Bucky's confounded expression doesn't budge, and finally he walks back inside, presumably fleeing the conversation. He's been getting better about not doing that, but Steve can't entirely blame him for this one. He remembers being similarly confounded when Ms. Hill sat him down.

"Bruce won," Natasha's murmuring, squinting over a complex spreadsheet displayed on her phone screen. "Damn. Bruce!"

He looks up from across the patio.

"You won the pool!"

Bruce smiles widely and goes back to his tablet.

**

Bucky comes back a little while later later with beers for Sam and Steve and another brightly colored drink for Nat, so Steve counts that as a victory.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

My birthday's coming up at the end of the month, but I'm going to try to have a chapter or two prep beforehand so there isn't a hiccup in posting. WE SHALL SEE, GENTLE READERS.

(<3)

UNLISTED: The Tony thing is as resolved as it's going to get. I think Bucky will stop avoiding him now.

Steve Rogers: You're a miracle worker. What'd you do?

UNLISTED: Don't worry about the details. And don't ask either of them. I think they're equally self-conscious about the whole thing in their own ways.

**

Steve Rogers: Bucky is all right with you, right?

Sam Wilson: LOL, yeah of course!

Sam Wilson: he came over and we talked. there's like a checklist of questions every time I tell someone. 1. so ur like a monk? (nooo.) 2. so its not religious? (nooo) 3. so how do u date ppl? (vry vry carefully)

Sam Wilson: etc etc

Sam Wilson: he wasn't rude or anything he just had a billion questions.

Steve Rogers: Okay. I'm glad.

**

"You hit him with your car?"

"That's the first time she hit him with her car," Darcy interjects, beaming. "Don't look so worried! He was totes fine. When you meet Thor, you'll see. He's kinda built like a tank."

Bucky looks to Jane for confirmation, and Jane shrugs, unable to deny it. "He is... built a little bit like a tank."

**

They don't see Peter for a while. Midterms are apparently a big deal, and he has a scholarship to think of.

(Sam says Peter mentioned his internship checks have been going towards a lot of his uncle's old medical bills and a new roof for his aunt's house. Steve suggests they start going out to eat more
after training, to sneak a few meals into the kid without being too direct about it. Sam fist-bumps him, which means he agrees.)

Spider-Man sees a bit of action when a hostage situation arises in the bank downtown. Natasha must have given Bucky a printout of the article, because pinned up next to the training schedule in the common area is a scathing article from The Bugle about vigilante interference with a full-cover photo of Spider-Man punching a bank robber. Someone has circled Spider-Man's hips and shoulders and written GREAT FORM overtop the article text.

**

Natasha and Sam take Steve out to a cafe that overlooks Central Park. It's relaxing.

"Text from Clint," Natasha says, picking up her phone. Steve takes a strange pride in being able to detect that small uptick in her tone that means she's very pleased.

"Anything appropriate for general audiences?" Sam wonders, sipping on the bubble tea that Steve agreed to try once and then immediately set aside.

"Thanks for sending Thor'... 'most of Serbia demolished'... 'moreso than it was before'." Natasha hmms and looks up. "We might be seeing them soon."

"That'd be nice," Steve says, finding he really means it. The strange family they've composed has started to grow on him.

"I wonder if T'Challa will come over." Sam leans over, seeing if he can steal one of Steve's spring rolls. The smack on the hand informs him he cannot.

"Is that revenge for before?"

"Just protecting what's mine."

Natasha smiles. "I hope T'Challa comes over. Tony already hates him."

"Only because Pepper makes such a show of being impressed by him," Steve points out. He picks up the spring roll, taking his time in admiring it so that Sam can get as annoyed and jealous as possible, then takes a huge bite.

**

"Nat mentioned your doctor's been giving you projects?"

'Assignments' would probably be a more common word to use, Steve thinks, but the psychiatrist manages to navigate through the minefield of Bucky's bad memories with admirable grace, and all the trigger-words involved with them. When Steve emailed her to mention the idea to take Bucky out sometime soon, she gave him some detailed suggestions, along with a list of films currently in theaters that would not be appropriate for his temperment.

Bucky nods, expression flat. He's constantly teetering on the fence between 'doing the few things he's asked to do with no complaints' and 'experiencing the cultural shame of having to go to a shrink'. Gently, he tips a takeout container into a large ceramic bowl, trying to make sure all of the beef slices make it out of the carton.

"Anything I can help with?"
Bucky quirks his lips. "I'm supposed to ... put more effort into identifying and talking about what I want."

"Or just finding it, and pouring it into a bowl and microwaving it."

Steve smiles as Bucky rolls his eyes. "We spent about three conferences talking about getting stuff myself."

"Which is why the freezer is now constantly out of vanilla bean ice cream?"

Bucky looks away boredly, as if he has no idea what Steve is talking about, but the quick swipe of his tongue across his lower lip gives him away.

"Well, if you need anything you can't achieve through raiding the kitchens, you know I'd be happy to help." And Steve means to deliver that line in a light-hearted, just-so-you-know kind of way, and he thinks he does pretty well with it. Bucky ducks his head and nods, turning to fiddle with the microwave buttons.

When Steve goes to Sam's room to discuss outing plans, he notices a mess of papers on the desk. One has scribbled bullet points that he can barely read ('consent' is circled several times) and on the other one, there are notes in all directions, male and female symbols, and what appears to be a ginger bread man outline with lines coming from the head, body, and leg.

"Planning some Christmas cookie recipes?" Steve tilts his head, leaning in a little.

"That is called a gender-bread man, and he is a very well-known teaching tool." Sam smacks his hand from the papers, picking them up himself and flipping them over. "Quit spyin'. You don't see me going through that sketchbook you carry around."

"These are really highly rated on the internet," Steve wheedles, but Bucky is still looking at the large headphones with serious trepidation. Nobody knows exactly why he doesn't like things covering his head, but nobody is really going to make him explain it, either. Steve assumes it's the same reason he didn't like the initial MRI device.

"I can just wear earbuds." The modern word fits strangely in Bucky's mouth.

Steve nods. "Okay, but. If you want to try... you know how the sound system in the entertainment room is like a theater?"

"But better," Bucky admits, reluctantly interested now.

"This is like your own, personal." Steve gestures vaguely. "Tony caught me wearing some headphones I bought in a corner shop and started yelling at me and I didn't understand why, and then he got me these, and it's like night and day. If your hearing - if it's like ours, all the little - yeah, you should. Try it."

He hands the wireless headphones to Bucky, putting the Bluetooth flash drive thing down on his desk, and leaves to let him think about it. He has no concerns about Bucky figuring out how to hook it up to his Stark tablet. Bucky's always figured that stuff out ten times faster than Steve ever did.
They're in the middle of dinner when Bucky's phone chirps. He pulls it out of his pocket, reads, and then his expression fades away, painfully neutral. He struggles for a moment before putting the phone on the table and sliding it to Natasha, next to her plate.

Steve frowns. "Can I-"

Bucky shrugs, folding his arms and placing them on the table, so Steve reads.

*Jane Foster: We're getting dim sum tomorrow at the place I told you about. You and Steve are welcome to join us if you like! It's all supersoldier portions.*

Natasha holds the phone in her hands a moment before looking over at Bucky. "Do you want to?" she asks, gently. Steve notices that Tony and Sam have the calm, blank looks of people who are pointedly minding their business and not listening.

Bucky makes an impatient sound and buries his face in his arms. Steve winces.

"I'll write an excuse for you," she says, and Bucky deflates, huffing out a grateful sigh.

The next morning, Tony breaks the unspoken news rule again to bring everyone to the TV. The news is on, scroller packed with abbreviated reports about Eastern Europe and bunkers that are now billowing smoke. The left side of the screen is a slideshow of different daunting faces in grainy detail. Generals, terrorists, some with known Hydra affiliations. On the other side of the screen is a news conference with Warmachine at the podium, surrounded by the others. He's answering questions and smiling. The camera cuts to previously recorded footage of some men being led away in handcuffs. Natasha's expression goes surprisingly soft after staring at the screen for a few moments, and then she pulls out her phone.

"I'm telling Bucky to come down," she says to Steve. When he does, Natasha reaches out for his hand, rubbing circles over his fingers and pointing to the screen. She murmurs to him in Russian, and Steve speaks just enough of it to know what she said:

*See? I promised.*

Steve takes the bowl of fruit sitting on the kitchen counter and carries it outside, placing it on one of the small tables next to the chaise lounges. He studies it a while, rearranging individual fruits and rotating the bowl until he's satisfied. He sets his messenger bag down and pulls out his sketchbook and a few pencils, starting with the gentle curve of the asymmetric bowl and then the rough shape of the pear in the front. Then the orange, then the apple next to it, and the two peaches. He hears the french doors open behind him.

It's Bucky, and he's wearing the headphones. Not looking at Steve, he sets about picking out another chaise lounge, rolling it until it's close to Steve's, and adjusting it until the whole thing lays flat. Satisfied, he lays down, body curled toward Steve and eyes resting shut, and proceeds to drift asleep.
Thor gets back first, which is a commotion in and of itself - Jane isn't very loud, even when she's happy, and Darcy's not loud so much as snarky, but Steve, feeling a duty to his new friend, texted Peter that he may want to come over, and Peter is beside himself and cannot stop talking.

"When you guys were fighting the Chitauri I actually saw you fly past my window for like a split second and I kind of died a little. Can I, um, can I touch your hammer?"

"Of course, my new friend. And what weapons do you carry to the battlefield?"

"Um, I don't really have any. I can make webs, though?"

"Ah, a most appropriate power for your title. I desire to see this ability!"

"Iron Man says I'm not allowed to web outside of the gym."

Thor shoots him a sympathetic look. "I, too, have been asked to keep certain abilities in check while indoors."

"Because you fried the security system," Tony mutters under his breath, still tapping out a pizza order on his tablet to prepare for everyone else's arrival.

**

Warmachine has business in DC. T'Challa does indeed come to the Tower with the others, and to Steve's surprise and embarrassment, he is singled out very early on.

"Tales of your bravery and selflessness carry far, Captain Rogers." It turns out a Wakandan accent isn't completely dissimilar from a Nigerian one, to Steve's ear, and that combined the low octave of the man's voice is causing Darcy (and, Steve would never reveal to Thor, Jane) to look at the man with an... uncommon amount of attention. Steve has seen that look too many times when going to dance halls with Bucky.

"Well, I know Pepper appreciated your help in London, and we're all grateful for your assistance with Hydra."

"Of course." He inclines his head. "My country may prefer a somewhat isolated existence, but one cannot turn their head away from true threats to human freedom... I must confess, considering your history with the group, I was surprised that you did not accompany us."

Steve takes in a breath and wishes Tony would come and grab his business partner. The man isn't being rude, but Steve really doesn't know how to answer that question just yet.

