A story in which the serum doesn't affect Steve's size, the shield goes to Bucky, and they reunite years before the Battle of New York. Also, Steve is a punk, but that's canon.
A timeline starting with the Howling Commandos and going all the way to Pre-Infinity War.

Notes

Trigger Warning for implied suicide attempt.
The Howling Commandos

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The serum did not have the intended effect on Steve. However, that does not mean it had no effect on him.

Steve Rogers, the 5’4” punk with a list of health issues down to his knees and an overwhelming sense of righteousness stepped out of the chamber 5 foot 6 without any health issues, and with his levels of righteousness off the grid. Which, all things considered, was impressive. It hadn't seemed possible that he could get any more righteous.

Steve also came out of the chamber more toned. He was still slim, but for once there was actual muscle beneath his skin. He was still small and unassuming, but his beady little eyes danced around the room, calculations running through his brain as he tried to catch his breath. For once in his life, he could.

The scientists who’d injected him with the serum (Howard Stark and company) were admittedly displeased at the results, but the fact that the serum had worked at all was still one of the most incredible scientific discoveries of the 20th century.

The next few weeks were spent prodding, testing, and waiting to see if this little five foot six punk would survive. He did.

That was when the question what next? started bouncing around the minds and mouths of everyone who knew about it. Multiple suggestions were given.

“A tour? You mean like with showgirls dancing around? Let people take pictures of him with their babies?”

“Put him back in the army? How will he explain how he’s not a string bean anymore? Push-ups?”

Steve could do pushups now, real, big boy pushups, without his knees slumping to the ground or his lungs having a seizure. He could do lots of pushups. He could do push ups one handed.

“We could always send him somewhere else. He could work in intelligence? Code cracking?”

That option was considered thoroughly. The serum had made Steve smarter, in some ways. His brain worked faster, his memory was advanced, he knew what to do when he was given numbers to solve. He was logical. Steve balanced in the middle of the seesaw, with logic on one side and his stone cold stubbornness on the other. He still wanted to fight every person who he thought deserved it, but now, he knew where to hit. He saw the attacks coming and reacted accordingly.

In the end, it was decided that he was smart, capable, but not impressive. He was given the title captain and sent into Europe to fight.

Good riddance. That's all he’d really wanted anyway.

That first night in Europe Steve made his way to the officers station where he inquired about Bucky. It was that night that he found out Bucky had been lost, and it was that night that that stubbornness came into play in all of its harshness for the first time.
His team didn't like him nor did they trust him, but they followed him. Snide comments and squinted glares followed closely after salutes.

They were ordered to join the front-liners. Steve didn't care. He fought and fought and fought until people were telling him to calm his temper tantrums (a remark on his height) and he was reminded that he was supposed to be fighting nazis, not his commanding officers. Two days later he and his troops left the camp, not going to the front lines, but to a Hydra lab.

James Buchanan Barnes, 6'0" (aliases: Bucky, jerk) was found strapped to a table in said lab and was, blessedly, liberated.

It was the first time the Howling Commandos had ever seen Steve smile.

That night, they all crowded in one of the tents, talking and discussing plans in a way that suggested comradesry. They introduced themselves for the first real time, the other commandos laughing and taking digs at each other while Steve held court, smiling so genuinely his jaw hurt. Bucky laid against his chest, smiling in a foggier type of way. That moment in time was also when they were closest in weight: Steve had filled out a bit, and Bucky had lost some (torture did that to a person).

From that point on, the Howlers were the golden boys of the 107th regiment, specializing in raids. They fought primarily using standard issue M1 Garands, but over the course of time graduated to Thompsons, and then discovered other favorite weapons. Dum Dum, for example, preferred using a Winchester that he'd found. It’s intended use was for trench warfare, but it worked just as well up close and personal. Bucky, being the designated sniper, used a Johnson rifle.

However, that was only the start.

It was January and everyone was turning bitter around the edges from the cold and the constant missions. Christmas had come and gone, and they remained in Europe, going on mission after mission.

They were on one mission in a Hydra bunker when the ammo supplies were depleted and Captain Rogers lead them in a sprint down a hallway, around a corner, and into an unmarked room. They closed and locked the door and looked around for something to use as a weapon.

They’d hit the motherload.

That was an exaggeration; there were actually only two guns. But there were other weapons as well. As it turned out, they’d stumbled upon a storeroom of stolen Stark gear and technology.

Bucky had walked to the corner of the room and picked up a glossy shield painted in the colors of the American flag. “Why the hell would Howard design a shield?”

Steve had shrugged. “Dunno. But if you think you can use it, take it.” He said this as he observed a display of small but sharp knives, and then began packing them away.

It was a sight to see. By the time they were ready to leave, Hydra forces had surrounded the door, which made it all the more exciting when the door slammed open and a grenade was thrown, hitting one of the soldiers and exploding with so much force even those who weren't killed were thrown back. Then the commandos stepped forwards and everything went to a state of beautiful, beautiful chaos.

Dum Dum and Morita used the rifles; Gabe, Pinky, and the others used a mixture of liberated ammo and random items that had little explanation, but were plenty dangerous when thrown; Bucky used
the American Shield, which let him deflect bullets back into the ranks, as well as smash in some Hydra faces; and Steve used his knives. He started with slashing and stabbing motions but realized quickly that throwing them was much more fun. The serum had increased his vision and given him above-average accuracy, making him absolutely deadly.

One might think that Rogers’ righteousness would get in the way of all this. One would be wrong; Rogers’ righteousness was the reason he enjoyed it so much. Justice can mean doing what's right, or it can mean doing what's fair. And it certainly seemed fair; they were killing Nazis.

Steve Rogers was very righteous. He was just his own, special kind of righteous.

That night they sat around the tent again, talking quickly in a variety of accents and languages, laughing and howling and shoving each other and grinning; even Steve. Because, of course, he was sitting next to Bucky, their legs pressed firmly up against each other.

“You're keeping the shield, right?” Gabe asked, the same excited look on his face as always.

“Aww, I dunno,” Bucky said, miming at casual. Steve watched him, making note of the same half-lidded eyes and easy smile as he gave the girls back home. “I feel like Uncle Sam carrying it.”

This received a round of howling laughter. Even Steve was loose enough to laugh, which made Bucky swivel his head and watch, grinning ear to ear.

“No, not Uncle Sam!” Dum Dum said. “Captain America!”

Steve immediately stopped laughing, twisting his face into a scowl. “Hey, I'm the Captain here!”

The others laughed and threw empty cigarette cartons and rolled up socks at him while he threatened loudly to tell his superiors, etc etc.

Bucky kept the shield. And Steve kept the knives. He still used a gun most of the time, but if he thought he'd be more efficient with a knife? Well, it just wouldn't do to waste ammo.

So Steve became Captain Rogers and Bucky became Captain America. It was only a nickname, a codename at best, a taunt at worst, used primarily to get Steve pissy. He’d bunch up his face and wag his finger and channel his inner Mrs.Rogers, screeching about manners and how they needed to learn to be respectable young men, *damn it!* He continued until they were either halfway to hysterics or one of them played nice and went “Yes mom, sorry mom” and Steve could cross his arms with a contented *Hmpf!*

It wasn’t all sunshine and roses; they were still at war. Even when they weren't fighting on the front lines, war still meant rations, and cold, and homesickness, and danger, and injury, and all sorts of other things that were less than pleasant.

They all were injured at some point or another, and they all took turns bandaging each other up, always with a chorus of “Aw come on, it’s barely a scratch” and Bucky’s personal favorite, “Walk it off, soldier.” It got to the point where the phrase was a joke in itself. Steve would mention something about how his socks were soggy or he’d gotten an uncomfortable scratch and exactly half a step behind him would be a snark of “Walk it off, soldier.” Then Steve would stop, turn around, and repeat the phrase mockingly, the smile that belonged solely to Bucky twitching up on his lips. Bucky would then mock his mocking, and then Steve would mock his mocking of his mocking, etc etc until they were just making faces and jabbering at each other until one of the other commandos snapped them out of it. Usually Jaques. Usually with a grunt of “We’re never going to get to see any real action, are we?” like everything they'd done thus far was too boring for him. Sometimes they'd take
the hint. Sometimes Steve would jut his chin out at Barnes and go “Yeah Buck, stop being a
distraction, I’m trying to win the war for us”. When that was the case, there was usually a round of
jeering until someone said “Who’s Captain America now?” and Bucky made a disgusted face.

Steve would grin snarkily to himself for the next few minutes, but at least it got them walking again.

Steve wasn’t just obnoxious. He had a variety of skills and abilities, including the ability to be a
decent friend, when it came to that. Him and Barnes’ friendship was mostly made out of insults,
quips and roughhousing, but they did occasionally make room for things like emotion.

They had been on another raid one day when Bucky was shot. He was lucky-- it had only skimmed
his leg. Decent blood loss, but no major worries. They finished the mission and then went back to the
tents, with Rogers and Barnes crawling into their shared one with the medical kit in tow.

Steve had asked Bucky to take off his pants (“Only if you say please”) and opened up the kit,
preparing to use the suture needle if needed (it’s like mending a sock, he told himself, mending a
sock. There was no room for disgust or fault in Steve-- he had to do what was needed of him).
However, when Steve crawled over to look at the wound, it had already closed up on it’s own. It
was nowhere near healed, but it looked like the wound had happened a day ago, not an hour ago.
“Buck?”

Bucky was pale, but he didn't look surprised. “I've been meaning to tell you about it,” he mumbled
to the floor of the tent. “One of the experiments they did on me…”

“Jeez Buck, you're healing almost as fast as I do.”

“Almost?”

Then they were shoving each other again, everything back to normal.

Bucky didn’t let anyone else know about the experiments. When he was injured, either Steve tended
to him or no one did.

And that was just how things were.

They were back in the real world for a briefing and supply update when Steve met Peggy Carter.
She shook his hand firmly upon meeting and told him she'd heard about him and his Howlies, how
she’d been one of the minds behind the serum, how she and Stark were in cahoots and had
wonderful things planned for them. They were able to restock with newer, personalized weapons.

It was a given when Howard found out about the shield they'd liberated. But instead of being upset
or demanding it back, he lit up like a kid on Christmas, asking if it works and if it'd done Bucky any
good.

Steve rummaged through some files in the back, looking for more information on the serum.

“Sure, it’s helped out. Deflects bullets better than anything I can think of.”

“That’s because it's vibranium,” Howard said, his eyes lighting up even more. “But don't tell me you
only use it to deflect bullets?”

“Nah, he also likes to carry it around,” Steve said casually, still fingering a few files. “Please, take it
away from him. It just inflates his ego.” His eyes darted up, meeting Bucky’s for just long enough for
his lips to twitch up in a smirk before he regained his composure.
“Is this true?”

“Steve’s one to talk. Don’t let his height fool you, his ego could trump Hitler’s.”

“And I haven’t even tried for world domination yet.”

“Yet.”

Howard ate it up. It was possible that he didn’t get much humor out of the other scientists he spent his days with. He had taken the shield from Bucky and was examining it as they talked. “I bet you look like Uncle Sam carrying this around.”

Steve snorted. “He calls himself ‘Captain America’.”

“Hey, other people call me that. I just accept it.” Bucky shrugged good-naturedly like what can you do? and his head twitched to the side, one of the ticks left over from the torture.

Steve pressed his lips together, choosing not to point it out. “Don’t act like you don’t love it.”

Howard ran his hand along the face of the shield, tracing over the ridges carefully. “There’s a dent. Why is there a dent?”

“Loose plate,” Bucky explained.

“But how did the dent get there?”

“You can thank Steve for that. That dent’s from one of his knives.”

Stark froze. For a few moments the room was completely silent, and then: “What?”

“It was just a throwing knife and a lucky shot. Well… I don’t think those knives are actually meant for throwing, but they’re good for it. Upwards to the future and all that.”

Howard’s jaw had never hit the jaw quite so hard. “Do you think it’s from the serum? Your increased accuracy, perfected throw?”

“I wouldn’t call that accuracy,” Bucky interrupted. “He was supposed to be aiming for the Nazis.”

“Who could just aim at the Nazis when there’s a honker like yours in their peripheral?”

“Are you suggesting, Steven Grant Rogers--” Bucky grinned at the way that Steve’s nose crinkled at the name “--that you purposely threw a knife at me, your childhood friend and comrade? Stark, please, I don’t think the serum worked, better put him back in the box.”

“This version’s faulty,” Steve agreed, “better put me down like Bucky’s dog from grade school.”

Bucky gasped, dramatically placing a hand on his chest. “Don’t talk about Spot that way!”

There had never been a dog, but it was a running joke that Bucky’s ‘deep rooted issues’ must have come from some sort of childhood trauma. The joke had lasted for years, and the dog’s name changed every time.

Howard had partially zoned out, still listening while he stroked the shield thoughtfully. “Rogers?”

They both turned to look at him. “Hmm?”
His expression was one of muted amazement. “Did you actually throw the knife at him?”

Steve cleared his throat and straightened, as if only then realizing he was among his superior. “Um, yes. Non-active target practice.”

“It was a bet,” Bucky clarified. “The Commandos didn't think he could do it. A word of advice Howard, don’t make bets with Steve. He’ll clear you out of your last cigarette. And he doesn't even smoke.”

“Hey, what can I say?” Steve said, giving Bucky a knowing smirk. “I'm the reason you'll still be able to breathe when you're an old man. Older than you are now, anyways.”

Howard grinned. “Was he always this bad or is this my fault?”

“Hey, no one deserves that blame.”

“Hey!” Steve said, marching over to Bucky and punching him in the arm. “Jerk.”

“Punk.”

“You two could keep this up for hours, couldn't you?”

Steve grinned. “Guilty. He’s just so easy to insult.”

They looked like they were ready to start wrestling ut quickly stopped at the sound of heels clicking against the floor. “Steve?” Peggy asked. “Are you ready for the tests?”

“Ready as I'll ever be, ma’am.”

“Oh please. I'm sure your plenty used to tests by now. How long were you in the labs after the serum?”

“Two weeks and five days.”

“They couldn’t even handle him the whole three weeks,” Bucky teased. “I don’t blame them.”

“Barnes, would you like to stay back with me?” Howard offered.

Peggy pursed her lips to contain the smile. She and Steve both did that, like they couldn’t let the secret that they were happy out. “That might be a good idea. Give you two boys a break?”

“Aw, it’s not like that ma’am. This is just how we show affection.” Bucky rustled Steve’s hair and he elbowed him in response.

“Wow. You must really love each other.”

They laughed and Peggy raised an eyebrow, still doing the I’m-not-smiling-you’re-smiling thing with her deep red lips. She managed to get Steve to come with her without any more ‘affectionate’ injuries. Bucky saluted him as he walked away. “Captain.”

Steve returned the gesture, grinning and following Carter.

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The tests indicated the serum was still running through Steve’s system at its full capacity. His body
had completely adapted to it; it appeared as though his body was already producing more, so that he’d never run out.

Steve had watched as the few scientists who had clearance shuffled around him. He watched them stick him with needles, never flinching, just watching.

“You’re pretty calm,” Peggy noted. “Not afraid of needles?”

Rogers shrugged. “Nah, just used to it. Mostly from the serum thing, but I got stuck with needles a lot growing up. I was indefinitely sick.”

Peggy gave a pitiful smile. Steve didn’t mind it like he did with other people. “It must be nice, being healthy after all that time.”

Steve smiled. “I like it. I wouldn’t have minded if they’d made me a bit taller, though.”

This got a laugh out of Peggy. “We’ll see what we can do with the next generation serum.”

“Thanks. Let your next lab rat know it was my idea.”

Steve liked Peggy, liked her smile, liked her laugh, liked her no-nonsense approach and er confidence. He also liked that she didn’t seem to think his body was important-- which was a strange thing to appreciate, but after a lifetime of being fussed over it was nice to exist as more than that.

It was one of the first times a girl had really laughed at his jokes; most of the dames back home didn’t appreciate his dry humor.

Peggy’s eyes were bright with intelligence.

“What a dame,” Steve muttered that night, back in their tent. “Another life, Bucky. I’m telling you, there’s an alternate universe out there where we’re together.”

There was a short pause before Bucky’s gruff voice spoke up in the dark. “I never should have gotten you into science fiction.”

Steve rolled over and shoved him playfully, not able to see him in the low light but knowing the message was received when Bucky let out a breathy laugh and shoved him right back.

Before long the Howlies were in the mountains, eyes on a train in the distance. “We’re not going to zipline down, are we?”

Steve checked to make sure his collar was zipped up all the way. The scowl was back on his face. “Unless you have a better idea?”

No one did, so they zipped down, landing on top of the train and spreading out. Steve dropped into one of the cars. There was a loud noise in the one next to him, where Bucky had slid in. Steve rapped on the door. “You with me?”

There was some muffled groaning and then a knock back. “To the end of the line, pal,” Bucky grunted. He’d probably landed on his face instead of his feet, Steve thought with a little smile.

He observed the contents of the train car. He’d almost made it to the other end when the door exploded inwards and he was being shot at. Later, recounting the event, he claimed it was a robot, but even then he seemed unsure.

The point was, something shot at him. Steve rolled out of the way and returned fire with his
Thompson, which didn't do much good. Then Bucky was beside him, joining in the fire, his leg pressing against Steve’s leg in a familiar way. To the end of the line.

The fight was a blur, only memorable in snippets of sparks and the train rocking from side to side as it continued to thunder down the tracks. Steve’s gun ran out of ammo and instead of taking precious time to reload he slung it over his back and pulled out his knives. They implanted themselves in the chinks in the robot’s shoulders, in its chest, in one of it’s weapons. All the while Steve ran calculations in his head like a mad man. All the while Bucky was right there with him.

They ran back into the other car; they took cover; they returned fire; Bucky remembered what Howard had said and tried throwing the shield, which ricocheted off the wall and hit the robot with enough force to send it stumbling backwards. Steve caught the shield on the rebound.

Maybe it was after that, maybe it was before, but at some point a hole was blown in the side of the train. The robot fired at the door at the other end of the car and it shuddered and caved in on itself, denting so badly they wouldn’t be able to get it open.

Steve and Bucky communicated with their eyes. They then leapt out in front of the robot, grabbed the side of the wall and flung themselves onto the side of the train, shuffling along the edges. Dum Dum was in the next car over and he reached out, pulling Steve in. Steve reached out for Bucky right as the railing gave in and Bucky swung wildly over the ravine.

“Bucky!”

Steve reached out, their fingers barely touching as the railing gave in and Bucky fell. He slipped right through Steve’s fingers.

Steve cried out as he watched Bucky fall, eyes wide open, mouth gaping in horror.

They didn't make it to the end of the line.

There was no consoling Steve. With Bucky’s shield strapped over his back, Steve led the Howlies on mission after mission, each one progressively more dangerous. He’d been aggressive with the knives before, but now he was absolutely lethal. He threw all 5’6” of himself into every fight, and came out on top.

He never used the shield except in emergencies, just kept it strapped to his back. It made sense in a twisted, painful way: Bucky had always watched his back before. He continued to, even when he was lost. Even though Steve had failed to watch Bucky’s back.

Steve fought for three more months after that. His overgrown righteousness lead him to believe that he knew better than his superiors-- which he wasn’t actually wrong about, but it certainly didn't make him many friends.

He destroyed Hydra bases. He battled Red Skull. And then he flew his plane into the Arctic Ocean, tesseract in tow, where he presumably died. Very sad. What a story; what a soldier.

But that wasn’t the end.

The super serums kept both Steve and Bucky alive through the cold. Bucky was retrieved by Soviet forces; Steve was lost to the ice.

When Howard found out Steve was gone, he sent forces out looking. After a week without success he was forced to return to work and wait until the war ended to continue searching.
After the war ended, the remaining Howling Commandos separated. Dum Dum Dugan published a comic book a year later: The Adventures Of Captain America And Co. The story was about all of the Howling Commandos, but he knew how much naming it after their little joke would have pissed Steve off and pleased him in equal amounts.

Captain America stuck. He became a symbol of righteousness and liberty, freedom and justice for all, etc. Dum Dum had kept the comic book light, playing certain things up and others down. It was never supposed to be a memoir, just a silly comic book to make the other commandos laugh. He claimed Captain America had superhuman powers and made Steve out to be super smart (people often doubted Steve’s intelligence; Dum Dum wanted comic Steve to get that respect.)

The comic book wasn’t even read by that many people, but soon it was a household name. You helped an old woman cross the street, you’d hear “Oh, you’re such a Captain America”.

Cute. Bucky was actually the type of person to do that, not that he’d had many chances during the war.

People remembered Captain America. Few people remembered Captain Rogers.

He was frozen in the ice for nearly 60 years, but it felt like one night. He awoke in a bedroom he’d never been in before with the radio playing softly. A newspaper sat on the table, proclaiming The War Is Over!

Steve was painfully, stubbornly righteous. He had no family, he was no longer needed to fight, and Bucky was dead. Therefore, his decision to attempt to strangle himself with the curtain cords felt perfectly justified.

A group of nurses ran in before he could and he fought them off, his muscles aching and stinging from disuse. He reached for his knives, but they were all gone. Finally he was restrained to his bed, panting, eyes lined in red and glare in full effect.

The nurses stuck him with the IV again and left. Steve had caught his breath and his heartbeat was almost at an acceptable rate when he noticed the shield in the corner of the room, and went off once more.

Chapter End Notes

I am incredibly excited to have finally started publishing this story, and I hope you've enjoyed this first chapter. I feed off of comments so if you have any comments/questions/theories, please don't hesitate. Comments make my day :)

Some other quick notes
- Updates will be every Tuesday and Sunday (I'd recommend subscribing to get updates)
- I will be posting some original fanart for this fic, and if anyone else was interested in creating fanworks of any kind, I would be honored (and would link/spon you in whatever ways I can)
- This is going to be a long one. I already know it will be over 100k. Henceforth, please share your opinions with me, as I'm always extremely curious to hear what works/doesn't work for different people.
And one quick disclaimer...
This work does include violence and gore. I am not a medical professional but I know my way around a tourniquet and will be using whatever resources I can to try and make all injuries and first aid efforts as accurate as possible. This work will also include regular cussing and mature themes, but for anything too bad, I will put trigger warnings at the beginnings of each chapter.

I can't wait to get started on this fic. Please let me know what you think!
Steve was awoken in 2007, sixteen years after Howard was brutally executed on the side of a road. Steve’s defrosting made it into the science magazines, but not the newspapers. He didn’t care.

Steve spent the next three months in a SHIELD facility, which he found really fucking funny. They taught him all sorts of fun things, including (in no particular order): how to not kill himself, what the Vietnam war was about, how to break encryptions, what the internet is, and most importantly, how to play nice. In order to get out of the facility Steve had to make them question why he was there in the first place. So, in public, he smiled, played shy, flirted with the SHIELD Coffee baristas, and even pretended to be dumb sometimes. He ‘forgot’ things. He laughed. He mourned his dead friends—normal person mourning, getting teary eyed and nostalgic.

Finally, SHIELD released him and Steve smiled, waved, said he was headed back to his apartment, got on a bus, still waving, with only the clothes on his back, the shield in his duffel, and the stolen cash in his pockets, and took the bus until it hit the end of the line, never returning to the apartment SHIELD had so ‘graciously’ arranged for him.

He was on the run for four years, hacking onto the SHIELD mainframe and finding where there was still a suspected Hydra influence. He hopped trains like it was the 1930’s; he stole only what was needed to survive and continue to fight.

He grew a reputation as Nomad, the vigilante/terrorist who wore the Captain America shield on his back. He appreciated that his reputation didn’t include that he was small. One of the perks of mass murder was that people didn't spend much time gossiping about his height.

It was a fall night in Boston, and Steve was on the run.

*Surprise.*

He was sprinting across rooftops, cursing his legs for not being long enough, when he saw a billboard advertising an addiction hotline. It had a huge blown up picture of Captain America on it, pointing a finger straight at Steve. It read: ‘Are you on a path that Captain America would agree with?’

Steve stared up at the billboard, his chest rising and falling rapidly, and felt the horrible urge to sob. Not because of drugs— he was perfectly content in his methods of self medication— but because his righteousness only extended outwards to a point. He felt just in his crimes, but that didn't mean that he was just. If Bucky saw him now…

Steve was forced out of his thoughts by a hand over his mouth and a fist to his stomach. He screamed into the hand, doubling over and taking three seconds too long to retrieve a knife and plunge it into his captors leg. They released him and he yanked the knife back out (have fun with that), flipping it in his hand and stabbing the other person who was grabbing onto him.

He didn't kill them, because Captain America was still watching, his finger pointed at Steve like *Now son, do the right thing.* But he did stab them.

And then roll them off the roof.
But he didn't kill them, because the Cap was watching.

Steve moved around constantly, trying to find new things to do, new people to wipe out. Hydra had been officially eliminated a year after he’d woken up, but it was such a huge corporation that there were still thousands of stragglers who were never caught. They regrouped, and it was Steve’s job to not only disperse them, but eliminate them.

There was a man, Brock Rumlow, who supposedly worked for SHIELD. After some high class snooping, Steve found out that was very much not the case, and climbed into his house through a window one night.

“Your crimes against humanity are… extensive.” Steve said when Brock came into the kitchen in just a sleep shirt and his boxers to pour himself a glass of milk. Brock (5’11", alias: Crossbones) stopped pouring the milk and froze.

“Murder,” Steve recited. “Murder of a colleague. Assassination attempt of a superior. Extensive human experimentation. What do you have to say about that?”

Rumlow didn’t say anything. He turned around slowly, as if he meant no harm. “Who are you?”

Rogers bared his teeth. “I'm your worst fucking nightmare.”

Brock threw the glass of milk at him and it shattered against Steve’s raised arm, spraying him with glass and milk. Brock charged at him and Steve slipped to the ground, getting in a good nut-shot before rolling and wiping the milk out of his eyes.

Brock whipped around and loomed over him, looking about ready to strangle him. It was possible, based on the fact that Steve couldn't get up, that he had broken a rib in the fall. Terrific.

“Those charges aren’t true,” Brock growled out through a smile. “I would never waste money on an assassin.”

He started to lunge for Steve but was cut off by the bullet hole in his forehead.

Steve cried out in pain when the man collapsed on top of him, and yeah, if his ribs weren't broken before they sure as hell were now.

He had to struggle for a while to roll the guy off of him, as it appeared that Rumlow’s diet mostly consisted of protein shakes and raw meat, but eventually he managed. He retrieved an ace bandage from one of his pants pockets and used it to apply pressure to his chest.

When he finally managed to stand, he retrieved the shield from where it had rolled to and slung it over his back. He cringed at the sight of the bullet hole in the man’s forehead; guns were fine, he guessed, but knives were just so much cooler. He kept a couple of handguns on him for situations like this, where gravity was working against him, but still. He could have done better.

Three weeks later, this time in a town right outside of DC, he was in a situation far too similar. He was in the guy’s kitchen, perched on the counter by the window, waiting while he rehearsed his lines. The man walked down the hallway and over to a picture on the wall, adjusting it.

“Alexander Pierce,” Steve purred “You're crimes against humanity are… extensive.” What? Steve did this a lot. It wasn’t fair to ask that he come up with a completely new script each time. “Fraud. Corruption. Embezzlement. Human experimentation. Murder. Shall I go on?”

Actually, Steve wasn’t sure about the murder, but generally it was a safe assumption.
The figure (5’10”, alias: Director Pierce) stayed perfectly still, not saying anything. He tilted his head up, still facing the painting.

Steve glared at him. He already had his knife out. “What do you have to say about that?”

The man shifted. “That’s pretty bad,” he said finally, shifting from side to side. “But I’m sorry to tell you… I beat you here.”

He turned around, and Steve stared at him. Not Pierce.