Darcy helps him. "Steve's been helping his Howling Cutemando. Can't work that job remotely, you know?"
To Steve's surprise, T'Challa nods and makes an apologetic gesture. "Of course. I have heard a bit about your friend. It was good of you to remain here and fill the position that only you can fill... the more time I spend with your group, the more I see the benefits in numbers. Never stretched too thin."

"Pizza!" Clint bellows, and half the room flocks to the boxes in his arms.

**

"No no, not flicker the verb, it's F-l-i-c-k-r. No 'e'. It's a website used to share pictures." Jane dabs a paper towel over her pizza slice.

Bucky cants his head. "Doesn't Instagram already do that?"

Darcy shrugs. "Instagram is like, for selfies and dumb photos you take on your phone. Flickr has professional photography, digital art, pictures of sculptures, a lot of artists use it."

"What about for drawings?"

"By hand? Yeah, people scan them and put them up on Flickr sometimes."

Bucky punches Steve's shoulder. "You should put your stuff up there."

Steve makes a noncommittal noise and looks away, watching Clint and Natasha catch up in the corner. Six months ago, he would have thought they were both bored and emotionless. Now, he can see the tiny hint of a smile on Nat's lips, the way she leans forward just a bit. She did miss him. Not for the first time, Steve's grateful she chose to hang back with him in America.

Bucky punches his shoulder again.

"What?"

Bucky rolls his eyes. "I said, you should put up the one of the diner. I remember that one. It was good."

"Bucky, I drew that in the 30s."

Bucky snorts derisively. "Unless I missed a big change, people like art even more when it's old."

"No, I mean, I don't have that sketchbook anymore. Any of them, actually." Steve shrugs and tugs another slice of pizza out of the box. "I didn't exactly have my worldly possessions on me when I crashed."

"Your stuuuuuff," Darcy whines, pouting.

"I think it's mostly in museums now," Bruce tells them delicately.

"Yes. The Smithsonian was kind enough to ship some things to me upon request... my mother's necklace wasn't on display in the first place."

"They've got your sketchbooks?" Bucky looks disproportionately affronted. The indignant note in his voice draws a few heads, and Steve winces. He's never been great with people being mad for him.

"It's fine," Steve says, looking down. "A lot of it isn't even in museums. Private collectors got most of the pre-War stuff."
"How could you keep all that stuff after finding out the guy is actually alive?" Darcy makes a face.

"They probably paid thousands for it," Jane points out, and Clint barks out in a laugh.

"Try millions. I’ve seen Coulson online lusting after some of that stuff - before we found you, Steve, don't get me wrong. There was a hardback copy of *The Hobbit* that was hitting six figures when I looked at it."

Bucky shoots to his feet. "*I got you that for your birthday!*"

"Bucky, really, it's okay."

"I agree with Mr. Barnes." T’Challa’s reasonable tone contrasts Bucky's. "Those items did not get passed down to your next of kin and then sold, or donated. They were not given up willingly."

Steve halts the conversation with a large sweeping gesture. "I want," he enunciates clearly, "to hear some incredible, detailed, heroic stories of how you guys swept into Romania last week. I saw a clip on the news. It looked amazing."

**

"So you're a supercomputer, right?"

"Yes, sir."

Peter takes a sip from his bottle and winces sympathetically as Tony removes Jarvis's faceplate, frowns at it, and buffs it on his shirt.

"So you're doing, like, a hundred thousand things at once?"

"Something like that, sir, yes."

"So what are you doing riiiiiiight.... now?"

"As always, sir, I am monitoring the security systems of all Mr. Stark's properties, running scans on several of Mr. Stark's electronic properties, and adjusting his stock portfolio in accordance with my latest algorithm for conservative growth,. I am also responding to two emails from two different business partners proposing lunch dates for the same day in June, allocating some of Mr. Stark's personal funds to go toward a psychiatric ward in Warsaw, planning the attendance list for the-.

Tony's head snaps up. "Wait, go back one?"

"Warsaw, Poland, sir."

"Why are we sending money to a psych ward there?"

"It's where two of the hostages were sent once they were recovered, sir. A mere hundred thousand dollars will go quite a ways toward improving their treatment and the basic infrastructure of the building. It was built in 1982 and has since-"


Peter gets shifty-eyed. Almost as if on cue, Bucky appears next to him, plucking the bottle from his hand and examining it. "Parker, what's the twenty-first century drinking age?"
Peter smiles winningly. It doesn't work. Bucky gulps down the rest of the hard cider and stalks to the fridge, pulling out an Orangina and shoving it into Peter's hand.

"Wait, wait," Clint leans over to Tony, leg still - Steve notices - pressing inconspicuously against Natasha's. "Tony, didn't you make that ... stuff?"

"Stuff," Tony echoes, eyebrows rising. "I make a lot of stuff. You could kind of say that's what I do. I'm the stuff-maker."

"No, the-" Clint gestures to Bucky of all people, then to Steve, then tips his fingers in front of his mouth to mime alcohol. Tony blinks and then grins.

"Yes, yes, the stuff!"

Bucky frowns. "Anyone gonna tell me what's going on?"

Tony practically scampers across the room, grabbing Pepper's arm and drawing her away from a conversation with Jane. "Please say I can. Please say I can."

Pepper gives him a confused look, and Tony huffs impatiently and whispers in her ear, looking to all the world like a small dog begging to go on a walk. "If someone misbehaves, Thor can just put them in a time-out by putting Mjolnir on their stomach, it's totally cool."

Pepper throws her hands up. "I abstain from voting and am going to bed," she declares, and Tony pumps a fist in the air and grabs Bruce's arm.

"Come on, science bro, remember that batch we brewed up last month?"

"What? Oh! Oh." Bruce scratches the back of his head, standing up. "It's... probably safe."
"Shoehorning," the doctor had said, the week before.

"Excuse me?" Steve had said.

"I'm sorry, but I've been trying to come up with another way to put it that would make sense to a layperson, and I can't." The doctor had shifted in his chair, leaning out of frame to sip on some water, before continuing. "I've seen different parts of the brain suffer damage or fall into disuse for different reasons. If they snap back, it's never much, and never so quickly."

Steve had waited, doing his best not to get hopeful. The doctor had continued.

"I'm starting to suspect that the reason Sergeant Barnes was electronically 'erased' so frequently, and frozen when not on assignment, was because he was unusable to them otherwise. They wanted an unkillable mindless robot and, using stolen technology they barely understood, they made an unkillable man with a bad habit of protecting people and only following orders that he agreed with." He had leaned forward with his stylus, pulling up a time-lapse of the hypothalamus. One bright spot, one, one and a half, three. Three and a half. Seven. "For decades they've been working to retard this exact process. The brain righting itself. The brain being damnably stubborn, if I do say so myself."

**

Clint explains briefly that Tony and Bruce started some sort of alcoholic distillery a while back - he was there when they had to air out an entire level because the fumes from the first batch were knocking people flat on their back. Literally.

(It's about then that Jane and T'Challa excuse themselves from the rest of the festivities. Robot Jarvis retires to the lab for some repairs.)

"They've been synthesizing some kind of thousand-proof whiskey, I don't know how it works exactly." Clint shrugs, watching the ceiling. Peter has crept up there, seated patiently and watching Darcy's drink with serious intent. As soon as she sets it down to check her phone, he shoots a web to capture it, pulling it up to himself and enjoying the spoils.

"Bucky's not going to like that," Steve remarks idly.

"I'm too young to be a grandmother," Natasha complains, and gets up to go join Thor and "Sam, son of Wil" in the corner. They haven't stopped talking since they introduced themselves to each other. Thor has that bright-eyed, animated look to him that means he is talking about Asgard.

"Actually. Where is Bucky?" Steve looks over one shoulder, then the other. Maybe another cat nap. They're less frequent than they were, but they still happen every other day or so. Maybe the people were too much for him.

"Haven't seen him since he carded Peter. How's he doing, anyway?" Clint leans back and stretches on the couch. Steve notices a fresh white cut along his bicep that only closed up a day or so ago.

Steve shrugs, because it's impossible to catalog objectively. "Better than he was a week ago," he says finally. "His... baseline is better. His bad days aren't as bad." The Howard night does not count.
Clint nods. "You think he'll suit up?"

"What?"

"Not now, obviously." Clint looks back to Steve, notices his face, and recoils a little. "Jesus. Sorry."

Steve schools his features into something more relaxed and makes an apologetic gesture. "He's - he trains Spiderman now. He's very good at it, but. I don't know about."

"Actual enemies?"

"Yes."

"Hm."

"Or if he'd want to."

Clint scratches the back of his head, considering this. "I guess it's hard to tell right now. Well." He looks up again, tracking Peter as he walks across the ceiling and drops the empty bottle neatly into the recycling bin in the corner. "No big rush. No pressure. We've got enough fresh blood to handle anything that comes up."

**

It starts to rain outside, and then it starts to storm in earnest not long after. The lightning is pleasantly dramatic with such a good view of the city, and Tony queues up some party music as soon as he returns with what looks like a keg covered in extra tubes and pressure gauges.

"We're doing this. This batch is gonna be great, it is definitely not poisonous. Steve, get over here. Where's your grumpier half?"

"Elsewhere." Steve gives a put-upon sigh and walks over to the... device. It looks more menacing than it should. "So this is... alcohol."

"Super alcohol," Tony corrects, and Bruce, who is usually trying to be as far away from Tony's hare-brained schemes as possible, looks like he is actually sort of proud of the... whatever it is, and curious to see if it will do what it's supposed to. "Aged in oak and then put through a rigorous amount of science."

"We admittedly spent a lot more time focusing on enhancing the proof than the, erm, taste," Bruce smiles apologetically, and Steve actually smiles back, finding himself kind of touched. This project, when it started, would have been something just for him. A gesture of sorts, back when he and Tony couldn't stand each other's presence without world-threatening chaos looming overhead.

"It can't be worse than what Bucky and I drank as kids," he says, taking the offered glass and holding it under the tap. The odor is immediate - like whiskey soaked in lighter fluid. Somewhere far behind him, Steve hears Darcy make an 'oof!' noise.

Tony lets go of the tab when the whiskey glass is about half full. "Do we need to open the windows? Let's open the windows a little bit. Nobody's gonna faint this time, though." Peter drops down from the ceiling to nudge the patio doors partway open while Steve swirls the clear mixture around, sniffing it. It's certainly... alcohol.

"Um, is there a gas leak?" Bucky is standing in the doorway. His hair is mussed, and he's wearing a
loose t-shirt and the pajama pants he must have switched into to catch a quick nap. Steve is trying to avoid an emotional reaction, but Darcy is awwing and drawing attention to it all.