They stared at each other for a few long seconds. The man was taller than 5’10”, it should’ve been a dead fucking giveaway. He had stringy dark hair that fell loosely around his face and a scowl that rivaled Steve’s own. He was bulky and Steve immediately picked out a few bumps that meant he was packing.

He wore a large, faded red shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He had a metal arm.

Steve’s serum-enhanced brain ticked around, sucking in information as fast as it could. The eyes. That glare. The set of the jaw, the shape of the figure’s fucking nose…

Steve threw himself backwards through the open window so fast he banged his shoulder against the windowsill. That didn’t so much as slow him down from his mad scamper as he clawed to his feet, stumbling onto himself and running as fast as he could from the apartment. He leapt from roof to roof like he was being chased. He wasn’t, but even after checking behind him a couple dozen times he still wasn’t convinced.

He threw himself through the window of his squat, not caring as it shattered around him. He rolled, the shield going one way and his body the other.

With shaking hands Steve clawed himself out of view of the window, propping himself against the wall as he choked for breath. It was as if the serum had drained out of his body and his lungs decided to compensate for sixty-some years of behaving themselves. His blood sugar levels dropped; his eyes went into tunnel vision and then danced with spots; his heart pounded like that damn train that Bucky had--

Bucky.

Steve choked on his own sobs. He couldn't breathe.

His mind whirred, trying to be helpful. Actually, five percent of his mind tried to be helpful. The rest was too busy screaming.

Symptoms: shaking, difficulty breathing, increased heart rate. Seizure? Perhaps a seizure. When Mrs. Davids across the hall has a seizure you should: move any sharp or dangerous items away, protect head… avoid restraining?

Steve was shaking so badly he could feel his brain shudder, his lungs splutter. Move sharp or dangerous items away, he repeated, and then move any sharp or dangerous items away, and then move any--

Right.

Steve yanked the knife out of his side pocket, the pair to the one that he left on the floor of Bucky’s-
Focus, sharp/dangerous objects, dammit!

Steve yanked out two other knives, then opened up the pockets with his throwing knives, sliding all six of them across the floor with so much force they hit the wall on the other side of the room. He pulled out his last throwing knife and chucked it at the wall. It opened midair and embedding itself in the drywall, a clean stick.

Steve sobbed.

Weapons, dammit Rogers!

He fumbled with getting the two guns out, sliding them across the room. Then the ammo…

Bucky. BUCKY. Barnes-- Buchanon-- Bucky-- Barnes-- James--

“Til the end of the line, pal.”

Steve screamed again. He pulled his knees to his chest, then slammed his forehead against his knees. OW.

He whipped his head back, hitting the corner of the wall.

Lungs reset.

Heart rate: approximately 500 beats per minute.

Approximately .

He stared at the window. There were no curtains, which meant no curtain cords.

“Walk it off soldier.”

His shaking hands reached for a knife, only to find his pockets empty. Fuck, fuck, fucking shit.

Bucky laying next to him. Bucky leaning out the window, cupping his hand around a cigarette as he tried to light it. Falling.

Bucky standing in Pierce’s kitchen.

Goddamnit. Steve was never going to do Opium again-- ever .

The next morning, Steve got up (got up, not woke up) and carefully checked over his weapons. He put his knives back in their designated pockets and unloaded his two handguns, reloading the magazines and snapping them back in place. They went back on his person.

His hands twitched, but he’d used up the last of his stash the day prior.

He climbed back out of the broken window, leaving the shield in his squat.

He walked along the edge of the roof to the building. Three stories up. He leapt to the building west of it. Two stories. The next building was five stories, but it had balconies, making it almost too easy. Of course, it’d be easier if he was a few inches taller...

He spent the day climbing buildings and trying to distract his mind. It didn’t work. Eventually he
ended up at the public library, his serum-flushed mind working through the encryptions on its own. He had a legal pad next to him where he scribbled out equations.

“Excuse me, young man, but what are you doing?”

Steve almost jolted. He made himself smile up at the librarian, holding his hands still instead of reaching for a knife like he wanted to. “Sorry ma’am,” Young man? I’m older than you are. “It’s this game for math class.” The library squinted her eyes, looking at the notepad. “It’s calculus.”

She made another face, but basically told him he could continue. He rolled his eyes after she’d left and continued breaking into the FBI’s secure network.

He’d taught himself a interesting new type of codebreaking for this project, which involved hacking the code to create a new account, instead of removing the security altogether.

Howard Stark deserved a lot more credit for the serum than he got.

After breaking in, Steve shifted through the files, looking for any new information pertaining Hydra or the KGB. Nothing.


Steve’s super-circulation really should have gotten the Opium out of his system by now.

Finally, Steve gave in and choose one of the people on the FBI’s watch list who was associated with Hydra. There was high likelihood that he was involved with them.

That was good enough for Steve.

He waited until nightfall and then hopped the subway, carrying his duffel bag with the shield in it. Once he got off the tra-- the subway -- he climbed to the top of a nearby building and strapped the shield to his back. The apartment he was looking for wasn’t even ten minutes away.

His heart thumping at a consistent rate in his chest, Steve opened a window and let himself in. He walked quietly through the bedroom he was in and into the living room. Nick Fury (6'1", alias: Nicholas) sat on the couch, his back to him.

Steve withdrew a knife. He crept up behind him and carefully slid the knife up against his throat.

Nick Fury did not wince. His eyes- well, eye- was open. He didn't show any sign of panic or surprise.

“You knew I was coming, didn't you?” Steve asked softly. He was smiling, if you could call it that.

Fury continued staring straight ahead. “When you're in the line of work that I am, you expect things like this from time to time.”

Steve pressed the knife upwards, but Fury stayed still. “Your crimes against humanity are extensive,” he started.

Shit.

He didn't remember the file.

“Assault,” he started, because that was always a good place to start. “Murder. Shall I go on?”
Fury tried to look up at him with his good eye. “Can you?”


“I didn’t—” Fury paused when Steve dug the knife deeper, “I didn't do human experimentation. That’s just messed up.”

“If you're a part of Hydra you did.”

“Yes, well that's convenient, because I'm the director of SHIELD, not Hydra.”

Steve couldn't help hesitated. “SHIELD?”

“Yeah, ever heard of it? Man, I'd think whoever hired you would've given you an informational packet or something.”

Steve was about to respond when a hand came up and yanked his hand downwards, flipping Steve over the couch. He rolled, landing on his feet and pulling out two knives at the same time. Fury was behind the couch, just standing up as the first knife embedded itself into his hand, pinning it against the wall.

“Ow! What the hell man?”

Steve raised his other hand, preparing to throw. “Want to try again? If you want to wait and tell me in an hour that fine too, I’ve got time, but I can tell you right now it won’t be very pleasant for you.”

“Who the hell are you?! No, I don’t work for Hydra, I already told you. You seriously think I'm a nazi?”

Steve threw the knife, aiming for Fury’s coat but instead also skimming his skin. Oops. “I've got all night,” he repeated, drawing another knife and flipping it in his hand. This was just what he needed: a nice, peaceful night out on the town pinning a Nazi to his own goddamn wall.

Fury stared him down, giving Steve a once over. A flicker of... something made his eye widened. “Is that a shield?”

Steve grinned, taking off the shield and slamming it into the wall by Fury’s head with so much force it stuck in the drywall. “You like it?”

“You're like six inches shorter than me.”

“Seven,” Steve corrected automatically. “And I'm still going to kill you.”

“Motherfucker, no one ever said the Nomad was short! Do you know how many police lineups we've had to set up? One guy even mentioned how big you seemed.”

“Focus. Hydra.”

“I told you, I'm the director of SHIELD --”

A knife to the stomach. Nick Fury tries to double over in pain, but is still pinned to the wall by his arm.

Fun.
Fury mouths what Steve is sure to be some very creative curses, and then he tries to straighten. He fails. He glares at Steve. Steve glares back harder.

“Your name is Sam. Seb-- Steph-- Steve! Steve… Roger!”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Rogers. There’s an ‘s’.”

“What in the fucking--”

“Hydra,” Steve reminded him in a bored voice, twisting the knife in his stomach.

“Ow! You know, your voice is deep for such a small guy. Okay, okay, listen. Listen.” Steve raised his eyebrows, still bored. “I’m the director of SHIELD, like I said. I believe that there is some Hydra influence, not me, but others. I have suspicions. Don’t kill them, not without evidence, but… Alexander Pierce, Brock Rumlow, Jasper Sitwell…”

“Killed them already,” Steve said boredly. “Jasper Sitwell?”

Fury looked at him like he was a madman. “You what?”

“Any other secrets you’d like to spill?” Steve asked, the poor lighting casting shadows across his face. With his muscles tense and ready for a fight, his eyes staying still instead of flitting around, his mouth just slightly open… well, he didn't look like a teenager. He looked… his age. Subjective age, not biological.

He looked dangerous.

Good.

“You're not going to kill me,” Fury said calmly, even though his body was shaking. The room smelt of blood. “I can help you. We’re on the same team, we're both fighting the same guys. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?” He paused. “Do you want a job?”

Steve stared at him. “Jasper Sitwell. That’s all I needed. You're disposable.”

“For fuck’s sake, you're supposed to be righteous --”

Steve yanked his knife out of the wall and pulled his shield down, sliding it into place onto his back.

“Don’t kill me,” Fury pleaded. “Listen. Barnes is alive, I can take you to him--”

The color drainer out of Steve’s face. The serum seemed to dissolve into his blood because his heart was pounding again, and his lungs were quivering, and, and--

Does this mean we can keep doing Opium?

“Keep your men away from him,” Steve ordered. He yanked the knife out of Fury’s hand, wiping it on the man’s coat and sliding it back into his pockets. “Back off, or I'm coming for you again.”

Then, because Fury was an idiot, he replied “I'm going to tell them about you. Tell them that Steve Rogers is The Nomad.”

Steve snarled without much force behind it. “Legally, Steve Rogers is dead. Besides, who would believe a man with a concussion?”

He slammed the butt of a knife against Fury’s skull and Fury crumpled. Steve let him keep the knife
in his stomach.

He ran out through the hallway, leaving Fury’s door open and ringing a neighbor’s doorbell, because, after all, Steve was a righteous man.

That night he climbed back to Alexander Pierce’s apartment, going into the kitchen through the window. This time he climbed off of the counter, creeping forwards.

The man rounded the corner and froze when he saw Steve. Same red shirt, metal air, greasy hair. “I thought you were a hallucination,” he muttered.

Steve was glad he wasn’t holding a knife, otherwise he would have dropped it. “Ditto,” he managed.

“You're bleeding,” the man realized.

“Oh, no, it's not--” he looked up and met his eyes. They looked hazel in the light, but Steve knew they were actually blue. He swallowed. “It’s not my blood.”

They stared at each other for a few moments.

“I have a shower,” he said. “If you… yeah.”

Yeah,” Steve muttered. “Well… this blood’s already drying, and it's pretty gross.”

Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean. Sure... Second door to your left.”

“Thanks.” Steve stared at him, carefully skirting along the edges of the counter and then walking to the bathroom, checking behind him to make sure the figure didn't move. Man. Person.

He couldn't say his name.

So Steve showered. He cleaned his knives. He almost embedded one knife in the door when there was a light knock on it. “Hey? Do you have clean clothes?”

“Uhh… no, but--”

“I'm leaving some out here. I dunno if they’ll fit, but there’s nothin’ worse than sleeping in bloodstained clothes, you know? I’ll be… in the living room.”

“Okay,” Steve said, because what else could he say?

He waited until the footsteps receded to open the door part way and grab the clothes. They were too big (surprise) but the sweatpants had a drawstring and the tshirt wasn't ridiculously large.

There were two pockets hand sewn on the inside of the pants, the perfect size for a knife. Steve slipped one in each pocket.

He did the calculations in his head again: with his metabolism, and the fact that he hadn't taken anything in over 24 hours, there shouldn't be any drugs left in his body.

He carried his dirty clothes in a wadded up ball as he slipped out of the bathroom. The figure was sitting on the couch in the living room, staring into space.

Nice. Always a good sign.

“The clothes fit alright,” Steve said. The man whipped around to look at him, his expression a little
“Good.”

They continued to stare at each other.

“Did you know?” Steve asked.

“Not until yesterday. You?”

“The same.”

“...How?”

“Frozen in the Arctic. Serum. You?”

“Russians. Hydra. Cryofreeze.”

“Oh.”

“I got out two years ago.”

“I was defrosted four years ago.”

“Oh.”

“Oh.”

Steve stared at him. “You packing?”

“No,” he lied. “You?”

“No. You mind if I--”

“No. You can.”

Steve walked over, trying to act confident and in control of the situation. He failed.

He sat on the couch next to him, gingerly putting a hand on his shoulder. Then he leaned over, pulling him in a hug.

It was when Steve took in a deep breath and *oh fuck, he smells the same* that he started shaking. Just a little.

“Bucky,” he drawled out, the word hindered by a sob.

It was quiet for a few moments. Then: “Steve.”

“Motherfucker...” Steve mumbled into Bucky’s shoulder, desperately trying to wipe the tears away. “Motherfucker, holy shit... Bucky. *Bucky.* You're okay, you're okay--”

“Debatable. At best.”

This made Steve laugh, and then snuffle. He kept on hugging Bucky, holding on to him tightly.

One arm wrapped around him and squeezed, gently, as if he was unsure. “You can hug me tighter,” Steve promised. “I swear I'm not as breakable as I look."
Bucky stayed quiet. It was only when he started shaking that Steve realized it was because he was crying too.

They stayed that way for a long time. Eventually they pulled apart and cleaned up-- Steve had to use multiple tissues for his nose alone.

The apartment was over air conditioned and apparently neither of them wanted to hunt down a thermostat so Bucky dragged a few heavy blankets over from a closet and swaddled them up. Steve found himself leaning against Bucky’s chest, his legs up on the couch. It was always impressive when friends could communicate just by looking at each other; Steve and Bucky didn’t even need that. It was telepathically agreed upon that neither of them had any intention to sleep.

“In most of my memories,” Bucky hummed, his voice low and rough and God, fucking damnit, he was real, “you’re smaller. You join a gym or something?” His voice didn’t betray anything, but his words were sarcastic.

Steve snorted. “It’s the serum. I’m two inches taller than I used to be, and I have muscles and shit now.”

Bucky snorted. “Where.”

Back in the 1940’s this would have resulted in a whole episode of shoving and noogies, all bony limbs and stupid grins. But even in that moment, with the two of them scarred, emotional messes, they managed a few well placed elbows and hidden smiles.

“Four years,” Steve mumbled, his smile faltering. I’ve been so alone, Buck, so alone.

Bucky cleared his throat. “Longer than that.” He hesitated and Steve could imagine him looking up and mouthing the numbers as he counted like he always did. “60 years. I was frozen for a lot of it, but…”

“Oh, Bucky.” Suddenly the blankets seemed too thick, the small distance between them seemed too big. Steve rolled over, adjusting the blankets so he was on his side, his head and arm rested on Bucky’s chest, the only thing separating them being Bucky’s shirt.

Another moment of hesitation, then Bucky’s arm was on Steve’s back, rubbing careful circles. His chest was very still, like he was holding his breath.

“What’re you thinking about?” Steve asked, trying to keep his tone from betraying him. He used to ask Bucky that back home, when he could tell Bucky was worrying.

He continued rubbing the circles on Steve’s back and Steve preened into the touch. It had been a lot time since he’d been touched nicely. “Touch,” Bucky said, like he was reading Steve’s mind, except he hadn’t, he’d just answered the question. “I’m not… good at it. Anymore. Freak out, I… haven’t touched anyone in a while. Don’t want to hurt you.”

Steve snorted, despite the ache in his chest. “Don’t worry about it. I heal fast.”

“But Steve…” Bucky swallowed. Steve wondered if he was freaking out about him being there as much as Steve was. “I have episodes. You don’t understand, I spent those 63 years as a brainwashed assassin, I could really hurt you.”

Steve found his hand on Bucky’s stomach, softly kneading at the fabric like a cat stretching out it’s claws. “You killed Pierce?”
A pause. “Yeah.”

“That’s the reason I was here. Last night. I know I’m small—”

“Travel sized,” Bucky said affectionately.

Steve wrinkled his nose but he couldn’t stop his smile. “Yeah. I know I’m… travel sized… but I can hold my own. And besides. I trust you.” To prove his point Steve wiggled around a bit, sticking a hand down his pants and pulling out one of his knives. He flipped it open, showed it to Bucky, then flipped it closed and tossed it on the coffee table.

“Wow. You trust me so much you got rid of one of your knives.”

Steve laughed. “Hey, I said I trust you, that doesn’t mean I trust anyone else in this fucked up world. Man, the internet? Cell phones? There’s some crazy shit out here.”

“I was awake for some of it, so it wasn’t that big of a transition for me… but yeah. It’s… strange.”

He was still rubbing Steve's back. Steve hoped that he never stopped. He hadn't realised how touch starved he was.

“Hey Buck?”

Bucky made a quiet noise in response.

“With the touching thing. Just… let me know if you need space. I’ll really try.”

“You're not leaving?” Bucky sounded surprised.

Steve's insides twisted painfully. “Hell no. I don’t even know if I want to let you go to the bathroom on your own.”

He couldn't hear Bucky laughing, but he could feel his chest vibrate softly. It made him smile against his shirt.

“You’ll be like a little Koala,” Bucky said wistfully. “Just clinging on to my leg. There will be no escape.”

“I just got you back and you already want to escape? Damn Buck, I'm sorry to smother you like that.”

Bucky laughed again. “No, not like that at all. I'm just wondering if you're small enough that I could fit you in a backpack.”

He received another bony elbow to the side, but Steve didn't put much force into it, too comfortable to try very hard.

“I'm 5'6". And a half.”

That was a lie; he was only 5’6”. But it made Bucky do his light little laugh thing again, so it was worth it.

Chapter End Notes
Thoughts?
Steve didn’t remember falling asleep, but he woke up the next morning, meaning some sort of sleep happened. When he woke up he was alone on the couch, tangled in a mass of blankets.

He let out a big exhale before getting up. There was some noise in the kitchen, so Steve slid the knife on the table into one of the hidden pants pockets and shuffled over, still wrapped in one of the blankets.

Bucky was standing at the counter, chopping vegetables. Steve purposefully yawned, hoping not to startle Bucky, especially not when he was already wielding a knife.

Still, Bucky turned around and stared at him like he was seeing a ghost. Steve grinned. “I don’t look that bad, do I?”

Bucky kept staring at him. He swallowed visibly. “Shit.”

Steve stood still, waiting for him to do something.

“You're real.”

“Real hungry,” Steve replied with a grin. “What’re you cooking?”

“Eggs with chopped vegetables. I kinda only made enough for one.”

“Yeah yeah, because clearly I’m a figment of your imagination.” Steve peered over his shoulder. “It doesn’t look like you only made enough for yourself.”

“Four eggs, with vegetables. Metabolism, plus muscles, plus heavy arm, equals high caloric intake.”

Steve noticed how Bucky’s words seemed clipped, his sentences short and choppy. He didn’t comment. “Yeah, okay. Just throw two more eggs on the skillet for me.”

“Three eggs, and vegetables. You've got the serum too.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I thought I was the mom.”

Bucky did his best to hide his smile by moving to chop more vegetables. “Mrs. Rogers. I remember that.”

Steve grinned. “What, does your knock-off serum not give you improved cognition? You forget a lot, old man?”

He’d called Bucky Old Man back when they were still teenagers, and the three years difference felt more obvious. It was only then that he realized it was actually true.

Bucky shook his head, pretending to be focused in his cooking. “Nah. I have chunks of memory missing, some that are out of order, that type of thing. From the… brainwashing. I went on a mission, came back, and they wiped my memory before I went back in the ice. It’s still… foggy. The knockoff serum is probably the reason I remember anything.”
Steve scowled. When Bucky caught his expression he offered a placating smile. “Now there’s a familiar expression.”

Steve tried to force the thoughts out of his head. He glanced around the room. “Where’d you dump the body?”

Bucky started cracking more eggs into a bowl. “Which one?”

“Pierce. You know, the guy whose house you're living in.”

“Bridge.”

“Hmm.” Steve looked around more. “Are you planning on staying here?”

“Yeah, thought I’d settle down here, move in. Tell the police they've got the wrong house when they come to investigate.”

“Glad you didn't become funny while I was gone, I’d be really upset.”

“Funny, funny.” Bucky started pouring ingredients into the pan on the stove. “I want to move on tonight.”

“Fine with me. I've got a squat a few blocks away, I just need to pass by and grab my duffel. And… there's a guy I wanna visit.”

“'A guy,'” Bucky repeated. “Visit? Like a playdate? Fun or serious?”

“Fun,” Steve said, making a face like he didn’t understand why that wasn’t obvious. “Fury thinks that he's Hydra. I get to practice my knife throwing.”

Bucky smiled, by stayed quiet. Eventually it became a little ridiculous. “Whatcha smiling about?”

“Just… I have a few memories of you throwing knives. You looked so serious in all of them, and those were all with you taller… I dunno. I had just thought they were fake.”

“Not fake. Probably.” Steve shrugged, sneaking past Bucky to grab a stray vegetable. “Mm. I like having breakfast made for me. This is worth hiding in your backpack for.”

“You literally just ate a piece of raw zucchini.”

“I have low standards,” Steve said with a grin. “Hence, our friendship.”

Bucky turned around, the small chopping knife he’d been using still in hand. “Don’t test me, Rogers.”

Steve stuck his hand in his pants and pulled out one of his knives, flicking it open. It was at least an inch longer than Bucky’s. “You were saying?”

They ate together and then Steve gave Bucky the task of showering and changing clothes-- he was still wearing that faded red shirt, and his hair wasn’t getting any better-- while he went to the library. His normal clothes were still bloody so Steve swallowed his shame and went dressed in the sweats he’d slept in; Bucky’s sweats. On the bright side, when he got to the library he was not the only twenty-something in sweats.

He hacked into the FBI’s server again using the same account information as he’d used the day before and quickly accessed Sitwell’s information. Nothing very incriminating, but it did have his
address, and he was close.

“T'm good,” Steve promised Bucky as he pulled on his bloodstained clothes. “Trust me, I know what I'm doing.”

“I'll watch your back,” Bucky offered.

Steve picked up the Captain America shield and slung it into the holster on his back. “No need. You're already watching my back.”

Bucky made a face at the shield. “I hate that comic Dugan made. It was horrible the first few months when I was trying to sort out memories and that damned book contradicted everything I could come up with.”

Steve shrugged. “You're a national hero, Buck.”

“I'm a terrorist.”

Steve’s face did a thing. “Anyway. You can come and watch, but I’d prefer to handle it myself.”

“Fine with me.”

Bucky could keep up with Steve just fine on the roofs. If anything, he was better at it than him.

Unacceptable.

(It was because he was taller, dammit.)

Steve’s playdate with Sitwell went… well. It was awkward at first murdering someone in front of his childhood best friend, but if what Bucky had said was true he had done much worse. As much as Steve tried to ignore it, his assassinations were different from his kills as a soldier, so even though Bucky had seen him kill before, he’d never seen him murder. Afterwards, Steve retrieved his knives— one of which had implanted itself directly in the middle of Sitwell’s forehead, oh darn, that was definitely an accident-- and they went on their way.

Traveling with a companion was very different than traveling on his own. For one, people gave them more space than before because their glaring power had been doubled, which they both appreciated. They had to make sure not to lose each other in the crowd, but at that point both of their minds were still buzzing at the prospect of being together again that that happened almost naturally. At one point the subway station was busy and their glaring powers were weakened, so Bucky ended up grabbing onto the harness Steve wore in order to carry the shield (which was currently in the black duffel). Steve glared daggers at him and once they were back in a less populated area he said through gritted teeth “It is a battle harness, not a goddamn child leash.”

Bucky didn’t let go until they were on the next train subway. He seemed to like the way Steve maintained his eye roll.

They ended the day in Charlestown, West Virginia. Steve announced that he was going to go ‘acquire’ some drugs, and asked if Bucky wanted any.

“Like I'm not crazy enough already. Let's throw drugs into the mix.”

Steve flashed his teeth and saluted him, leaving through the window. He was still wearing the bloody clothes.
When he returned he seemed notably calmer, and there weren't even any fresh bloodstains on his clothes, which was a plus. He changed clothes and curled up behind Bucky on the floor of the office they may-or-may-not have broken into. Steve was the big spoon. Go figure.

Weeks passed. They stayed pretty much attached at the hip, though Steve didn't follow through on the whole bathroom thing, which was appreciated.

Steve kept his drugs hidden and only did them in private. Bucky practiced touching him and voicing his limits.

They went on missions together, first to libraries where Steve updated Bucky’s hacking skills and they found targets, and then they went together to take them down. Bucky leant Steve a M249 SAW Paratrooper (his favorite type of machine gun; Steve wasn't sure why he owned more than one) and together they infiltrated a Hydra base.

It was a lot of fun.

As the weeks went by, Bucky began to share more and more information with Steve about what had happened to him. He’d had two years to recover, so he talked about things casually without having horrible panic attacks or violent outbursts. They’d be eating chips and guacamole and Bucky would stare into the distance, go “I once killed a man with nothing but a ceramic bowl of mango salsa”, and then bite into a chip, humming about how tasty it was.

One day they sat at the computers at a public library and Steve watched a slideshow on YouTube about famous people that had been mysteriously assassinated. Bucky had leaned over the chair, watching the slideshow and going “Him. Him. Her. Her. Him. Him. Him. Him. I think him? I’ll think about it and get back to you.”

Then he clapped Steve on the shoulder and walked back to his own computer.

Sometimes they were a lot darker. There was a public screening of some PG-13 thriller in a park in Virginia and Steve watched Bucky’s face closely to see his reactions. After it was over, he asked if Bucky had experienced anything the main victim in the movie had.

He smirked. “Every day before noon, pal.”

Steve wasn't sure if he was joking.

But after a few weeks, they had learned the important pieces of each other’s history that they'd missed. Sometimes Bucky’d ask about their childhood or the war, always clarifying questions. He got things right most of the time.

Bucky was shot on their two-month friend-versary, which was fun. Steve considered sharing some of his narcotics, or maybe sneaking Bucky a horse-tranquilizer pill, but he decided that would be a non-righteous thing to do, so he didn’t. Instead he demonstrated superior friendship skills but using a pair of tweezers to remove the bullet from Bucky’s leg, and then he sewed him up with a suture and everything.

Steve no longer wanted to gag whenever he saw a suture needle. In fact, Bucky had to ask him to stop humming so ‘goddamn happily, Rogers’.

Medic skill: achieved.

Bucky made sure Steve ate. Steve made sure Bucky showered. On the bad nights, they stayed up together and cleaned their weapons until everything got blurry and one tapped out. It was usually
July came and went. Bucky’s birthday present to Steve was a cupcake, a sketchbook, and an agreement to supervise the following day while Steve went on the biggest drug trip of his life.

Fun.

He became… sentient again at hour 1800. Bucky told him that he hoped he enjoyed it, because Bucky was never ever going to do that again.

As a way of apology, and because Steve had missed Bucky’s birthday, Steve tracked down a pack of Luckies. Perhaps cigarettes were in bad taste after the earlier incident, but Bucky happily took them, making Steve promise to never let him have more than two at a time.

Steve sat against the wall of the apartment they were currently staying in (abandoned due to high risk of exposure to asbestos; hallelujah for super-serum) and pulled out his sketchbook. He started sketching the all too familiar scene of Bucky circa 1930-something, with his short hair and flesh arms, leaning over the fire escape of their dumpy apartment with a cigarette dangling from his lips. He was adding the details when Bucky saw and immediately lit up, recreating the pose as exact as he could. Steve drew eagerly.

When he was done, they compared the drawings side by side. The second had Bucky circa 2011 leaning out the window, more muscular than before with a metal arm and a man bun (re: hallelujah), but the same Lucky Strike cigarette dangling from his lips.