"No, it's a drink. Courtesy our host." Steve holds the glass up and Bucky walks forward, inspecting it gravely and then inhaling. He flinches back almost immediately.

"It's strong."

"It's on purpose." Steve smiles. "Tony and Bruce made it because my metabolism doesn't let me get drunk."

Making a curious noise, Bucky leans in again, slower, and Steve realizes that most of the room has stopped what they were doing to see how this develops.

Bucky bites his lip. Then: "I want that."

Shit.

"Well, there's enough for both of you," Tony declares pragmatically, gesturing for some horrible enabler to fetch him a second glass. "Not that I'm an expert in either of your biologies or in brewing, but I see no reason to let that stop me. There's science that needs doing."

"Science should make sure they drink plenty of water tonight," Bruce murmurs, watching as Steve gives the requested glass to Bucky, who swirls it and makes a face before tilting his head back and downing half of it. When he swallows and grins, there is thunderous applause.

**

Steve finds that shots are the only way to really make himself drink it, and after some careful monitoring of himself determines that a shot is, more or less, half as strong as shots back before the serum. It's an inexact guess, but Bruce brings him a bottle of water as if feeling preemptively guilty, and Steve has to admit to himself that the buzz is nice, in its own way.

Bucky is cutting his share with whiskey he finds in the cabinet. He is animatedly telling Darcy and Sam about a memory in real-time as it returns to him - Dernier and Jones in a small town French pub, wooing the local women. Steve's face when Bucky had translated the French for him.

"It was filthy," Steve declares, "and I am not repeating any of it." Sam guffaws and Clint appears as if from nowhere, nudging Bucky in the arm in a silent bid to hear for himself. Mouth curling into a smile, Bucky leans over and whispers something very long and detailed into Clint's ear.

**

Peter has gone to bed. Darcy is keeping up impressively well, matching Sam drink for drink and still enunciating clearly as she demands that he get up and mix her something if he's going to keep yammering on about what a great bartender he was in college.

Steve is several shots in, talking to Natasha when Bucky sidles over and pokes his arm.

"Hmm?" Things feel sort of muzzy and warm, and the squinty look on Bucky's face reminds him of nights spent in a too-small apartment with too-cheap booze. It's a nice face.

Bucky looks pointedly over his shoulder at Thor. He is telling a story to Sam and Tony. "Rainbow road?"
Natasha grins. "Not made up," she reports, and Steve nods in assent. Bucky frowns, digesting this, and walks back over to hear the rest of Thor's story.

**

Bruce's 'ow!' draws Steve's attention. Tony had elbowed him, he realizes, and is pointing excitedly to the corner where Bucky is talking to Natasha and Clint in Russian. His expression is calm, warm, almost, and he's engaging in more eye contact than probably his first whole week put together.

"Science bro success," Tony murmurs to Bruce, and the two of them lean back in matching satisfied poses.

**

Steve is relaxing on the couch, half-listening to Tony tell the room a story about when he first met Pepper. Bucky comes to sit next to him, body loose and brushing against Steve's at the edges. Knee to knee, elbow to arm. It's so pleasant. Everything about tonight feels... pleasant.

"Clint's good," Bucky reports, calm.

Steve inclines his head, and it tips forward more than he meant it to. "Mm."

They listen to Tony's story for a while. It's long. Steve's forgotten the beginning. "Is he with Natasha?"

"Hm?"

"Clint. Is Clint with Natasha."

Steve turns and gives him a questioning look, and Bucky lifts his eyebrows very slowly and very deliberately to indicate his meaning. Steve shrugs.

"It was never my business. Never asked." Steve looks back to Tony, then to the corner, and notices that the two agents are sharing the love seat in the corner. Clint is perched on the arm of the chair, turned to Natasha, who is relaxing and taking up most of the actual seat. This is normal.

"At first, I thought maybe you two." Bucky shrugs his shoulders.

Steve breaks out into a short laugh. "No, no."

"So you two've never...?"

"God, no, Buck." Steve scrubs a hand over his face and can't help from grinning. "And before you ask, she's tried to set me on dates with girls at the office, back when... when we had an office, and they all went terribly. If you're in the mood for those stories, you better go find someone else."

Bucky sips his weird glass of half-and-half, impressively not grimacing at the taste. "No good stories from you, none from Sam. Got it."

"No," Steve agrees, "not Sam."

"Are a lot of people in the future like him?"

"Like him how?" To be honest, Steve's not sure he's never met anyone who could be called similar to Sam.
"Being... different, I guess."

Oh. Steve knows what he means. "I think they say one in ten? Isn't straight, I mean, is. Is some kind of other thing." And he gives a one-shouldered shrug, the one Bucky will know means 'and that is fine'.

Bucky nods. "He says you don't get arrested for those things anymore." He sounds ponderous.

"No. Consenting adults, it's their business." Steve's mind goes back to a shuffle of papers, something circled, but it's late and he's... sleepy. It's not important anyway.

Steve gets lost in his thoughts for a while. Bucky gets up, refills his glass, returns, sits, sips calmly. After a moment of watching the others, Bucky asks, "What kind of music is this?"

"It's..." Steve listens to it a moment. "House."

"House?"

"Or electronica," Steve amends. "Or chillwave."

"Those are all kinds of music?"

"Yes." Steve is pretty sure. "Skip industrial. You won't like it."

Bucky frowns and looks over the room a minute, finishing his drink and then setting it down on the table. His hand sweeps wide once the glass is released, the accidentally grand gesture of someone who's not completely coordinated. "How do you dance to any of this?"

The wind picks up outside, pushing a gust of wind in through the gap where the french doors have been nudged open for fresh air. All of a sudden Bucky's on his feet, dashing out to the patio before Steve can think to ask what's wrong.

"Uh, Steve?" Clint is looking at him expectantly for an answer, and Steve realizes with a slow blink that everyone else is, too.

"I'm - I'm not his translator," Steve mumbles, and looks back to the dark gap between the doors, where the wind and rain are coming from, and if he listens hard he can hear the sounds of papers flipping quickly and then nothing, and then Bucky is coming in and going directly to the kitchen.

"Bucky?" Steve calls out.

"Left your book outside. Gonna make sure the pages aren't wet."

"Oh," Steve says, and there was something he was supposed to remember, about a book, and maybe about Bucky. It's not coming to him. It probably wasn't important. "Thanks."
Bucky is ten when he sleeps over at Steve's during the rainstorm.

The loose arrangement of pillows and blankets on the floor is more than enough, even for Steve - it's a pleasant autumn night and they fall asleep easily, mid-conversation, because they have spent all day playing and there is nowhere in the world that feels more comfortable and safe. Bucky doesn't get up until his bladder is absolutely insistant, and it's when he's returning from the bathroom, bare feet on cool hardwood planks, that he hears the sound that makes his body tense in absolute fear:

Raindrops on paper.

He'd been tasked with bringing in everything from the fire escape after dinner. The soldiers, and the sketchbook, Steve's sketchbook, filled with at least a week's worth of drawings, including the ones from just hours ago, painstaking detail of the epic battle of the army men descending from high ground in perfect formation. Bucky launches himself to the window, pushing it open with panic-shaking hands and scrambling out in his pajamas, soldiers ignored and dripping on the ground, reaching in the dark for the soft delicate cover of the book. There, but it's paper, the wind having blown it open to some unseeable page. He shuts it and yanks it to his chest, crawls back inside, biting back tears, and goes to desk lamp to turn it on and assess the damage.

It's bad. The pages aren't trapped together but they cling at the corners, limp in places, large splotches of water having turned smooth stiff paper to soft misshapen bubbles. Bucky traces his fingers gently over the outline of the sniper in the background, now ghostlike from how the dark straight lines have turned soft and grey.

Ashamed, he pulls it back to his chest, scared to close it again for fear that it will not open back up. He walks in the dark to Mrs. Rogers's bedroom, knocking softly, scared to wake Steve up by accident, scared to confess, hating himself.

Mrs. Rogers is alarmed by how soaked he is, but when he shows her the book and tries to put some words together she seems to understand what happened. They sit at the kitchen table for an hour in the lamplight, working together to dab each page with a dishtowel. The pages dry, rippled in spots, some pages untouched but so many more beyond fixing. When they are done Mrs. Rogers leaves the book open on the worst page under the lamp to dry a bit more. She tells Bucky to go to bed, now, that it will not seem so bad in the morning.

**

Steve wakes up, but it's not an all-at-once process so much as a long stretch of being aware that his head hurts, and then that he is lying down, and then that he must have been asleep until recently. His thoughts don't arrange themselves coherently for a while because nothing feels right - his feet are uncomfortable, and his legs, and his hand is pressed against something cold and smooth. Fabric. A couch.

He's not laying flat. He's still wearing his shoes, wearing jeans. His arm is curled around something warm and solid. A leg? Steve sits up quickly, head swimming and thick, and looks down; he's on Tony's couch in the common area, and until just a second ago he'd been sleeping with his head
nearly in Bucky's lap, one arm slung around Bucky's leg. Bucky, thank god, is still asleep, but he's stir-
ing, brows coming together and making a low, unhappy sound. He probably has a headache to match.

"Mmmuh," Bucky protests, right hand covering his face a moment before he takes a long, deep breath and squints his eyes open. "Steve," he says, but it kind of comes out as 'stv'.

Steve scoots down the couch so he can lean back without trapping Bucky's leg, still cradling his head. He can't do words just yet. I didn't mean to fall asleep here, he wants to say. My head is agony, he wants to say. Anthony Stark is a menace, he wants to say.

Bucky tilts his head to one side, then the other, and there's an audible crack when he pushes it just a few inches further. "Mnh." He swings his leg around to get both feet on the floor, taking a few breaths before breaking out into raspy laughter.

"Wh?" Steve wants to know, and he follows Bucky's gaze to a large bottle of aspirin that has been left on the coffee table. There is a sticky note on it that just says 'SORRY' in Bruce's handwriting.

"Water," Bucky declares, and gets to his feet as slowly as possible, stretching his shoulders and then arching back. Steve looks away when the strip of skin is exposed between Bucky's pajama pants and the t-shirt.

Steve stares at the floor for a while, because that is the least painful thing to do. He can hear the soft clinks of Bucky getting two glasses and filling them from the tap. He hears Bucky's bare feet pad over on the plush carpet, and then there is a glass of water in front of his face. He makes a grateful grunting sound and takes it, twisting the aspirin bottle and tipping out several too many before handing it over to Bucky. They feel dry and terrible on the way down, the water barely helping.

"I feel like shit," Bucky says after swallowing his, but to Steve's confusion, he sounds happy.

"You were always better at being hungover." Steve allows himself a moment of grousing before downing the rest of the glass of water, getting up to get more. Bucky makes a sort of noncommittal, unapologetic noise as he leans against the wall.