“You look hot,” Steve said, then before Bucky could get a big head added “I should draw the Captain America shield next to you and submit this to a fan magazine.”

Bucky was not amused.

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They traveled around the country, using public transportation whenever possible. Sometimes they stole money to take buses. Sometimes, when that wasn’t a viable option, they bought train above ground subway tickets. Steve would very carefully follow Bucky inside, focusing on his back until they sat, which was when Steve would close his eyes for the duration of the ride. He leaned his left leg against Bucky’s right casually, pretending he didn’t need the contact.

Bucky let him pretend. He was good like that.

They kept busy. Life was difficult sometimes, when they couldn’t find places to stay the night, but they agreed that they had no desire to stay in a homeless shelter so they made do. Roofs offered the most privacy, but allies offered protection from weather. They took shifts.

(Bucky stayed up most of the time. Sometimes Steve would wake up in the middle of the night and look up at Bucky, who’d have his baseball cap on shadowing his eyes. He leaned heavily against the wall, and one hand was under his jacket to the side, no doubt holding a weapon. He appeared to be asleep. He wasn’t asleep.)

There were no threats that could touch them.
Police became more aggressive with time. Steve was vaguely aware of a national watchlist that he was probably on (because no one respects their veterans), but the day-to-day risks barely increased. Things would not be fun if caught (even though Steve was only killing the bad people), but the odds of him actually being caught were low.

Hydra was like an infestation; every time they found one nest and destroyed it, they just found out there were more deeper underground. Cleaning out the infestation gave them something to do, anyways.

One day someone on a mission recognized Bucky and yelled at him in Russian until he mentally powered down and lowered his weapon. The man smiled, baring his teeth. “Asset. Your mission is to kill… that guy!” He waved in Steve’s direction vaguely, then scampered into a securely locked office to watch.

“Bucky?”

The light behind Bucky’s eyes had shut off. Steve had a three second head start before he was being shot at.

He scurried around the warehouse, dodging and ducking behind metal pipes and crates

As he ran for his life the story of Samson flashed before his eyes. Samson had been given the gift of strength from God under the condition he adhere to a few specific rules, none of which included “pls dont massacre anyone”. Samson would have blind rages and killing parties that would probably make Steve and Bucky’s Hydra-hunting look weak in comparison. At one point, Samson was so pissed off by the Philistines that he captured 300 foxes, tied them together in pairs and attached a burning torch to each pair’s tail, and then released them in the Philistines’ grain fields and olive groves, burning everything to the ground.

Steve felt like one of the foxes, running away from it’s own tail. He felt like a ferret.

The Asset shot at him when he got the chance to and Steve had to hike the shield up on his back to protect his head. The shield seemed to confuse Bucky if nothing else, so Steve used it to his advantage.

“Hey Bucky!” He yelled from behind a metal box. “Remember the Captain America thing? Dum Dum and Jacques gave you so much shit for that, didn't they? Hey, you remember Brooklyn 1938, that Christmas party where you danced with Helen Maryl and I went to bed early? You woke me up after an hour with a bucket of ice water and told me to get my ass downstairs.”

Steve peaked over the box and made eye contact with Bucky, who hadn't lowered his weapon but also hadn't moved forwards at all. “It’s Steve,” Steve said, a little out of breath. “Yeah, remember me? Bucky, can you put down the gun for me? Bucky, please, put down the gun.”

Bucky didn’t put down the gun. He began to march forwards and Steve cussed.

Plan B.

Steve raised his shield and walked out. “Bucky?”

The word made Bucky’s face twitch. “Who the hell is Bucky?”

“That’s you, you lugnut. Look at this shield. Familiar, yeah?”

As Bucky looked down at the shield Steve threw it at him with as much force as he could muster.
Bucky caught it with his left hand right as Steve slid in between his legs. He moved as quickly as he could, punching straight upwards and then kicking out Bucky’s right knee (he always leaned more heavily on his right side), pressing the pressure points where Bucky’s neck connected with his jawline (which had always been the most sensitive), and, in a final move, licked his finger and stuck it in Bucky’s ear in the most brutal wet willy of his life.

Bucky squeaked and elbowed Steve in the face so aggressively he stumbled backwards, rolling and landing on his feet. He grabbed the shield from where it was rolling and slammed it over his friend’s head, and Bucky crumpled to the ground.

Steve loved that shield.

He very affectionately dragged Bucky into a corner and unloaded the magazines to both of his guns. Then Steve turned to the office where the Hydra shithead was watching, pale faced.

Two hours and a very gentle interrogation session later, the Hydra soldier was taken care of and Bucky groaned and woke up. Steve was sitting on top of one of the metal boxes, staring down at Bucky casually.

Bucky stared back for a few moments, completely expressionless. Then: “The hell happened to your face?”

Steve grinned.

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Sometimes, Bucky slipped back into a confused version of his Winter Soldier mindset. They’d be in a new squat and Steve would walk into the room to find Bucky holding something, a newspaper or the shield, in confusion. He would look up at Steve and bark out “What is this?” and Steve would force himself to act relaxed as he walked over and leaned against the wall, answering simply.

“It’s your shield.”

“I don’t need a shield.”

“‘Course you don’t, your skull’s too thick for anything to penetrate.”

Bucky-- or rather, the Winter Soldier-- scowled deeply at him. “Mission.”

Steve knew that, when he was actually the Winter Soldier, the Asset was almost completely emotionless. Whenever Bucky retreated to the soldier Steve felt more secure based on how much emotion he showed. The worst times, the scariest times, were when Bucky appeared to be a completely blank slate.

The first time Bucky asked for his mission, Steve had tried to tell him that he didn’t have a mission, which was not the correct response. The Winter Soldier became confused and disoriented, his eyes widening in something that resembled fear, and he started mumbling about being no longer of use. “Terminate?” He muttered. Then he looked to Steve, and louder and in Russian, “<Terminate?>”

This time, with Steve leaning against the wall and Bucky, shield in hand, asking for his mission, Steve remembered the correct response and remained impassive. “Mission: protect the Asset.”

“Protect… the Asset?”

“Self.”
“Self?” Bucky dropped the shield and looked down at his hands, one flesh, one metal. He looked to Steve. “Mission head? Handler?”

“Mission assist,” Steve said, a knot forming in his throat. “Ally.”

“Ally,” the soldier repeated. He looked around, as if trying to figure out how he was supposed to protect himself, and finally decided on eating a granola bar and going to the bathroom. When he came back out, his shoulders weren’t so stiff. “Hey pal.”

“Hey.”

Bucky patted Steve’s shoulder as he walked by, frowning and picking up the shield from the floor. “Howard fixed the plates,” he recounted, “But I asked him not to fix the dent. I liked Howard.”

“He was funny,” Steve agreed. “Nice.”

“He showed me some of his new inventions, that day, yunno, when you had to go be a lab rat again for a few hours? I asked him if he was still working on the flying car. He said he’d get back to it once he started sleeping again.”

Bucky set the shield down. Steve didn’t press him.

Bucky didn’t sleep as much as Steve did, but when he did they were always touching in one way or another: arms crossed over each other, fingers intertwined, with Steve laying on top or behind him, whatever made sense that day. Steve was the big spoon… with exceptions.

(No matter how they slept, Steve made himself avoid touching Bucky’s left arm. If he ever got close, Bucky would move it away. The message was clear.)

When they did sleep pressed closely against each other, Bucky had a habit of tucking in Steve’s feet in between his calves. It took Steve a while to remember it was because before the serum, Steve’s circulation was so bad that his hands and feet were always cold. Bucky had slept with him like that back in Brooklyn.

Steve didn’t correct him.

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The fall months passed without major incident. A gunshot wound here, a stabbing there, sprinkle in a half dozen nights of staying up and cleaning their weapons together and you’d get Fall 2011 for the Rogers and Barnes household.

By Thanksgiving time they were very, very broke, but the idea of stealing significant amounts of money around the holidays made the serum roll around in Steve’s chest unhappily. They always took the money from Hydra agents they’d disposed of, but now they started taking their phones too and then searching the building for anything else worthy of pawning.

Thanksgiving was spent in Arizona (which is a state in denial about the whole ‘winter’ concept), in the home of a retiree who’d flown to Miami to spend the holidays with extended family. They lounged on the flowery sofas eating reheated ‘Thanksgiving In A Box’, throwing food at each other, and exchanging sarcastic comments about what they were thankful for, i.e:

“I'm thankful that I get to wake up next to your ugly mug every day.”

“I'm thankful that you're no longer a string bean who can’t breathe.”
“I'm thankful for breakable newspaper dispensers.”

“I'm thankful for wet willies.”

“I'm thankful that that guy in Pittsburg ran out of ammo.”

The house in Arizona was a personal favorite. The grandmother who lived there was supposed to come back on the Wednesday after the holiday, so they took their time. They didn't account for the housesitter showing up that Sunday and catching Bucky right out of the shower (poor her).

It hurt Steve’s inner sense of righteousness to tie her up and leave her in the closet, but for the record, he did do his best to reassure her. “Hey, we’ll be out of here in five minutes. Is this your phone? What's the passcode?”

(Steve wasn't great at reassuring.)

She unlocked her phone for him and Steve opened her contacts, writing down the first three. Then he set her phone aside.

(No, he didn't pawn her phone, Steve wasn't cruel.)

He slapped the back of Bucky’s head as he passed him.

Bucky got dressed and they quickly packed up their things. They went 15 miles south in a borrowed car, stopped at a bus stop and left the car in a nearby parking lot. Steve called the first person on his list, who was apparently closet-girl’s sister. “She’s fine,” he explained in exasperation as soon as he’d explained the situation and she’d began to freak out. “Look, we’re two homeless veterans without any family, just trying to have a good holiday. We didn't steal anything, we didn't break anything. I actually cleaned the drain, and my buddy fixed the leaking sink. We don’t mean any harm.”

Hopefully she didn't call the authorities. Steve had a feeling Fury was trying to keep an eye on them, and though he wasn’t bothered by the police, he didn't want to give Fury any breadcrumbs to follow.

He hung up the phone and they took the first bus north.

As the weeks drew closer to Christmas, Steve and Bucky had more run ins with the cops. The police didn't hesitate before shooting. On Christmas eve eve eve eve eve eve eve eve eve, Steve took a bullet to the calf.

“Why the hell would someone aim for your calf?” Bucky asked as he cleaned Steve up.

Steve rolled his eyes and glared at him. “You're right, they should've shot me in the head.”

“You said it, not I.”

Steve punched him in the shoulder.

By Christmas day all that was left of the bulletwound was a scab.

Steve woke up Christmas day feeling warm and rested. He pulled the covers back over his shoulders and rolled over until he hit Bucky.

Bucky grunted. He moved his hand around, grabbing blindly until he found Steve. He felt his shoulder, making sure it was him, then hit him lightly.
“Morning,” Steve mumbled musically.

Bucky rolled over until he was facing Steve. His eyes opened barely, and a small smile traced across his lips. Bucky sniffed obnoxiously. “You smell like drugs.”

“Jerk.”

“Punk. Any plans for today?”

Steve smiled. “I was thinking domesticity. You?”

“Mm, that sounds good to me. You going to be Mrs. Anderson?”

“Actually shut up.”

They were staying in a house belonging to the Anderson family. At least, they assumed that's why the name Anderson was on the welcome mat… and the decorative plate over the sink… and the mailbox… and the mail.

To their knowledge, the Anderson family had also left for the holidays, though they didn't know when they'd be back or if anyone was supposed to be house sitting. On the bright side, it was a pretty safe assumption that no one would come on Christmas.

Bucky helped himself to the contents of the refrigerator to make breakfast while Steve stirred up some hot chocolate.

After breakfast they helped themselves to the bookshelf and got to work.

At one point, Steve glanced up and saw Bucky scowling at his book. “Having fun?”

“Darcy is being an idiot. Lizzy deserves better.”

“Hmm. Let’s discuss that after you finish the book.”

Bucky glanced up. “You've read it?”

“Winter flu.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Of course.”

Christmas Domesticy: achieved.

Bucky was a big fan of domesticity. Steve was too stubborn to admit that he was too.

The next day they were back on the road.

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The plan came together slowly. They both knew they had no intentions of celebrating New Year’s Eve, and with it being a holiday of drunkenness it seemed like the perfect opportunity to pull something.

Then they found out about the Hydra base. Apparently, it had been right under their noses for a
while; it was in a bank vault in D.C.

Steve crinkled his nose. “Fury’ll like that.”

Bucky stared at the address on the screen. “It looks familiar. Did we ever go to D.C. together?”

“Only earlier this year, with Pierce’s apartment.”

Bucky shrugged— which was more of a half shrug, like he was adjusting the metal arm. “Guess we’ll have to see what it is in person. New Years Eve?”

“We can sneak in and override the computers.”

“Sounds like a good time.”

Oh boy, did it.

So on New Years Eve they arrived at the base in D.C. with their usual weapons, plus the Captain America shield over Steve's back and a pair of wire cutters, expecting an empty base. Instead they found… a New Years Eve party.

Bucky surveyed the building, jaw set.

“Remember it yet?” Steve asked.

He shook his head, not saying anything else. Steve didn't press.

They entered through a second story window and made their way down half a dozen flights of stairs before they heard someone coming. They both froze.

A man wearing full tac gear stumbled up the steps, dead drunk. He grinned at them. “Come on guys, the ball is about to drop!”

The what is about to what.

They followed him down the rest of the stairs into an underground bunker area filled with scientists and soldiers alike, all in various states of professional dress, all apparently very, very drunk. They all had stopped drinking long enough to count down loudly from ten.

Steve looked at Bucky, who shrugged. He hefted his M249 Paratrooper and Steve slung the shield off his back, figuring it’d do better protecting his front.

Bucky passed him a gun.

On the stroke of midnight, mobs of Hydra agents screamed “Happy New Year!” and started drunkenly making out with each other, and Steve and Bucky opened fire.

Fun.