The kitchen is a mess, but it's nothing that can't be cleaned up. Empty pizza boxes, pizza boxes with a few slices left that didn't quite make it to the fridge, empty bottles. There is one spot swept clean on the counter. Something rectangular - his sketchbook, and sticking out like bookmarks between every page he can see paper towels.

Bucky joins him, leaning heavily with elbows against the sink as he refills his own glass. "You left it outside," he said, and Steve remembers now, the rain and Bucky getting up in the middle of the party to go fetch something. Very distantly he can remember this happening once before, when they were children - the book had gotten left on the fire escape for some reason or another and the book had never shut right after that, rippled pages pushing it a quarter of the way open at any given time. He thinks he remembers Bucky feeling terrible about it.

Steve feels a warm weight press next to him - Bucky's left arm brushing against his, deceptively flesh-like and solid, as Bucky takes a gulp of water, sets the glass down, and reaches over to leaf through the pages. This isn't normal. For all their oversharing and closeness over the years, he doesn't ever remember Bucky going through a sketchbook without asking.

"I like..." Bucky hmmms, flicking a few more pages over and then sliding the paper towel out of the way. "This one." He presses his finger just underneath the still life of the fruit, and Steve's heart
stops.

Bucky backs up and refills his glass again, silent, and wanders off, presumably to the elevator to his room. Steve does not move from his spot in the kitchen.

Beneath the sketch of the asymmetric bowl, the pear and the orange and the apple and the peaches, is a sketch Bucky cannot, cannot, have missed.

Chapter End Notes

Steve's sketch is courtesy Bluandorange, who is a gem, and is on AO3 and on Tumblr.

Do you like the sketch? Go compliment Blu. (They take commissions, if you're into that kind of thing.) You could also reblog it here.
Chapter 35

Steve begins the long, involved process of telling himself that everything is fine and that he is overreacting. Nothing explicitly damning has been discovered. Bucky didn't even mention it. Perhaps he doesn't care or it doesn't even register on his radar right now.

The best thing no matter what is to act as if nothing is wrong. He compartmentalizes the panic. There's a text on his phone from Sam. It is from three hours ago.

*Sam Wilson: we went to hangover brunch, back in a few hrs*

*Steve Rogers: What did I do last night to merit exclusion?*

*Sam Wilson: dude. BRUCE TRIED TO WAKE U 2 UP.*

*Sam Wilson: it was so funny omg*

**

Steve takes a long, hot shower, doing his best to melt the solid concrete that feels like it's taken up residence behind his eyes.

It helps a little. He still feels groggy, not buzzed but not thinking perfectly clearly, and still trying to steer his thoughts away from things he can't control. He gets out, towels off, changes, and decides to see if any leftover pizza did in fact make it to the refrigerator.

Some did, but Bucky is already eating most of it. "I just took the longest shower of my life," Bucky announces, and magnanimously sets aside three slices of pineapple and ham for Steve. His hair is still damp and one long strand is curled to his forehead. "Does hot water not run out in the future?"

"It does eventually in normal houses." Steve sits in the chair across from Bucky, opening the pizza box wider so he can use the back of the lid as a plate. His mother would not be proud of his manners today.

"Mm." Bucky takes a moment to chew reverently, finger-combing his hair with his left hand. Steve watches, studying Bucky's face, looking for evidence of. Anything. Bucky catches him looking.

"Coordination's better?"

"Yeah." Bucky wiggles each finger individually, then makes the hand signal Steve recognizes from Star Trek. "Takes time."

Steve nods and folds the pizza in half, eating slowly and realizing too late that his mouth tastes terrible. He decides he does not care.

**

Tony, Bruce and Sam come back, and they're carrying a takeaway box that smells like warm syrup. Inside are the fluffiest pancakes Steve's ever seen - Bucky shares them with great reluctance.

"Good," Bucky compliments around a mouthful, and Tony nods in agreement and drops languidly onto the couch. He smells like mimosas.
Steve looks around. "Where's everyone else?"

"Jane and Darcy took Thor out for breakfast earlier, and then I think they were going to the lab." Bruce is counting off his fingers. "T'Challa emailed to say he had a lovely time and had to get some work done at the Embassy downtown, and then he's meeting a friend upstate. Pepper's working. I don't know where Peter is."

"Peter has a biochem exam in half an hour," Bucky says, looking at the clock on the wall. Steve tries not to look shocked that Bucky both knows this and remembered it.

"Okay, so Peter's on campus. Is that everyone?"

"Clint and Natasha," Steve adds, and there's a moment where the room realizes that they are both unaccounted for at the same time. They silently, as a group, decide that that line of conversation is over.

"Falcon test?" Sam prompts Tony, and Tony goes 'oh!' and gestures for attention:

"So since some Iron Man flight tests left some of my properties in various states of disarray, there may or may not be a standing rule that I can't do flight tests in the Tower."

Sam raises his eyebrows in a way that clearly states 'Pepper has this shit on lock and I am okay with that.' (Sam has a very specific way of talking, Steve has learned, and so do his eyebrows.)

"So, I was telling Sam at brunch." Tony shrugs. "Why not the quarry? We could make a road trip of it. It's only about an hour drive, really quiet, I own the subsidiary, so nobody around, no drama. I'll bring my suit too and we'll make sure it runs alright."

"You must be excited," Steve says, and Sam grins. He is.

Bucky sits up. "Can I come?"

They stare at him. He blinks calmly, realizes they're waiting for an explanation, and shrugs. "Nobody around," he says. "I need to get out at some point or another, so it might be good practice to ... go somewhere where I don't have to, um. Wear one of Natasha's digital face masks, or. Talk to new people."

Steve looks to Sam, and then to Tony and Bruce, and they all shrug. Bucky smiles carefully, as if trying the expression on for size.

"I'm going to help Jane in the lab, but you four have fun." Bruce gives a wave and disappears down the hall towards the elevators. Tony claps his hands together, delighted.

"Jarvis!"

"Sir?"

"Tell the kitchen to put some sandwiches together. It's gonna be a picnic."

**

'Some sandwiches' turns out to be twelve sandwiches, a twelve-pack of sodas, a bottle of sparkling cider, some fresh strawberries, and four bottles of water. Steve doesn't know where they got the checkered blanket or basket from, but good lord, it's hardly the strangest thing to appear in the Tower. Tony throws the whole kit in the trunk of the convertible Audi, along with a toolkit and
Iron Man briefcase and Sam's new gear, and gestures everyone to get in.

"Shotgun," Sam declares, and then amends that with, "which is a phrase meaning that I'm going to sit in the front, not that I see a -"

"I know, Wilson."

"Just checkin'." Sam gets in. Bucky zips his hoodie up halfway, looks toward the garage door as if mentally preparing himself for the fact that he's going to be going through it in a moment, and climbs in behind Tony. **

"New arm treating you alright?"

"Yeah, thanks." Bucky holds his left hand up in front of him, looking at it contemplatively as the fingers curl one by one. "It's good."

"Good." Tony takes an exit on the left and revs the engine a little, and Bucky's hair starts whipping around. He makes a face, fishing a hair elastic out of his jeans pocket. With careful practice he gathers his hair with his left hand and tugs his hair into a ponytail. Steve smiles to himself and doesn't say anything. **

Tony waves some kind of badge at the security check while Bucky bends over, hood up, pretending to tie his laces. It goes fine. Tony will probably even delete the security footage when they get home. Steve's learned that for all his laid-back chatterbox persona, Tony's had to get paranoid to stay alive. One of the few things they always agree on.

The quarry's not abandoned, exactly - it just appears to be closed for the day. In the distance Steve can see cranes and construction gear, everything set aside and out of the way. Bucky sits up straighter and squints down at what looks like a dried-up stony riverbed, eighty feet across and very, very long. The 'banks' are a tumbled mess but the middle is paved flat, maybe forty feet wide.

"Dangerous if he lands wrong," Bucky says slowly, and Sam grins.

"I never land wrong."

"Even when I ripped your wing off?"

"If I'd landed wrong, I'd be laid up with casts on both legs."

Bucky thinks about this, then nods. Tony parks and hops out, popping the trunk and pulling the toolkit out. Sam takes out the Falcon gear and Bucky, deciding to be helpful, gets the basket. He picks a spot that has a good view of the quarry on a large flat rock, laying the blanket out and getting comfortable, pulling out some sunglasses and crossing his legs at the ankle.

"Comfy over there, Barnes?" Sam hauls the rig onto his back, stretching his shoulders out and beginning to adjust some straps.

"Waiting for the airshow to start." Bucky glances over at Steve, expression warm but... searching, too. Examining. "You comin' over, or do you fly too now?"

**
Tony gears up and hovers about fifty feet above the center of the quarry. Bucky watches Tony, interested. Sam's wings fan out in an impressive display of silver and red.

"I don't remember them being red," Bucky remarks.

"Everything Tony touches turns to gold. Or red. Or both." Steve sighs, but he can't help but admit it looks nice. Sam seems very happy with them. He's off the ground in moments, soaring up and arcing back, looping, spiralling down towards the ground and swooping up ten feet early. Tony watches and Steve can see his mouth moving - he's probably talking with Jarvis.

"How's she handle?" Tony calls, his voice echoing a little in the shallow canyon.

Sam's hard to see, that high up and with the sun so bright, but Steve knows deep in his bones that Sam is happy. His legs kick out and he banks left, swooping over the picnic blanket and making them both laugh, before aiming for Iron Man and coming to a standstill about four feet away. The jets compensate, holding him in place.

"THIS. IS. PERFECT."
The tests go on for a little over an hour. Tony was right - they can't find any flaws in the engineering, even when they test how fast it takes the system to reboot when hit with an EMP. It's just four short seconds, and the wings stay extended so Sam can glide to safety.

"You're a genius," Sam says, and Tony agrees and does a barrel roll.

Bucky watches with interest, but he also keeps looking over at Steve; long, curious glances that Steve can't bring himself to return. In the corner of his eye he can see wisps of long brown hair being tousled by the breeze, and blue eyes on him, trying to work something out. He's pretty sure he knows what Bucky's trying to work out, so he acts as normal as possible, fighting the flush creeping up his neck and focusing on egging Sam on to fly higher. He'll kick himself later, repeatedly, for ever letting himself draw Bucky, for getting himself into this mess. For now he just has to focus on damage control.

"So what's the same?"

Steve looks over, startled. "What?"

Bucky shrugs. He's not looking at Sam or Tony anymore, watching the clouds instead and worrying on his lower lip. "I dunno. Restaurants, shops, grocery stores. Outside stuff. Is everything different?"

"Oh." Steve thinks about it for a while. He's had so many easy answers lined up for when people ask him what's jarring or different, but to actually give an honest response to someone who knows what he'd mean... "Desegregation is a big difference, obviously. Inflation means everything costs a fortune, at least it feels like it. Oh, shopping malls. Some of them make the old Macy's Department Store look tiny."

Bucky whistles in appreciation. Steve laughs.

"And... lots more types of food, as you've probably noticed."

"Chinese," Bucky says with a solemn reverence.

"And the portions tend to be bigger... lots more tourists from other countries, since traveling by plane is so much more common. Movie theaters are, um, there's no news reel at the beginning anymore. There's usually car commercials, and then trailers for other movies. The serials aren't really a thing anymore."

The conversation takes a brief break as Tony begins 'attacking' Sam with faint, controlled repulsor beams. Sam dodges and begins an impressive litany of taunts.
"The park?" Bucky asks.

"What about - ? Oh. Yes, I suppose parks are mostly the same. Kids, families, pets. Frisbees now."

Bucky makes a speculative noise. "I could deal with frisbees."

"I'm sure you could." Steve's not 100% sure about anything Bucky could handle right now, but Bucky seems to be spending the day acting sociable and trying new things, and Steve is not going to stop him from taking as many baby steps as he wants. Steve has a mental list of all the places he, Sam, and Natasha have scouted near the Tower that could be possible day-trips without too much noise or too many people, but he's not going to mention any of those ideas unless he explicitly asks.

The silence settles back in, and Bucky shifts on the blanket a little, pulling his hands from under his head to fiddle with the zipper of his hoodie. "So what do you like doing out there?"

"Out there?"

"Yeah. Outside of the Tower." Bucky is watching the zipper go up an inch, down an inch, up another.

"Before everything in DC happened, I'd go jogging in the morning."

Steve realizes Bucky isn't responding because he's assuming that what Steve did in the morning is going to be followed by what Steve did with the rest of his day, but there's nothing, so he racks his brain. "SHIELD had me busy a lot," he says, shrugging. "Lots of ops. Travel."

"Uh-huh." Bucky sounds less than convinced. "So all this new stuff in the future, and you've been exercising and fighting."

"I visit Peggy," Steve says suddenly, and he doesn't know why. Bucky goes very still next to him, hand stopped mid-tug on the zipper, taking a while to digest this.

"Natasha says she has, um." Bucky struggles with the word. "That her memory's fading."

"Alzheimers. She recognizes me, but sometimes she doesn't know her nurse of five years... and every five minutes, twenty minutes, her short-term..." Steve doesn't know where the word 'memory' goes - it gets lost somewhere in his throat, which is constricting too quickly for him to fight. He gets to his feet, goes to the car, and buys himself some time rummaging through the cold drinks they left in the trunk. Two bottles of water. When he comes back, more collected, he hands Bucky one bottle and opens the other for himself.

**

Bucky seems lost in thought for a while, but once Tony and Sam land for lunch he's back to the new easy smile, the small jokes. If Sam and Tony can tell he's testing the waters on being more... himself, they don't say anything about it.

"There were three ham and cheeses. You already ate the other two."

"Yes, but I also want that one." Bucky looks at Steve with a mock seriousness that makes Sam laugh. Steve, unimpressed, begins unwrapping it to have it for himself. Bucky makes an indignant noise.

"We were friends, once, Rogers."
"Yes, and here you are, trying to take food out of my hands and leave me with the avocado monstrosity."

"There's nothing wrong with avocado." Bucky leans forward on his elbows and tries reaching again, only to have Steve lean out of the way.

"Then you eat it, and leave me with this one."

"I don't want the avocado one right now."

"Man children," Tony proclaims under his breath, drinking the sparkling cider out of the bottle. "Twenty-something-slash-ninety-something man children."

Sam grins. "You know, Stark, if the whole inventor thing ever falls through, you could always invest in food trucks that follow these two around."

Bucky frowns. "Food truck? Like a delivery truck?" He swipes for the sandwich when he thinks Steve isn't looking, but to no avail. Steve finally sits up to get out of arm's reach so he can eat in peace.

"You know that falafel I brought you that one afternoon?" Sam asks.

Bucky's eyes widen almost imperceptibly. "Yes."

"Food truck," Sam intones, and proceeds to explain the built-in appliances, the window on the side, and how they often use Twitter to tell people where they are.

"And these things are everywhere?"

"No, no. Just major cities."

"So, here."

"Definitely here."

"Kim's Aunt Kitchen, while grammatically confusing, has reeeeeally good grilled salmon." Tony waggles his eyebrows. "I'll take you sometime if you want."

Tony has 'broken hearts', as it were, on The Discussion of Actually Going Outside. Sam maintains a very neutral expression while Steve holds his breath.

"I think I like salmon," Bucky says, and the line forms on his forehead that means he's trying to reach out to something too far back, too specific. "Steve?"

"Your aunt made it sometimes when she'd come into town. You liked it."

"Okay." Bucky takes him at his word and nods. "Sometime, we can ... soon. We'll go. And." The joking bravado has petered out in the last few seconds, and he's nodding, looking resolutely unconcerned, reaching for his bottle of water and drinking.

**

"You know you don't have to go yet if you don't really feel comfortable."

Bucky's head snaps up, picking up the words and realizing that Steve is intentionally talking under his breath so that only Bucky can hear. Between the wind whipping around them in the convertible
and the quiet voice, there's no way Sam and Tony will overhear.

"Yeah." Bucky chews his lip and his hand drifts unconsciously to the hoodie zipper again. "It's just. I can't be... I've gotta start getting normal sometime."

"You are- you're improving plenty. All the time. Your psychiatrist said you only have to teleconference every third day instead of every other, right? That's huge. You don't need to feel like you have to rush yourself."

Bucky seems frustrated about this, or about something, so Steve doesn't push the point, focusing his attention on the horizon instead. It must be a little after three. He hasn't checked his phone for a while.

"I want... I need to make decisions. Need to show that I can."

You don't have to prove anything to anyone, Steve wants to say, but he's afraid it won't come out right.

**

*Steve Rogers: If his sudden interest in getting out of the Tower is making me worried that he's trying to get some space from me, that's just baseless paranoia, right?*

*Sam Wilson: yyyyyyyyy*

*Steve Rogers: I don't know what that means.*

*Sam Wilson: it means 'emphatically yes'*
Bucky starts pushing himself, and Steve has to suppress the quiet feeling of alarm in the back of his mind. He's worried that Bucky will push himself too far and retreat again, or that he'll misstep and land himself in trouble somehow. Shamefully scarier than either of those is the possibility that he'll succeed, become an independent person again, and decide to get as far from Steve as possible. Bucky's never explicitly said anything to him about the drawing - about his suspicion - but Steve still finds himself getting long, examining stares sometimes, and he makes sure every time not to notice them, not to rise to the bait.

He used to be terrified that Bucky would never make it past ten words a day, wouldn't be able to be left alone with anyone but himself, or himself or Sam or Natasha, but the ring of trustworthy people has widened and widened and he's had at least a dozen training sessions with Peter, six or seven with Pepper, and nothing's ever gone wrong.

Steve had gotten so used to Bucky's stilted conversation and was so grateful for what Bucky was saying that... he has to admit, he'd never noticed or paid much mind to what was missing. Bucky starts engaging in other people's stories, asking for more details or clarification. He disagrees, sometimes - calmly of course - but the first time he contradicts Tony is shocking to Steve because he never realized that Bucky hadn't been doing it.

(Sam teases Bucky more than he used to, and Bucky reacts by giving as good as he gets some days and with unamused annoyance other days. It's the second one that really throws Steve for a loop, because he has a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach that Bucky has always had the capacity to be angry or irritated, but never displayed it for fear of scaring someone off.)

He asks Clint about where he learned bowmanship and why, and engages in a friendly debate over bows versus sharpshooting. Jane is monitoring several tests from her tablet one morning and Bucky asks if she can explain it to him. It turns out that dating Thor has made her very, very good at paring down complicated concepts, and after half an hour Bucky is dazed but somewhat informed about m-theory.

Bucky starts upping the ante in training with Peter, and when it comes to hand-to-hand it's becoming something of a blur. Bruce, the least versed of all of them when it comes to fighting, often leans over to Steve to ask how Bucky got out of getting pinned, or if the rubber training blade made contact with Peter's arm or not. Steve is always happy to translate and pick apart the movements that are over in a fraction of a second. He notices once, after leaving to use the restroom, that Pepper has taken his spot next to Bruce and is miming the choke-hold Bucky had Peter in, explaining how he escaped it.

It's late in the session one afternoon when Peter twists out of Bucky's grip, planting his hands on the mat and kicking upward with all his strength. Bucky flies back several feet, hitting the mat hard and holding his jaw in both hands. Peter's back on his feet in a flash, panicked.

"Oh my god oh my god I'm sorry, Sergeant Barnes I am so, so sorry, I, I didn't think, I,"

"Oh my god oh my god I'm sorry, Sergeant Barnes I am so, so sorry, I, I didn't think, I,"
"That was excellent," Bucky announces, laughing, grinning through bloodied teeth. "No more thinking."

**

Days pass. Natasha has taken Tony's food truck idea and reformatted it into a controlled trip with an objective - going to some specific shop (Steve has never heard of it) and picking out some shoes for herself. Bucky doesn't have to do anything but come along and survive the experience.

(Clint has assured Steve that Natasha is an unusual woman who takes very little time shopping. She researches beforehand, tries on about five pairs, tests how strong the heels are, and is out in under twenty minutes.)

They go half an hour before close, and Steve studiously ignores Clint's implications that he's worrying too much. When his phone chirps, Steve definitely does not drop the remote in the fumble to get it.

**

UNLISTED: He looks great in boots.

Steve Rogers: I thought this trip was about you.

UNLISTED: The shopping gods are unpredictable and should never be questioned.

"Is she gonna be late?" Clint asks, not needing to ask who Steve is texting.

Steve arches an eyebrow. "Why, got a date tonight?"

Clint makes a noncommittal noise. The mystery continues.

**

"It's a food and a dance," Steve hears Natasha saying in the elevator, just before it opens. He sits up a little straighter on the couch, glad that Clint has filtered out and been replaced by Jane reading an article and Darcy playing 'Floppy Bird' on her phone.

"That's confusing," Bucky says quietly, sounding more like his old self - more like himself from a month ago. His head is tilted down as he rounds the corner, but he's in one piece and unscathed, other than the slightly twitchy look he gets when he's been overstimulated. His hands are stuffed in his pockets and hanging from each wrist is a large brown paper shopping bag with twine handles. Jane waves hello and Darcy puts her phone down, leaning forward towards the bags as if physically drawn to them.

"We went shopping," Bucky explains, as if that required clarification. Darcy slips out of the armchair, settling in next to Steve on the couch and making grabby gestures. Bucky's mouth twitches, unsure, before he deposits both bags in front of her and watches her open them up.