Steve's righteousness had absolutely no issue with shooting to kill, and with the M249 (100 rounds a magazine; fully automatic machine gun) he and Bucky were very, very efficient. By the time he was halfway through his bullets a few Hydra agents had managed to get their guns, but most were too inebriated to even get the safety off.

Don’t drink, kids. Otherwise two supposedly dead veterans will come and fuck you up.
A few bullets clanged uselessly off of the shield, a few off of Bucky’s arm. A few went behind them. A few ricocheted off of the floor in front of the soldiers.

“I’ll take right!” Steve called out. Bucky nodded curtly and stopped firing for long enough to bound up the stairs to the left catwalk, then continued fire.

Steve ran up the stairs to his own catwalk. Before long his gun was locking back, out of ammunition. He slung it over his back and drew a handgun.

“Fuck. I do not have enough knives for this.”

A few more sober agents ran towards him, bullets clanging off his shield. Steve returned fire then stuck his gun in his pocket (not a good idea) and retrieved throwing knives, letting go of four at once. All four met their targets— not exactly, of course, but a knife in the stomach wasn’t that different from a knife in the heart, especially if you pulled the knives out afterwards. Internal bleeding was internal bleeding, and death was guaranteed.

He used his knives to remove the remaining soldiers from the hallway and continued forwards.

Steve almost cried out when the impact hit him. It was like a punch straight to the back, but far too hard and far too fast for a human. For a horrible moment, Steve wondered if Bucky had been triggered and ordered to kill him again. He didn’t think he’d have the strength to get up and give him another wet willie.

Luckily it was only a bullet.

(Steve hated his life.)

He yanked the handgun out of his pants pocket and shot blindly down the hallway. No sound. Another bullet, nothing. With the third bullet, Steve heard the sound of collapse.

He forced himself to roll to his side (Ow) and check for danger. For the moment, he was in the clear.

Except for the fact that he was wounded in a Hydra base with more than enough enemy agents left to do him a big hurt.

Steve pulled out a fresh ace bandage, sat up (OW) and started wrapping over his shirt. It was hard to tell exactly where the bullet had hit, but he forced himself to focus. It was somewhere on the lower left side of his back, below his ribs. There was no exit point.

He wrapped it so tight it reminded him of an asthma attack, then forced himself to his feet, wiping the blood onto his pants. He jogged painfully down the hallway, shield over one arm and gun in the other hand. He ran along the catwalk, only encountering one incredibly drunk agent (BANG!) and one slightly sober agent wearing full tac gear (BANG BANG!). Bucky was nowhere to be seen.

Steve tried to speed up to a run, which was a very bad idea. He could feel the bullet wound throbbing with every step and every breath; the bandage was both too loose and too tight at the same time.

Steve ran down the next hallway, no longer concerned with cleaning out the base, instead just looking for Bucky.

Someone lunged at him from a doorway and the two of them slammed against the guardrail. The serum took over and Steve watched wide-eyed as he shoved them against the wall and stabbed them in the stomach.
Steve pulled back, pulled the knife out and kept running. He was able to get up to a sprint when he ran right past the room Bucky was in.

The entire bunker was mass panic. Alarms were blaring-- how had Steve not noticed?-- and heavy-heeled feet were running in every direction.

But Bucky was perfectly still.

Steve hurried up to him. He wanted to touch Bucky’s shoulder, but he was giving serious ‘no-touching’ vibes.

Steve looked into the room Bucky was staring into. It was covered in wall to wall computers and machinery, with a large metal chair bolted to the floor in the middle of the room.

“This.” Bucky said, his voice lower and gruffer than usual. He didn't need to say anymore.

Steve felt sick to his stomach. This was where…


“Bucky,” Steve said, reaching out a hand. “We have to go.”

Bucky kept staring into the room. His eyes flickered to Steve’s hand, and then widened slightly.

“Whose blood?”

“Mine, lower back, pressure applied, we have to--”

Bucky turned and grabbed Steve’s wrist, running and pulling him behind. Steve’s insides felt like they were jiggling and snapping into each other but he didn't slow down. Bucky lead him into a hallway, left, right, the edges were going black, shit, right…

Gas sprayed in from the ceiling and they both had to slow to account for the coughing. The grip on his wrist tightened painfully.

Steve’s chest lurched with every cough and he doubled over. Bucky loosened his grip slightly and looked around desperately as the gas continued pouring in from the ceiling, puke-green and smelling like rotten eggs. “No.” Cough “Steve, come on. Crawl.”

Steve fell to his knees and they crawled, chests shuddering with every breath and every cough. The bandage wasn't tight enough. The bandage wasn't tight--

Bucky shuddered and collapsed. Steve dragged himself limply over to his body, sitting in front of him protectively. His shield… Steve must have dropped it. It was gone. He needed… he had to… the arm…

More marching. Steve raised his handgun. “Touch him and I'll fucking kill you.” His voice was strained and creaky, his throat erupting in sores. “Touch him and I swear to God, I will hurt you so badly…”

His gun wavered and dropped, firing when it hit the floor. Steve managed to sit up for another few seconds before the world went loopy and he collapsed on top of Bucky.

Chapter End Notes
Let me know your thoughts/reactions. New chapters posted every Tuesday and Saturday!
Waking up was a long process. It wasn't like waking up from being frozen, where he opened his eyes and it felt like he'd only slept one night. This time, waking up involved bright lights and blinking, moaning into a tube shoved down his throat, hands clawing at the tubes coming out of his nose.

Beeping. A heart monitor. It was too fast.

“He’s waking up.”

“Already?”

“Hurry, put him back under. His metabolic rate must be…”

Steve woke up again later. The room was quieter than the first time. He fumbled around until he found the thing sticking out of his arm, ripping it out.

“He’s awake!” A familiar-- but not pleasant-- voice said. “He needs more sedatives, and then restraints. The last time he woke up like this he tried to strangle himself with the curtain cords.”

Steve had just enough time to raise his hand and flip the voice the bird before slipping back into darkness.

The next time he woke up enough to process the bright lights before going back under. The time after that it was dark.

Steve rolled his head to the side. His eyes slowly adjusted to the dark hospital room. He was alone.

*Good fucking riddance,* he thought as the warm feeling slipped into his veins again and he slipped out of consciousness.

When he woke up for real, the lights were on, but not so bright that they were blinding. He blinked awake, his eyes only opening halfway. He tried to reach up and rub them, only to find that his hands were tied down.

He looked up and immediately made eye contact with the man standing at his side.

“Morrison? He’s awake,” Fury said softly into his walkie talkie.

Steve glared at him.

“You're in SHIELD, not Hydra,” Fury explained, as if Steve was an idiot. “Though you seem to think they're the same thing.”

Steve continued to glare at him. He made a half-assed attempt to sit up but that very clearly wasn't happening, so he continued to glare laying down. When he tried to speak, his voice came out gruff
and strained. “Bucky?”

“Is fine,” Fury answered. “He’s been having a little bit of trouble with the sedatives, but it’s been handled.”

White hot rage (identified: adrenaline) shot through Steve’s veins, but he didn’t have anywhere to put it except into his voice. “I’ll kill you,” he promised, “You don’t ‘handle’ Bucky.”

“For God’s sake, he’s fine,” Fury snapped. “You were the one who got shot. Have a little bit of self preservation.”

Steve continued to glare with his eyes half open. He had no intention to stop. He wetted his lips-- his throat was dry. His entire body ached, not more than he could handle. Even if it hadn’t hurt at all, he probably would have said the same thing. “More… painkillers. Please.”

Fury seemed to assess him before he reached over and pressed the button on the side of the drip Steve was attached to. Ah. Useful information for later.

The silence seemed to frustrate Fury. “Do you even care why you're here?”

Steve shrugged barely. “Execution?” He said in a half joking tone. Clearly no-- what’s the point in healing him then? No, Steve knew what they wanted.

“I want to offer you a job,” Fury said, and Steve rolled his eyes.

“I’m good.”

“No, you're not. I'm telling you now, this is not an opportunity you want to pass up. Free healthcare, insurance, a decent salary, room and board. Two apartments, one for each of you.”

“You don’t want me.”

“Clearly, we do.”

“Then I don’t want you ,” he spat.

“No more running,” Fury said, not as an order but as a promise. “I bet Bucky’d like that.”

Steve didn’t move. Then: “Nicky, would you lift my blanket up for a moment?”

Nick Fury gave him a look, then slowly did it.

“There’s a knot in my catheter. Right… there.” Steve pointed at the tube laying on the bed, which had been hidden by the sheet.

Fury bent down and looked at the tube right as yellow liquid started rushing through it. “Oh… my God. You are vile.”

Steve grinned. “I thought I was employable?” He let the smile drop, let his voice grow gruffer again as he nodded him closer. “Nicky. Come here, I need to tell you something.”

Fury looked like he’d had enough abuse for one day, but he leaned forwards anyone, clearly falling for the sick-person tactic at least a little.
“Take care of yourself,” Steve said seriously. Fury stared at him, trying to register the deep, emotional message--

Steve stuck a wet finger in Fury’s ear and he jumped backwards, rubbing at his ear in agitation as Steve cackled.

“You were supposed to be restrained!”

Steve pressed his lips together to hide a smile.

“And how did your finger even get wet, you didn't even put it in your mouth-- you know what, I don't even want to know.”

Steve wiggled his fingers at Fury, not able to hide the sly smile anymore.

Fury left and came back not five minutes later with handcuffs. Steve pretended to be bored as he was locked to the bed once more.

Fury stood up. Steve winked at him.

Fury left.

Steve was not allowed visitors. He stayed in the bed all day, drifting in and out of consciousness at random, but at least he was pretty sure it wasn't due to any of the substances pumped into him.

Steve’s eyebags were dark and his face was still bruised and paler than normal. The handcuffs were annoying.

At one point, a girl with dark red hair and crossed arms stood outside his window, looking concerned. He gave her a little wave, the best he could do with the handcuffs.

She left.

Whenever a nurse came in Steve complained about the pain so they’d give him more drugs. Finally, one (politely) snapped at him that he didn't need any more, he was healing faster than an average human anyways. Steve made a face but didn't argue.

Bucky didn’t come to see him. Or maybe, Steve didn't go to see Bucky.

Steve slept.

The next day he watched as they un-tubed him. He held his breath but didn't wince as they pulled the catheter out. “You've been in the hospital a lot?” A nurse asked.

Steve rolled his eyes with a slightly drunken smile. “You have no idea.”

And they said Bucky was the ladies man.

(6'0”)

(5’4’’)

(5’6’’
Fuck everything.

After that one of the handcuffs was taken off and Steve was given water to drink, which he did. The nurses seemed to pity him.

Poor little guy. Poor little Steve, poor little assassin.

Finally Steve was allowed to change back into his normal clothes. He’d been out for a few days so the bulletwound was more of a dry ache.

(Thanks serum.)

A man came to retrieve him. He had sandy blond hair and a thick tactical vest, and he didn’t look happy. “I’m Clint Barton, you can call me Clint, Barton, whatever. You’re ready to go?”

Steve nodded simply, choosing to stay quiet. But as soon as they were in the hallway he found himself asking “So Fury only sent one guy to guard me?”

“Technically, I think he called it an ‘escort’.” Clint didn’t even sound offended. Steve took note. “If it makes you feel better, I’m usually sent on higher grade missions than this.”

Steve looked at him for a few moments before the data clicked into place.

_Clint Barton, 5’10” (aliases: unknown)._ 

He was lead to a room and Barton slid in a keycard, then gestured to the door.

“Is this where I’ll be executed?”

A little smile flicked on Clint’s face. “We’ll see.”

Well.

Steve pushed the door open and his eyes immediately flickered around, processing everything in seconds: bathroom, bed, night stand, and…

_Bucky._

Steve surged forwards and hugged him tightly, burrowing his face in his shoulder.

“Buck.”

Bucky wrapped his arms around him. “Someone miss me?”

“What can I say, it’s been a full day without seeing your ugly mug.”

“More than that.”

“Subjective time.”

“I woke up earlier than you.”

Steve sighed. “Don’t you always.”

Bucky nodded to Clint, who was leaning against the door. “Who’re you?”

“That's the warden,” Steve answered into his chest.
Clint waved.

“Hey Warden, do you know when we can get our stuff back and get out of here?”

“It seems to me that Fury thinks you're signing on,” Clint said, sounding surprised. “Or did he get the wrong impression?”

Bucky ran his metal fingers down Steve’s back, scratching it gently. It took a lot of concentration not to creen into his touch.

“He offered me a job,” Bucky said, leaning down to tell it directly to Steve. “You?”

“The same. Twice.”

“When was the first time?”

“I’ll tell you about it later.”

“If you have any questions or anything, I’d be happy to help,” Clint said, still leaning by the door.

“Yeah, how does one survive being bossed around all day by Fury?”

“Oh, you wouldn't. Only our strongest deal with them on a daily basis, cough cough Hill.” Did he just say the word ‘cough’ out loud? “I do more… reconnaissance and field missions.”

“You good with a gun?” Bucky asked.

Steve finally let go, moving to the side so he could see Clint while still being close enough to Bucky that their arms touched.

Clint shrugged. “I snipe.”

“Much use for a sniper around here?”

“More than you'd think. What are your specialties?”

They looked at each other. “It’s a variety,” Steve said, doing his best to be ambiguous. “I don’t actually know why Fury wants us.”

“Only one way to find out.”

Steve and Bucky were given very specific instructions on where they could and could not go in SHIELD, with the understanding that if they followed orders, they would get their weapons back.

Steve wished he had energy for mischief; there was so much potential. Alas, he was still recovering from a bullet wound, so he gave himself a little reprieve.

The next day Steve and Bucky were sitting in the cafeteria when Clint came by with the redhead, who he introduced as Natasha Romanoff. “Mind if we join you?”

_Natasha Romanoff, 5’...3”? 4”? (Aliases unknown)._ 

Natasha smiled fakely at Steve. He returned her smile with an equally toothy smile that was about as far from his real one as he could get.

Clint and Bucky both looked uncomfortable.
“Sure, we've got room!” Steve reached over and shook Natasha’s hand obnoxiously. “I'm Steve, and this is Bucky.”