"Stillettos. Bucky, you're a very surprising man."

His eyes narrow. "Those are Natasha's."

"I thought they looked small," Darcy says ruefully, and puts them back in the box to move on to the next one.

Bucky looks over to Steve. "Is there really a dance called salsa?"

"The salsa, yes." Steve grins. He may or may not be privately happy that Bucky still comes to him.
Steve knows the least about the future of all of them, but he's still apparently the most trustworthy. "It's very fast-paced. Actually, you might like it. It's kind of got swing in it."

"Bucky swing dances?" Jane's attention has been pulled from the article on her tablet.

"I did, yeah." Bucky runs a hand through his hair and shrugs a shoulder, pulling his sweater off over his head. His t-shirt gets pulled up halfway in the process, just for a moment, and as always Steve makes sure he's looking at the television and nowhere in Bucky's direction. He has this down to a science.

"Steve, did you?" Darcy reveals a pair of men's ankle boots, and she grins devilishly and shoots an expression to Natasha that Steve doesn't catch.

"Hard to find a girl to dance with when you're about a head shorter than everyone your age." Steve pushes the conversation forward. "I think the salsa actually started in New York. Jarvis?"

"Correct, sir." Several screens appear above the television, displaying examples of the dance. The women are styled more or less like peacocks in backless dresses, and the men are dressed very sharply. Bucky's eyes follow the movement of their feet and widen.

"You can do that?" He asks, pointing.

"Yes," Natasha says simply.

"In those?" He points to the stillettos in the box.

"You don't do that dance in kitten heels, Barnes." She tilts her chin up just a fraction of an inch - her version of preening. Bucky whistles, impressed, and watches as Darcy unveils a pair of violet pumps.

"Also too small for you," Darcy tells Bucky, and he rolls his eyes. "Nat, you have really good taste."

"Thank you." She smiles.

**

When Clint comes back, they are all relaxing on the sectional couch, playing what Darcy calls 'Andy Warhol Youtube' - asking Jarvis to show them one thing, which leads to another, and then to another, several screens accumulating over time. Steve isn't just surprised that Bucky has stayed for it, but that he's doing two social activities in a row with no resting period in between. He seems to be holding up fairly well, if zoning out at times. When Jane asks Jarvis to bring up more dance styles Bucky is instantly back with them.

"What's that one?" He points.

"Voguing," Darcy supplies. "It's really a drag queen thing."

Steve leans over. "Drag queens are-"

"I know," Bucky interrupts, "Sam explained all that stuff."

"All that stuff?" Jane echoes, not hiding her curiosity. Bucky shrugs.

"All the... different ways. That people are now." He runs his hand through his hair again, still the same nervous tic after seventy years. "Or probably always were, but couldn't be?"
"It must be weird when all that stuff was, like, super taboo in your day." Darcy is trying on Bucky's motorcycle boots. They look a bit roomy.

Bucky quirks his lips, staring resolutely at the screens for a while. Steve remains absolutely silent and focuses on the empty new text screen on his phone. "I think it's good," he says finally. The conversation dies then, a little awkwardly, because nobody knows where to go from there.

"These are comfy," Darcy says finally, kicking her feet up. Bucky finally notices and gives her a look of genuine irritation, which makes her giggle.

**

Peter comes over for what Clint jokingly calls 'family dinner'. (Steve has a premonition that this name will stick.) Peter brings a casserole he heats up in the oven, Bruce makes something with quinoa that actually smells amazing, and Bucky actually gets temporarily banned from the kitchen because he wants to smell and ask questions about every single thing.

"We didn't have that," he explains almost sulkily, and Pepper does not contain her giggle from her spot at the dining table. Her omnipresent laptop is not doing a good job of hiding her smile.

"We should take him to a grocery store next. Freak him out with all the starfruits and kiwis and stuff." Tony has terrible ideas.

"That's a terrible idea," Steve informs him.

Natasha explains to Bucky that supermarkets are very brightly lit and big and often stressful, or something to that effect. Steve's Russian is improving but only by so much.

"We should stick to new dance moves. Those can be done in the safety of one's own home." Darcy is mixing ice cream with some special kind of flour, which makes no sense.

"Dance moves?" Peter echoes, moving to the ceiling when he realizes he's getting in Bruce's way. Even this kitchen is not really made for three to four people working in it.

"Anything since 1945 is fair game," Jane says, and Thor, next to her, chuckles.

"I found the 'Gangnam style' quite amusing, but Darcy assures me that it has already fallen out of favor."

Peter grins widely. "Sergeant Barnes, I think I need to teach you the dougie."

"Ooooh," Sam says, grin widening. Steve groans and puts his face in his hands. "Aww, Steve, what's wrong?"

Steve makes a pained noise, but he's laughing, too. "There were so many nights like this. Girls would decide to teach Bucky some new dance they'd learned in the city and I'd lose him for the rest of the night."

Bucky laughs too, and it's obvious he's remembering. "They'd abduct me, Steve."

Steve fixes his long-suffering expression on Natasha, who is the most likely to at least pretend to sympathize. "The poor man. Spirited away by beautiful women, forced to buy them drinks and sweet-talk them until the late hours of the morning."

"I'd always try to send one your way," Bucky reminds him, distracted by a tray of something that
Sam is pulling out of the oven and setting down on in the center of the table. It involves green beans and broccoli and Thor is leaning forward too, breathing in admiringly.

"It was a noble effort on your part, Bucky. Peter, is the casserole almost done?"

Peter webs the kitchen timer up to the ceiling and squints at it. "Two minutes."

"More dancing after dinner," Darcy demands, and looks around to see where her stirring spoon went. (Peter has it.)

Chapter End Notes

1. Today is my birthday! This means I'm going to be busy for the next few days, but don't worry, the next chapter is coming along in time.
2. Darcy's mystery dessert in the story is called ice cream bread. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gifcJ1z4Tas ) You're welcome.
3. I know it is not called Floppy Bird. Steve's POV leads to some human errors. (The future is hard.)
Most of the table is still finishing what Darcy insists is called 'ice cream bread' when Sam invites Pepper to the middle of the common area.

"We have to set a good example for the senior citizens," he says gravely, scrolling through a screen Jarvis has provided in front of him and selecting some things. "If we leave it to Darcy and Peter they'll only see twerking and krumping and then they'll write us all off as insane hedonists."

"Those are both made up words," Steve says, only half sure.

"I blame myself for your ignorance," Sam says, "but more than that, I blame all these people in this Tower who have known you way longer and haven't taught you anything important about the future."

"So, the learning how to use smartphones, the internet..." Steve trails off, but Sam is making a dismissive gesture with one hand while clicking mid-air buttons with the other. Music appears from everywhere, quietly at first so as not to be startling, and Peter is grinning widely, blissful and loose in his chair, as if all is right in the world.

**

The scienced-up whiskey manages to make a conspicuous reappearance, and Steve wisely opts to stop at one shot. Bucky cuts his share with a mix of things at Jane's suggestion, and they watch as Sam and Pepper are joined by Darcy and Jane, then Natasha and Clint. (Steve didn't know Clint danced, but he's also never seen anyone say no to Natasha, so.)

"Partition next," Darcy declares, after lip-syncing with a female rapper and performing an elaborate set of moves along with the song, and Pepper makes a quick 'motion denied' gesture while Tony laughs from his spot at the table. Bruce moves his chair around to Steve's side so he can watch more easily.

"I feel bad for you," Bruce murmurs thoughtfully, smiling.

Steve looks away from the way Clint is holding Natasha's hips to give Bruce a questioning look. Bruce grins.

"When they tell you to join them, you're not going to have a good excuse."

Sam points at Bruce almost as if on cue. "Come on, man, where's your sense of fun?"

Bruce holds his hands up in surrender, expression suddenly tight around the eyes. "I'm not.. I'm feeling a little too, um, green right now."

Sam 'ohs' and drops the subject immediately, returning his attention to dancing with Pepper. Steve eyes Bruce sidelong.

"You've got the perfect get out of jail free card," Steve mutters, not hiding his jealousy. Bruce smiles into his tea and says nothing.
Bucky points at Sam and cants his head. "What's that called?"

"Two-step," Sam replies, and wiggles his hips a little as if to show off. Pepper notices and giggles, much to Tony's feigned displeasure. "'S'easy."

"Future dancing is boring," Bucky declares, and, perhaps as intended, Sam takes that as a challenge and pulls Pepper to him to do something more complex that involves what Steve is pretty sure is called a body roll. Soon Darcy scoots in to steal Pepper's spot, dropping herself into a squatting position and then coming up slowly, and Sam laughs and does something fast and complicated as if in response. Bucky grins, pleased at the results of his complaint, and leans back further in his chair.

"You're getting dragged up there eventually," Tony warns him, "it's inevitable."

"I know, let me watch a while more and get a feel for it. You guys don't move like we did." Steve can see him cataloging how one movement shifts into another. He's always been fast at learning these things.

"It's still for the same purpose," Steve remarks, and Bucky grins with all teeth.

"Making time?"

"Yep." Steve watches as Jane gestures for Peter to come over and be her new partner. Thor, quite the opposite of being jealous, is using the opportunity to steal away to the kitchen and find the rest of the ice cream bread.

"Come here," Natasha says to Bucky, who gets up out of his chair like he was pulled by a magnet. Once he's actually in front of her, though, he hesitates, glancing over different parts of her body and then laying his hands carefully over the swell of her hips.

"Suddenly shy, Barnes?" Clint is smirking.

"I know how," Bucky drawls, "I'm just trying to think of a way to do it that won't make you deck me." He asks Jarvis to play one of the dancing videos from earlier, and one song fades into another. It's Turkish, Steve would guess. Bucky leaves a few inches in between himself and Nat, hands at a gentlemanly height but gyrating his hips, rolling his shoulders and making a show in front of her more than leading her into a series of steps. She grins, catlike, and follows with a movement that rises from her pelvis to her sternum, twisting until she's half turned away from him and coaxing him closer. Steve swallows.

"I need to remember that for later," Clint says to himself. He's watching too, standing with a beer next to Steve's chair.

"The move?"

"No. That taunting him is a good way to get him to do shit." Clint gives him a shit-eating grin and leans against the wall.

Once the song is over Bucky is passed around more or less like a party favor, and Steve really is getting flashbacks to dance halls in the 40s - the girls like the effortless way he moves and follows the rhythm, guiding them just enough without being handsy, and giving a show himself without being unresponsive to what they're doing. It's charming. It's seductive, really, and Steve knows he's right about why the girls like him because it's why he likes it when Bucky dances... shaking his head, he disappears into the kitchen, past the barren baking pan to the keg, and helps himself to one
more shot before rejoining Bruce and engaging in a bit of small talk. Peter is teaching Darcy
something where his legs are out like he's in a saddle, rocking back and forth and moving his hands
over his head as if combing his hair. Darcy is picking it up pretty quickly.