“Oh, Bucky. Like Bucky Barnes, Captain America!”

*SHE KNOWS.*

Bucky chuckles uncomfortable, and Steve felt a pang of sympathy when Bucky reached across and shook her hand. “Yeah, something like that.”

They sat. “So, Clint told me Fury wants to recruit you two. What's holding you back?”

Natasha had a grin on her face like they were gossiping. He had a feeling that she'd never gossiped before in her life.

“Well, we're pretty independent” Steve not-lied. “I guess we don’t see why we would join.”

“Well, why not? It’s not like you've got lots of agencies like this hounding you.” Natasha phrased the question perfectly to get them to spill about other offers they've gotten.

Bucky opened his mouth to tell them about the other offers he’d gotten. Steve stepped on his foot before he could.

He sent Steve a glare, then looked back to Natasha. “He doesn’t like Fury.”

“We don’t like Fury.”

“He doesn’t like Fury.”

Steve and Natasha both laughed ‘good-naturedly’.

The plates on Bucky’s arm shifted uncomfortably.

“I tried to explain to them that we don’t even see Fury that often,” Clint said, apparently ignoring his partner’s weird actions.

“So what’s actually holding you back?”

“I have some… history.” Bucky finally said.

*An underegagement.*

“I'm just getting back into… civilian life.”

*Scoff.*

“And I'm not a fan of working for big faceless companies. Especially not in this industry.”

And there it was. Bucky leaned back, and Steve knew he was secretly proud of stringing together so many words in a row, especially for strangers.

Natasha nodded sympathetically. “That’s what I had thought too. I had… a lot of red in my ledger, wanted to wipe it out. Clint convinced me to join. One of the best decisions of my life.”

Steve realized he was scowling again. He made himself relax his face, trying for another toothy
smile. “So what’s the holdup Clint? Why haven’t you worked your magic and sold us on it yet?”

“Well, I'm trying!” Clint laughed. “But really, it’s a good gig. This place is made for people like us.”

“Cyborgs?” Bucky muttered under his breath. Steve kicked him under the table.

Natasha smiled.

Steve wondered what her kill count was.

“By the way, what departments are you two in? Clint and I are both field agents.”

Yes, clearly. “Buck is more of a field agent,” Steve said cautiously, glancing at him for approval. “I'm more of… his backup. I.T. Research.” He shrugged, then remembered to smile.

Bucky was staring a hole in the side of Steve's face.

Natasha and Clint nodded, clearly not surprised. Obviously Steve would work in the background, and Bucky would be the one in the field.

Steve remembered his early days at SHIELD right after he’d been thawed: playing nice so they'd release him. He figured if it worked once, it might work again.

Or…

It could be nice, not having to run all those encryptions. He could have the inside scoop on different things, maybe get help in killing off Hydra in the most efficient way possible…

“As field agents, do you like… kill people?” Steve asked. He saw Bucky roll his eyes in his peripheral.

Clint looked unsure how to answer. Natasha seemed to find the question cute. “SHIELD is set up to protect against internal terrorism and to fight dangers that the rest of the military isn’t trained to handle. We try to prevent loss of life whenever possible, but sometimes it’s necessary.”

Steve nodded, as if accepting the information. Really, he’d just wanted to know if he could continue killing in the manner that he’d been doing.

That evening, he and Bucky were half sitting, half lying on Bucky’s hospital bed. It was a hospital room intended for recovery, so it had a warm quilt on the top instead of a papery sheet.

“We could leave,” Steve said, breaking the silence. They're shoulders brushed together, and Steve's feet were firmly held in between Bucky’s calves. “We could get our stuff and go back on the run.”

“We could,” Bucky agreed. “We could always… hear Fury out too. Just for… shits and giggles.”

“Yeah.” Steve paused. “It might be nice too, not having to run. Obviously we’d continue doing what we’ve been doing, it’d just be… government mandated.”

“Huh.” It was Bucky’s turn to pause. “We could get an apartment. Somewhere solid. I guess we’d… get a paycheck?”

An apartment with running hot and cold water, and a closet with room for multiple outfits. A refrigerator with only their own food stocked in it. Shelves with their books on it. Bucky could finally finish reading Pride and Prejudice. Hell, they could buy the movie.
Fury looked altogether too pleased when they entered his office.

“How’s your stomach feeling?” Steve asked. “I know it’s been a few months since I gutted you, but I realize not everyone heals as fast as I do.”

Bucky stayed quiet, but Steve could almost hear his exasperated *Jesus, Stevie.*

Fury no longer looked pleased. “My stomach is fine. Thanks to all the tests they did on it, I found out I’m lactose intolerant.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I trust you’re here to talk about my offer? Two apartments here in HQ, health insurance, a comfortable paycheck--"

“We don’t want that,” Bucky interrupted, his voice low. Steve could see him trying to work out how to say what he wanted in as few words as possible. “The paycheck, yes. But we’re not going to move in.”

“We’re willing to be hired on as field agents,” Steve said simply. “Need-based. But we have conditions.”

“Of course you do.”

“You clean up our records,” Steve started with. “You don’t need to erase everything--"

“--Just get you off the Wanted list,” Fury finished for him. “Got it, done.”

“We want clearance to the SHIELD database,” Bucky said, his voice more labored than if he was just talking to Steve. “Level 8.”

“Beginning agents get Level 3.”

“We’re professionally trained assassins,” Steve said, his smile all teeth.

“Then level 2. I’m no idiot, Rogers.”

“Level 7. You said it yourself Nick, we’re on the same side. The enemy of my enemy--"

“Level 6, final offer.”

“Done.”

Fury rubbed his temples. “Any other demands?”

“We work together, no exceptions. And we work alone--"

“Not going to happen.”

Steve bared his teeth. “If you want us to work for you, no one is to know that I’m the Nomad.”

Fury stared right back at him with his one good eye. “If you’re as good at your job as you say you are, they won’t. But I’m not sending you in without backup.”

“Fine. Bucky, do we want anything else?”
Bucky caught his gaze, then looked back to Fury. They were both standing, while Fury remained seated. “I hear Stark’s got a son.”

“He’s an ass. You two would love him.”

“He’s a genius? Like his dad?”

Fury shrugged. “Some would say he’s even smarter.”

“I want to have access to him for my arm.” Bucky didn’t offer any more explanation. Fury looked down at the arm with almost sympathy, and Steve felt the urge to throw another knife at him. Unfortunately, he was currently unarmed, besides the plastic knife he’d stolen from the dining hall, but of course he couldn't throw that, it was too light.

Fury agreed. His demands, in response, were simple: “When I have a mission for you, you are there. When I tell you you will have backup, you will have backup, and you will respect them. If you sign the contract, we will officially be on the same side, and I need you to act like it. I need yes sirs and no sirs from you, understand?”

“Bucky doesn’t say ‘sir’,” Steve argued, leaning forwards on Fury’s desk. “But I will. Sir.”

Fury looked like he’d made a grave mistake. “That's fine. And lastly, I have an initiative in the works. It’s an emergency protocol. If the need arises, I need you both to be a part of it. Agreed?”

“I think we can manage that. It’s been nice doing business with you,” Steve grinned.

“I wish I could say the same. The contract will be ready to sign tomorrow. Try not to kill anyone before then?”

“Yes sir.”

That night, Steve was already ready for bed while Bucky washed his teeth in the tiny bathroom. “He’s letting us off without many demands. What do you think he’s playing at?”

Bucky spat into the sink then wiped his mouth with the towel. “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer? Even with our demands, Fury still got us on his side. That's something.”

The next day they read through the contract and signed it, and just like that, they were agents. Fury personally saw that they were given their equipment back. It was impossible to explain the relief of being armed again.

Steve and Bucky walked to lunch together wearing their new SHIELD issued uniforms. Fury assured them it was a formality, and that they only needed to wear the uniforms when at HQ; they would wear whatever tac gear was desired for their missions.

At lunch they saw Clint and Natasha who were already on their way out, but grinned when they spotted the uniforms. “I told you, Clint’s convincing!” Natasha said, sticking her tongue out. “Trust me, you two are going to have lots of fun.”

Oh yes.

Fun.

Steve wondered how long Natasha was going to keep up the peppiness act. When he smiled back (with teeth) he wondered how long he was going to keep it up.
The next day they had a quick training session with a tall, menacing woman, Agent Hill (5’8”). She showed them the ins and outs of the main SHIELD protocols, and made sure they actually knew what they were doing. Hill claimed that training new agents was not part of her job description, but that she was only doing it for the sake of confidentiality. Fighting Hill was interesting, and not only because the goal was to wrestle her to the ground, not to kill. She had official training, which meant that all of her moves were precise and calculated. Steve fought in a scrappier manner, and Bucky’s fighting style was a mixture of both. He had brute strength on his side, and as they fought Steve saw his expression even out, his eyes lock on his target. Hill urged him to keep his metal arm behind his back to challenge himself, but soon it seemed to be getting harder to restrain himself. Finally, Steve called it. “Okay, stop, time to take a break. Hey Buck, we should get some ice cream later, don’t you think? You remember the blue ice cream shop by the hardware store back home? Everything was homemade.”

“The blue one,” Bucky repeated, eyes still glazed over but posture softening. “The pink one was cheaper…”

“But not as good,” Steve agreed. He walked over to him, subtly brushing his arm against Bucky’s side. Bucky tensed, then all the pressure went out of his body. “Thanks for the lesson, Agent Hill. Ma’am?”

The ‘ma’am’ seemed to please her, though Steve had no notion that Bucky’s lapse back to the soldier had gone unnoticed. “You’re welcome. Keep working on what I taught you, Rogers, about your blind spots. You won’t always have a shield to protect you.”

It was funny how she looked at Bucky when she said that.

An hour later at their new apartment, Steve was pulling on his Nomad clothes, minus the shield. Bucky lay starfished on the bed. Steve wondered whether it was due to the physical or the mental exertion. “Don’t tell me you’re going on a mission. I will literally knock you out so I don’t have to get up.”

Steve grinned. “Nah, going on a drug run.”

“Stimulants or depressants?”

“Depressants. Dunno which ones yet, we’ll have to see what’s on the market tonight.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“One of these days some junkie is going to give you rat poison and you're going to die on a street corner,” Bucky grumbled.

“Nah. I’m pretty good with poison.”

“Then they'll stab you.”

“I'm pretty good with knives.”

“Then they'll kidnap you.”

“I'm pretty good with knives.”

Bucky laughed tiredly. “Be back in an hour or I'm coming after you with the Paratrooper.”

“Hour and a half,” Steve corrected as he slid out the window.
He was back in the apartment exactly 55 minutes later, climbing over Bucky to get to his side of the bed.

“Ugh, yeah, real fucking funny Rogers,” Bucky muttered, slinging his flesh arm over his face. His metal arm clicked and whirred in the dark. “You smell like weed.”

Steve giggled as he sloppily crawled over Bucky. “I wonder why.”

“Go to bed.”

“I’m in bed. Besides, it’s still early.”

“We wake up early. Get some sleep, super soldier.”

Steve huffed, but laid down.

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Before joining SHIELD, Steve was able to hack into the level 5 clearance. After joining, he could view level 6 without even having to get out a notepad.

Lots of nights were spent on rooftops or in warehouses, in apartments or houses, office buildings and laboratories, squashing termite after termite. Cut off one head and two more grow back. Too many termites to efficiently squash, but they had time.

Who was the main interrogator usually depended on who was in the worse mood that day. Steve did it more often, but some days he sat back and watched as Bucky reduced someone to a pleading, bleeding mess on the floor, before ending it, quickly and smoothly.

Back at their apartment they played with the idea of domesticity. They both started acquiring books, and in their off time they’d lounge on different couches reading. Bucky rediscovered the wonder of cook books, and began trying his hand. Steve had no complaints, not even when Bucky kept on undercooking meat and he wondered to himself if he’d die of salmonella before getting his first SHIELD-issued mission.

When nightmares came or sleep stayed away, they cleaned their weapons together. Bucky had taken to polishing the shield too, something Steve had never bothered with.

They fought a battle of two against five in an alley a week after signing on, and at one point Bucky took the shield from Steve and threw it, the action painfully familiar. When they finally started going on missions, Bucky began to rely less on his Paratrooper and more on the shield, throwing it just like Howard had taught him. Steve managed to get Hill to teach them other strategies and ways to use the shield until they were both more than adequate with it, even if Bucky could throw it with infinitely more force.

Even though the shield was Bucky’s weapon, Steve still wore the back harness, just in case.

Other agents started whispering about Captain America, like they knew an inch about Bucky from the damned comic book. Steve heard words like ‘honor’ and ‘justice’ and wanted to roll his eyes to the back of his head.

It was probably only fair. Steve got the feeling Bucky wanted to roll his eyes out of their sockets just about every time they were around another person and Steve pretended to be peppy. As soon as he smiled with his teeth out, Bucky sighed, like great, this shit again.
Steve didn’t act completely dopey. He excelled in the field, even if he did try to be subtle about it. He only played up the personality when there was someone in specific he wanted to screw with.

Like Tony Stark.

After their third official mission, Bucky’s arm had a glitch, leaving it stiff and hard for him to move. As soon as they debriefed, they were loaded in a cab and sent straight to Stark Towers.

They took a special elevator straight to Tony Stark’s workshop. He glanced at them through the bulletproof glass and said something, perhaps into an earpiece, and the door opened.

“I hear we have an issue with a prosthetic. Picked up too many cars with your pinky finger, mister terminator?”

At that moment in time, Bucky was almost fully Bucky, without many traces of the soldier in his posture. Steve wished, for a horrible moment, that it was just the soldier so he wouldn’t look so shocked.

“I'm Steve,” Steve said, offering his hand. Stark looked at it blankly, like he wasn't sure what he was expected to do with it. “Steve Rogers.”

The name clicked into place and Stark’s eyes widened. “Ahh, I'd heard that they'd defrosted you, though if I'm honest I thought you would use my father’s apparent gift of immortality to do something productive, yet here you are. Captain, you can sit on that bench over there, I'll grab my tools.”