"Okay, I need to at least see you try." Pepper holds out her hand to Steve, speaking quietly enough
to make sure the room doesn't stop and begin teasing him, and Steve makes a quick, split-second
'please don't make me' face. Pepper, for some reason, deigns to ignore it.

"I can't -"

"I know. Come on anyway." And it's Pepper, and she asks so little of him, and provides so much...
Steve tries to make his rising out of his chair as inconspicuous as possible, too aware of all the eyes
that are going to be on him soon. People find nothing as interesting as a non-dancing person
dancing. It's unfair.

The music changes again and it's easier, simpler. Pepper begins has her arms raised slightly and
swaying, and he sees where he's supposed to put his hands, but he hates it - everything feels rude
and invasive and possibly disrespectful to Tony. She's her own person, though, and she asked him
to, so he curls his hands around the delicate frame of her waist and comes in a little closer,
hopefully masking his lack of talent by not letting himself stick out at arms length. Sam makes an
approving noise somewhere to his right and he feels the blush creeping up his neck.

I like team-building when it isn't completely overwhelming and unbearable, Bruce had said a few
minutes ago, and that feeling is saturating Steve right now. Pepper smiles gently and lays her arms
across his shoulders, keeping it simple and just moving side to side with little steps here and there.
Out of the corner of his eye he can see Jane smiling, and Bucky, who was holding her, stop what he
is doing to watch. He focuses on not blushing. He knows he's being wooden but he can't fix it,
doesn't know how.

"Potts, I'm relieving you of your duties." Sam guides one of her hands into his, twirling her out, and
she giggles and lets herself be 'captured' by Thor. Sam is a savior, Steve thinks, lightheaded, until
he realizes Sam's not guiding him back to the chairs but rather dancing across from him. It's so
much easier, though, no expected touching, and Sam is just... so easy to be around, half wrapped up
in his own steps. Steve feels the muscles in his shoulders relax a little and he makes himself grin,
mimicking Sam's moves, learning a little.

"Mystery solved," Clint says somewhere behind him. "He can dance alright, as long as he doesn't
have to get too close to a girl."

It's not said unkindly, but Steve feels a sting of something nonetheless - the feeling is cut short
when he feels Clint's hand on his shoulder, pushing him firmly to the left, into Bucky, so Clint can
take Steve's spot in front of Sam, his back to Sam's chest and doing something friction-based and
overly intimate. Steve spends too long staring before realizing that Bucky threw out an arm to
catch him and hasn't let go yet.

"Um," Steve says eloquently, and shifts his feet so he's a little further back. Bucky doesn't say
anything, glancing around quickly to discover what Steve already has - that Sam and Clint are
being so outrageous that nobody has even noticed that Steve and Bucky are paired up.

"It's- it's easy," Bucky says suddenly, and takes Steve's wrists, lifting them up a little and then
arranging his elbows. "Not - not that, I mean," Bucky makes an aborted gesture to the other men
before demonstrating how to shift his weight on his feet, to sway his hips.

The music is slow and building and too intimate. Bucky's breath smells very faintly like alcohol,
like ginger and lemon and honey. His eyes are dark.

Suddenly Bucky is so much closer, as if Steve was pulled in by an invisible force; he's not sure if he's doing this wrong or if it's what's supposed to happen, but all that space that he'd put between them is gone and Steve feels like he's scared to breathe. He doesn't know how to disengage gracefully, how to pull away without implicating himself, and he's been walking on the most careful of eggshells for so many days that he doesn't feel his ears go red, the flush creep up his neck, doesn't notice until he pulls his eyes away from the way Bucky is rolling his hips in subtle little movements to see what Bucky is staring at.

"I'm," Steve takes a breath and starts arranging an excuse. "I'm not very - very good at dancing, still, and -"

Bucky's expression flashes from astonishment to deep frustration to something composed, another of his fake faces, as he glances over his shoulder and says, "I've gotta go get some rest, my head's splitting. Steve, will you make sure I get there okay?"

"Wh- ?"

"I feel kinda dizzy," Bucky murmurs, quietly but loud enough for people to hear, for this to be staged, and Steve knows this is staged, and the panic of being exposed is suddenly dwarfed by the panic of the oncoming discussion.

Bucky is going to want to talk about this. Bucky is pulling him away to somewhere private to ask him what the hell is wrong with him, and Steve feels like he's both moving too quickly and too slowly as he's pulled along by Bucky's left hand, out of the throng (are they talking? Saying they hope Bucky feels better? His ears feel like they're plugged or full of water, he can't breathe, this is terrible, he's made such a mistake) and to the elevator banks. Jarvis doesn't have to ask where they're going, just shuts the doors behind them and they start moving, and Steve blinks at the elevator doors because he didn't plan for this outcome. Couldn't have. He never got past plausible deniability, trying to act normal, doing as much as possible not to arouse suspicion. If Bucky asks him something directly, or says outright that he knows, Steve has no idea where to go from here.

Chapter End Notes

Playlist [here](#).
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The hallway feels too long. Bucky is moving fast, purposeful, and Steve makes himself walk after him, a man obediently following his executioner.

Bucky opens his door, not Steve's, and ushers Steve inside before walking in too and slamming it shut behind him. Steve flinches and Bucky grimaces like he didn't mean to do that.

"Steve," Bucky starts, and Steve feels the irrational need to cut him off even though he has nothing to counter with. He realizes Bucky never walked very far into his room and that he's now crowding Steve against the door.

"I'm sorry, for whatever it is," he blurts.

"Don't, don't be sorry, it's not. I can't..." Bucky is almost panting, Steve realizes. His breath is hot. Whiskey, honey, lemon, ginger. The fake expression of 'a man with his head solidly on his shoulders' has fallen away and Bucky looks more like himself for it. He looks distressed. "I can't think of anything else to--" He breathes deeply. "- to prove."

"Bucky, I don't know what you're talking about. Breathe." He's been explicitly informed that 'calm down' is both unhelpful and kind of rude, and so instead tries to take him by the shoulders, firm without restricting movement. If he can focus on calming Bucky down he can ignore his own paralyzing fear, but Bucky makes an impatient noise and swats his hands away.

"I tried waiting for you, I tried to get better faster, I don't know what to-- I'm so sure one minute and the next I can't, and I need--" Bucky growls low in his breath and pushes Steve hard by the shoulders, pinning him to the wall and nearly pushing him through it. Steve twists to get a better stance, push back, figure out what's going on, but suddenly Bucky's mouth is covering his and Steve can't breathe. Bucky's lips are soft, insistent, grazing over his until Steve feels a flash of teeth tugging at his lower lip that makes him flinch back and moan at the same time. He feels Bucky's hands let go of his shoulders, mourns the loss of the pressure and the warmth of Bucky's body where it had started to press against his. Bucky looks at him through his lashes, eyes dark, breathing heavily.

"If you want me to stop, I will." He swipes his tongue across his lower lip as if chasing down any remnants of Steve's taste. "But I. I want."

Steve is in shock, but he's sensible enough to grab Bucky by the back of his head and yank him back, clumsily joining their mouths back together and arching his body towards Bucky's. Bucky makes a quiet broken noise and pushes him firmly against the wall, again, that delicious pressure returning, and Steve kisses Bucky until he absolutely has to pull away for breath. Bucky's gasping too but makes a disappointed noise nonetheless, hips rolling against Steve's in a way that makes him choke an down an embarrassing desperate sound.

"Steve," Bucky growls, and the sound of his name so laced with want and need is so alien. Steve smiles, punch-drunken, because this is unreal and because he still isn't sure it is real, and moves his hand to cup Bucky's jaw, getting a few more gasps of air in before kissing Bucky's cheek, his jawline, any spot of skin he can find until the apples of Bucky's cheeks rise with a genuine smile.
"I didn't know," Steve murmurs into the warm, inviting flesh of Bucky's neck. He can feel the pulse hammering there, and it drives the want in him even higher. His free hand roams over Bucky's back, to his hip, fingers hooking into the nearest belt loop to pull him closer. He feels like he never wants to be out of touching distance from this man for the rest of his life.

"That's because you're a moron," Bucky whispers, and rolls his hips again. Steve moans against the fabric of his shirt and lets himself be guided away from the wall, to the bed, and when he stumbles back his leg hooks around Bucky's, pulling him along for the ride. They end up tangled in a mess of limbs and bedsheets, Steve letting himself be straddled, hauled further up the bed, arranged to Bucky's liking. He can't help but laugh, just a little.

"What's so funny?" Bucky asks, and Steve smiles up at him.

"I'm just." He wets his lips, reaching to Bucky's waist (he's allowed to touch, now, encouraged, if the way Bucky's eyelashes flutter means anything) and pulling him in until he settles in even closer. "Happy."

"Good," Bucky murmurs. His eyes are eclipsed in black and he reaches down to curl his fingers in both sides of Steve's shirt to rip it open. Steve doesn't even care. Bucky's mouth is suddenly everywhere, tongue licking a trail from his abdomen to his chest, swirling around a nipple and making Steve bow up and whine with need. This is already so new and so much and it's not enough, it's not even close.

He scrambles for purchase and finds Bucky's shoulders, digs his fingers in tight until Bucky slides lower, out of reach, to sink his teeth into the jut of Steve's hipbone. Steve cries out and doesn't stop him. When he looks down Bucky's meeting his eyes, staring at him through his lashes, and Steve has to lay his head back down to keep himself from completely losing control. Bucky waits a few seconds, as if making sure that Steve hasn't changed his mind, before crawling back up with a trail of kisses that messily ends on the pulse-point in Steve's throat. He sucks gently, straddling one of Steve's thighs in a way that feels almost too good - Steve plants his feet on the mattress and lifts his hips a little, toward the pressure, tilting his head to the left to give Bucky more room.

"Fuck, Steve." Bucky presses his body down and Steve can feel it, the hardness against his thigh, the evidence of how badly Bucky wants this. Steve makes a soft helpless sound and chases after Bucky's mouth, capturing it again and trying to map out the exact taste of him. His hands roam over Steve's body indiscriminately, his biceps, his chest, the arrow of his hips, and then finally starting to fumble with the button of Steve's pants. Steve is pretty sure he's supposed to say something, and it turns out he's right, because he feels Bucky's fingers find the zipper and stop there, mouth slowing and finally going still against his. One last wall.

"Yes," Steve pants, still so close to Bucky's mouth that they must be sharing the same breath. "Yes. Everything. Yes."

Steve has some idea of what he just agreed to, but he doesn't predict the expression on Bucky's face, the way his eyes widen and his skin flushes even further. Then just as quickly he's gone, sliding down the bed and yanking Steve's pants down, his boxers, taking him in hand and gripping him tightly. Steve's hips snap up so hard he nearly launches Bucky off the mattress, coming back down with a loud thump. Bucky chuckles, and his tongue flicks out over his lower lip and he looks down at Steve's cock, assessing. Steve knows what's about to happen but he can't completely believe it - Bucky bends down, soft lips opening, closing around the head of his erection. It feels wet and tight and impossibly hot. The whine rips its way out of Steve before he has a chance to fight it, hips coming up again until he feels two solid hands pin him back down to the bed.

"Bucky," he cries out, and feels the tension in his abdomen, lower, the coiling heat, because
nothing he's ever experienced comes close to this, and when Bucky pulls off and runs his tongue downwards in a wet stripe, Steve goes from panting to feeling like he can't breathe.

"I want," Bucky murmurs, between licks, hand stroking Steve firmly but so tortuously slow, "to make you come. I don't want you to hold back, or, or try to last, I just," Bucky moans and undulates his hips (grinding against the bed, Steve realizes distantly), tongue snaking out again to capture the beads of precome. "I want you to. I don't want it to last because I want to do it over and over, with you, I want-"

He's cut off when Steve sits up and hauls him with a hand hooked under his arm, pulling him up to eye level again so Steve can wrestle with Bucky's own jeans. Bucky gasps out a laugh and helps, rolling to the side a moment to kick everything off completely, then his shirt, and Steve hauls him back on top of him, pulling him down for another kiss. He moves his hands over the skin he can't pull away to look at yet. It feels feverishly warm and smooth.

"What else?" Steve prompts between breaths, because talking, unexpectedly, makes everything feel that much better, that much more real. Bucky laughs and aligns their hips just right, pushing their bodies together in a way that makes Steve moan and arch, exposing his throat. "Do you want. Tell me," And it's almost a beg.

"Wanna find out every single thing you like," Bucky rasps, "and give it to you. Every night."

Steve whines and feels himself twitch, eyes fluttering shut. "I'm gonna make up for lost time," Bucky adds. "Not the ice. Brooklyn. All the times I was too stupid to just shove you against a wall and kiss you, all the times we laid in bed not touching - God, Steve-" Bucky's arms are on either side of him, propping him up and giving him leverage to push and roll his hips just right, sliding his erection against Steve's over and over again, until the feeling becomes too good and Steve has to dig his fingers into Bucky's shoulders in warning.

"Yes," Bucky gasps, his movements becoming shakier but faster, and Steve arches up to chase his own pleasure, finally acting without thinking to grab them both in his hand and stroke himself to completion. Bucky comes not long after, body stiffening and come spilling out over Steve's fingers. Steve feels like his lungs are on fire, like he can't possibly suck in enough air fast enough, and when Bucky rolls off him he throws a shaky hand out to grab a shoulder, ground himself, make sure Bucky isn't going anywhere.

He doesn't. In fact, by the time Steve's gotten himself together enough to roll onto his side and curl himself around Bucky's body, he's already fallen asleep.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve wakes up because Bucky is shoving weakly at his chest.

"Steve."

"Mrrrm."

"Steve, we're disgusting."

"No," Steve says, on reflex, because he's not really listening and because he would like to fall back asleep. Bucky's naked thigh is pressed against his side, warm and firm and comforting. Bucky squirms out of his sleep-loose grip.

"Steve."

Steve opens his eyes. He's pretty sure it's the middle of the night, and when he tries to sit up to see what Bucky's going on about... Bucky's in his bed, naked, and the memories start flooding back in a lusty haze of sense-memory. Steve sits up faster, and grimaces at the feeling on his stomach. Dried come.

"Oh," Steve says, looking down. The sheets are crunching a little against his skin. It's... mildly embarrassing, even though it's not all his.

"Yeah," Bucky's saying quietly, looking down at his own chest. It's not looking too clean either. "I can't fall back asleep."

Steve's finding it difficult to concentrate on any kind of problem, because Bucky is still naked and still in his bed. Even soft, he's beautiful, Steve thinks, and lets his eyes wander from his feet upward, finally allowed to. Bucky allows it for a few patient moments, then shoves him again.

"You can stare at me in the shower if you want. C'mon."

**

Steve does. Bucky starts rolling his eyes, pushing Steve's shoulder to turn him around to face the spray. The room is filled with the smells of honey and lavender, and when Steve turns back to kiss Bucky's cheek, Bucky takes his mouth and kisses him back. Nothing else feels like it matters at just that moment.

"I don't think I can get back to sleep after this," Steve confesses, watching Bucky scrub the grime off. The water droplets slide down his muscles slowly, as if taking their time of it.

"Me either." Bucky gets out, shaking his head back and forth like a dog and sending water everywhere. Steve makes a face and hands him one of the smaller towels for his hair. "God, that stuff smells."

"I thought you liked it."

"I do, it's good." Bucky breathes in. "Makes me think of..." He turns away, flushing.
"The bath?"

Bucky arches a brow, not looking at him but not turned away either. He starts to dry off. "Your hands were, uh." He laughs. "That was the first of many nights I thought I was going even more nuts."

"What do you mean?" Steve turns off the spray, grabs his own towel, and lets himself admire the way Bucky looks in his. It feels like the utmost luxury to do so. Part of his brain is still sending off alarm bells, like he needs to stay vigilant about getting caught.

"I saw your face, and I thought, 'he wants to.'" Bucky shrugs a shoulder. "I didn't remember much of you. I just knew I was supposed to stay by you, and never ever say anything."

"Say anything?"

Bucky actually looks a little sheepish. "About what I wanted outta you," he says, and in the pause he retreats to the bedroom, to the dresser. Steve finishes drying off a little more before following him out.

"Even if I'd known how you felt... you know I couldn't have done anything then."

"Because I wasn't myself?"

"Because you weren't ... together. For all I knew you'd have done anything for anyone, I - there was no way for me to know what you actually wanted."

Bucky's hand stills on the dresser drawer, looking over at Steve, assessing. "And now?"

Steve can't fight back the dumb smile he knows is creeping up on his face. "I might ask you to remind me, now and again." Bucky snorts.

"And how do you want me to do that?" He gets into Steve's space, chest brushing against his and mouth in his ear. Steve can think of several ways, but right now he decides upon laying his arms across Bucky's shoulders and pulling him in tightly. Even under all the lavender and honey, he still smells like home. Steve buries his nose in the spot under Bucky's jaw, breathing in deeply, enjoying the way he can feel Bucky's pulse quicken a little.

"I have no specific plans," Steve says, voice low, and when he walks forward a small step, Bucky lets him, until Steve's got him against the wall. Bucky squirms against him, towel falling onto their feet, and through Steve's towel he can feel Bucky's reaction to the small kisses he starts to press along Bucky's right shoulder, then left, all the way to the seam of his new left arm. He thinks about what Bucky did for him earlier, with his mouth, and wonders if he can do something like that for him - the idea itself is enough to arouse him further. He growls, planting his arms on either side of Bucky's face and pressing in tightly to kiss him properly. Bucky's body is tense, and Steve doesn't realize what that means until Bucky turns his head and pulls his hands in close to push at Steve's chest. He backs off immediately, pulling away to arms length but hands still planted on the wall, until it clicks that it wasn't the intimacy but perhaps the feeling of-

"I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"It's okay, just." Bucky's blinking rapidly, moving out of the spot as soon as Steve's arms lower, crossing the room quickly as if he needs the air specifically over there. After a moment, he walks back, eyes flickering up to Steve's face and then away as if he's embarrassed. Steve realizes the other man's arousal has disappeared completely.
"I didn't mean to, um."

Bucky scrubs at his face and shakes his head, non-verbally ending the conversation, closing the space between them and sliding his arms around Steve's shoulders. Steve breathes in deeply, paying more attention this time to the places where their bodies touch, the tension, and lays his hands on Bucky's hips. Feels fine. Bucky nuzzles into Steve's shoulders.

"I might not be able to do." Bucky's voice is barely past a mumble. "Everything. Yet."

"That's fine. It's fine." Steve honestly wouldn't care if they couldn't go past holding hands for a week. It doesn't matter. Everything felt so good, before, but it's so clear in his mind that all he wants is whatever Bucky's comfortable giving. "We'll learn together?"

"Yeah," Bucky says, and when Steve's hands wrap around him for a cautious embrace, Bucky melts into it. Steve stays just like that for a few minutes, drinking it in, before suggesting they change the sheets and try to get back to sleep.

**

Bucky says the easiest way to tell people will be to not tell people - he says he's thirsty and wants to make smoothies, and that they should watch TV or something in the common room. Steve doesn't see how that solves the issue at hand but feels no inclination to argue. It makes sense soon enough; when the blender stops and Bucky brings two glasses in from the kitchen to the coffee table, he pulls a cushion onto Steve's lap and lays down on his side. His hair splays across the pillow and he watches the screen with a relaxed sort of attention.

"Oh," Steve says, and shifts a little until comfortable. His hand finds its way into Bucky's hair, testing his limits of PDA and finding that this feels acceptable. Bucky sits up occasionally to have a sip of his smoothie, but when he sets it back down he always comes right back to Steve's lap.

"We could have just held hands, you know." Steve grins as he runs his fingers over the spot behind Bucky's ear, drawing out a contented little sigh.

"This is better," Bucky murmurs decisively. He gets a little riveted by the How It's Made episode, not noticing when Clint strolls in. His beeline to the fridge is halted when he spots them on the couch. Clint pauses, examining, then detours to the training schedule whiteboard. Steve watches over his shoulder as Clint holds the marker between his teeth, takes the white board down, and flips it, revealing an incredible mess of arrows and bulleted lists. 'Super Whiskey' is crossed out, as is 'Romantic Picnic'.

Next to 'Dancing', Clint makes a large red check mark, nods to himself, and walks out.

Chapter End Notes

A few things:

1. Everyone who has ever commented or messaged me over on my tumblr - hi. You are the reason this got done. This 40-chapter monster started because I wanted to write the story I couldn't find, but it actually got fleshed out and finished and done relatively promptly because I had your encouragement. Remember my cold, black, immortal heart? It glitters now, a little bit, and pulsates with the dark ichor of your good vibes.
Yay!

2. Big thanks and squishes again to bluandorange, who drew the fab sketch of Bucky for me and is generally a non-denominational angel of art and all things good. Did I mention they do commissions? Just throwing that out there.

3. THIS MAYBE ISN'T OVER. The sequel isn't fully developed yet but it will basically involve a bunch of epilogue-esque fluff and more of Bucky's recovery. Watch this space, or better yet, subscribe and/or follow me for updates.

Works inspired by this Colors by Shazrolane

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!