Steve thought he was talking to him for a moment, before realizing Stark meant Captain America. Bucky took a moment to realize too, before shuffling over and sitting down.

“I read your comic,” Tony said as he pulled a few things out of a cabinet. “Great stuff. I loved the part where you sang the National Anthem as you killed the Nazis, great touch.”

How…

Fun.

Chapter End Notes

Comments make my day and inspire me to write. Let me know what you think!
LSD sounded like a good idea for Steve: it was a stronger drug with effects that were supposed to last a full twelve hours, so even with his increased metabolism the high was expected to last at least three hours. It ended up lasting four.

Four hours of vivid hallucinations spent in clothes soaked through in a cold sweat as adrenaline pumped through his system with the sound of a train thundering down the tracks. When Steve had nightmares, they were almost never vivid, only abstract smears and remnants of despair and loneliness. The LSD took those nightmares and paired them with memories, so the terror and screaming had pictures to go with them: the train, Bucky falling, Steve infiltrating dingy labs all alone, fighting off guys twice his size and cleaning up his own wounds. He hallucinated the Commandos dying over and over again in different ways each time. The worst hallucinations were the ones where the Commandos remained unchanged, but Steve and Bucky were there as they were in the 21st century. Bucky’s eyes glazed over and he lifted his Paratrooper to Dum Dum’s head, pulling the trigger like it was nothing.

Unlike dreams, the hallucinations felt real, mostly because they were, in a way. The Bucky with the glazed over eyes wasn’t real, but when Steve reacted to the hallucination by tackling Bucky, knife in hand-- that was real.

When the drugs finally left his system he sobbed into his hands as Bucky wrapped his arms around him gingerly. “Hey. Hey, punk. It’s okay, it’s over. What was that, Stevie? I’m supposed to be the broken one.”

That made Steve snort through the tears. Then he went back to sobbing.

Three days later Loki attacked SHIELD HQ and they had no choice but to suit up and meet Fury at the helicarrier for his ‘initiative’.

They strode across the tarmac in their field agent equipment. Steve was wearing his Nomad gear which consisted of a dark gray sleeveless shirt, his pants with lots of pockets for his various weapons, and the harness for the shield, which was currently empty. A small black backpack was slung over his shoulder.

Bucky had the shield slung across his back, attached to the special holster designed into his Captain America suit. Luckily, the designers had gone with a much more subtle approach than the red white and blue suit Dum Dum had drawn him in. Instead, his suit was so dark blue it was almost black, made out of a thick fabric. There was the shape of a star pressed into the fabric, and thick vertical stripes wrapped around his waist in slightly lighter blues. In the original art ‘Captain America’ had red and white stripes and a white star on his chest, like the American flag, because the best way to sneak into battle was to dress up like the American flag. This newer version was at least designed with fighting in mind, even if the indented star and the stripes were purely for decoration.

Another difference from the original uniform was the lack of a left sleeve, showing off Bucky’s metal arm. He used it to deflect bullets, so it made sense, but at the same time Steve knew how much Bucky hated it. Even without the mask, and with his hair pulled back in a bun, Steve had a feeling it was a bit too reminiscent of the uniform Bucky’d worn as the Winter Soldier.
But he wore it anyways.

They walked together across the tarmac, Bucky looking like a bunker in his skintight reinforced armor-like uniform, and Steve looking like a short college kid who was about to go rock climbing.

“Captain!” a voice called out and Steve immediately turned to look. It was Natasha Romanoff, the redhead whose number of confirmed kills was yet to be determined.

But she wasn't looking at him, she was looking at Bucky. She was referring to Captain America, not Captain Rogers. Right.

She smiled sickeningly when she saw Steve. He smiled back, with teeth.

“Nice of you to join us. And you too, Steve.”

Oh, so that's how it's going to be.

Steve smiled so wide it was almost painful. “Natasha! I'm so excited you're here, I was really worried that this mission would be dangerous!”

Natasha laughed. “You're so funny!” It somehow resembled a threat more than a compliment. “Let's go inside, yeah? Bucky, you can meet the rest of the team. And Steve, you can meet them too! I'm sure we’ll find a good spot for you to sit and be Bucky's I.T. guy.”

“Great!”

“Great!”

As they began to speed walk towards a door to the interior of the ship someone hurried up beside them. “Do you guys know where you're going?” The man asked, having to jog to keep up with him.

“We're just following Natasha. You can trust her,” Steve said with a big toothy smile and a convincing nod. Natasha laughed obnoxiously.

“I'm Barnes,” Bucky said sympathetically, slowing a little to fall in line with the man. He shook his hand.

The man shook his hand firmly. “I'm Bruce. Do you prefer Barnes or Captain America?”

“Barnes.”

“That sounds good to me, Barnes. Nice meeting you.”

Bruce (5’8”, aliases: Bruce Banner, The Hulk) had no problems walking close to Bucky, even though everyone was sent information on each other the night before. Apparently, it hadn't been Fury’s doing, but the actions of one of their fellow Avengers: Tony Stark. So, assuming Bruce read his emails, he knew about Bucky’s past with Hydra, yet he still showed no signs of fear or even excessive interest.

Steve had only read the parts of the email that were about him and Bucky. It gave information, but only brief, report-like info. All of his data was about him being frozen and thawed, and then working with SHIELD as Bucky’s partner for the past five months. Bucky’s information was a bit more detailed, also mentioning his time working as an ‘unconsenting assassin for Hydra’, but still wasn't too incriminating. Regardless, the mixture of the email and healing from the LSD left Steve grumpy.

Bucky had actually read the email in full, telling Steve the important information on Loki, the
tesseract, and their teammates.

The four of them marched as a group into the helicarrier. Natasha lead the way and Steve tried to stay in line with her, like he knew where they were going too, only to have her turn at the last moment and run into him. “Oops,” she said sweetly. “It’s this way, isn’t it?”

Steve responded with a snarl smile, and they continued.

They entered the control room to find Tony Stark, a blond MMA fighter, and Steve’s least favorite person Nick Fury in the middle of a discussion.

“Loki is beyond reason, but he is of Asgard. And he’s my brother.” Adonis said harshly. “So I would watch your tongue.”

“He killed 80 people in 2 days,” Natasha said as they stepped up to the table.

The weightlifter shifted. “He’s adopted.”

“Thor, I would like you to meet Natasha Romanoff,” Fury narrated from his seat at the table, “Steve Rogers, Bucky Barnes, and Bruce Banner.”

“Ah,” Thor said, shaking each of their hands firmly. “Captain America, it is an honor to meet you. I have read your comic.”

Bucky made a face like he was trying to contain his discomfort. “Thank you,” he said stiffly.

“You are a truly brave warrior, worthy of my legions. I especially loved the part where you fought the giant squid.”

Steve snorted.

“And you are Steven Rogers? Ah, you are Captain America’s loyal sidekick. I admire you as well.” He turned to Bruce in time to miss the face that Steve made.

Bruce smiled and reached out his hand. “I’m Bruce. I don’t have a comic written about me.”

Thor gripped his forearm with his other hand, smiling more genuinely than Steve had managed in his entire life. “An honor.”

He shook Natasha’s hand and then kissed it. She smiled with her lips pressed closed, the same way Peggy Carter did when Steve said something funny. It made Steve grit his teeth and step closer to Bucky.

“Don’t mind me, over here trying to save the world,” Tony said from a command panel. “Please, continue discussing your comic books. I read the Captain America one, though I have to admit, I liked the porn parody better. I’m Tony Stark.”

Bruce shook his hand, frowning slightly. “I greatly admire your work with clean energy, Mr. Stark. And the Palladium-- incredible. You deserved the Nobel Prize for it, you were robbed, really.” Bruce was still shaking his hand.

Tony’s lips twitched up. “Yes, well, us Stark men have a tendency to be passed up for Nobel Prizes. Speaking of, Rogers, it’s good to see you. How’s my father’s serum working for you? You putting it to good use working I.T. for Robo-Cop?”

Steve walked over and shook Tony’s hand unenthusiastically, only to have Tony pull him into a
forceful bro hug, pounding him on the back. He pulled away, hating how he had to look up to meet Stark’s eyes. “I’m putting it to great use at my I.T. job. Excuse me.”

“Steve and I go way back,” Stark explained. “You see, we met a few months ago when the Tin Man’s arm stopped working properly and I had to fix it. We’ve been best friends ever since.”

“I’m so glad you’re making so many friends, Agent Rogers,” Fury said, leaning back in his chair. He looked pleased.

Steve decided that everyone in that room, excluding Bucky, Bruce, and maybe Thor, could burn.

He turned back to Tony, channeling his inner suck-up. “Haha, Tin Man. I understood that reference.”

“I did not,” Thor interjected cheerily, “But to no matter! We were just discussing the mission when you arrived, I’m sure Tony would be happy to catch you up.”

Tony’s lips twitched upwards. He looked dead on the inside. “Delighted.”

The mission debriefing took longer than it should have, mostly because of Tony’s constant side tracks, additional comments, nicknames, and use of words Steve had never heard before in either of his lives. The just of it was that an alien Loki, Thor’s brother, had stolen the tesseract. He had kidnapped a scientist and Clint Barton, and was now likely up to lots of evil, except for the fact that he was stuck in a holding cell in the middle of the helicarrier.

Most of that Steve had already known, except for the part about Barton, which made his stomach twist. Friend of Natasha or not, he’d been friendly to them when they first had arrived at SHIELD, and had seemed like a decent guy.

Bucky shifted slightly at the mention of brainwashing. Steve wanted to reach out and grab his hand in comfort, but he was standing on Bucky’s left side, and he didn’t particularly feel like being thrown out one of the helicarrier’s windows.

After Tony explained the situation, he explained how they were trying to find the Tesseract. He and Bruce talked science to each other for a few moments before announcing they were going to go jerk each other off in one of the labs.

That’s what Steve heard, at least.

After they left, Fury set the rest of the Avengers up with earpieces. Whenever they had the earpieces in they could hear any commands from Fury, but they had to flip a switch on them in order for Fury to listen in to them.

Steve and Bucky looked at each other upon hearing that, neither of them believing it. Steve glanced at Natasha, who was grinning.

*Natasha Romanoff, 5’4” (aliases: Agent Romanoff, bitch, mission assist).*

Steve glanced at Thor, adding him to the list.

*Thor Somethingsomething, approximately 7’6”. No known aliases.*

He decided on 6’5” for Thor’s height, though he wasn't sure how accurate it was. He tended to get less accurate the taller someone got. It was just so damn unfair.
After that, since Steve and Bucky weren’t scientists or useful, they were released to explore the helicarrier. Fury didn't necessarily tell them to explore, but he gave them that look of ‘I know you'll do it no matter what I tell you, better get it out of the way now’.

Steve liked Fury. He liked annoying him.

So Steve and Bucky patrolled the hallway, with Steve on Bucky’s right side so he could bump into him as they walked. After they got far enough away from the others Steve looked to him. “Any thoughts?”

Bucky’s face was tight in a non-expressive scowl. “Too many.”

Steve nodded, looking ahead. “I like Doctor Banner.”

Bucky grunted in agreement. “Ally.”

“You know, I could carry the shield for you for a while. If that'd make you feel better.”

The comment was enough the break the scowl. “You just want it for yourself.”

“It’s not my fault! You know, I think I was destined to be Captain America instead of you.”

“Yeah, okay. Pipe down, I.T. guy.”

After a while of exploring they stumbled upon the lab Tony, Bruce and Natasha were working in and decided to join them. Steve restrained himself from making a comment about circle-jerking and instead said “Hi guys, how’s it going? Nat, you’re looking pretty, as always.”

She recovered quickly. “So do you, Stevie.”

They smiled at each other with their teeth.

Bucky wandered over to the workspace cautiously, eyes shifting over the screens to the scepter laying on a table. Steve felt himself stiffen, his hand drifting automatically to one of his pockets before he stopped himself. They’d been in plenty of labs together since Bucky had broken free of Hydra, but just because Bucky could handle them didn't mean he liked them.

Tony and Bruce observed him silently, eyes flickering over his form, over his gun, over his arm. Bucky showed no signs of noticing.

Bucky noticed.

“Any luck?” He said gruffly.

“We’ve got a few ideas,” Bruce said, gesturing towards a screen with a map glowing on it. “We’re still narrowing it down.”

“Anything we can do to help?” Steve offered.

“No really,” Tony said, popping a freeze dried blueberry in his mouth. “I'm running a virus to get access to SHIELD’s secure mainframe. A few more minutes and we’ll be able to see the real reason they care so much about the Tesseract.”

“As opposed to, you know, stopping an alien invasion,” Bruce grumbled.

Steve frowned. “A virus? You could've just asked and I would have logged in.”
Natasha gave him a look. “What level access do you have?”

“Depends. How much time do I have?”

Natasha gave him a look like he’d officially won her over. Steve reminded himself that he didn't like her.

“Doesn’t matter, Jarvis is already at work. Until then you can just sit back and relax. I'm sure you have lots of practice at that, huh short stuff?”

“I am not the shortest person in the room,” Steve objected, but went to a bench in the corner anyways. He had pulled out his sketchbook and pencils and put his feet up so he could rest his sketchbook on his knees when he realized the others were watching. “What?”

“Nothing,” Tony said. “We’re just appreciating that you brought your crayons and coloring book with you for the end of the world.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “The world is not going to end. If it was do you think they'd call you in to save it?”

It took Steve a moment to realize what he'd said. He considered trying to save it, but the words were already out, so instead he just put pencil to paper and trying not to scowl at it.

“Wow, so aggressive,” Stark said after a pause. “I didn't know shrimp had teeth.”

Steve had teeth but he preferred knives, especially when dealing with people like Stark. However, he managed to reign it in and focus on his sketching.

The scientists got back to their work and Natasha looked to her phone, probably doing lots of horrible things and cyberbullying small children. Bucky glowered his way over to Steve’s bench and sat on the other side, lacing his feet in between Steve's. He began polishing the shield, probably because he didn't have any gun oil on him.

Steve drew out some of his hallucinations from the LSD he’d taken earlier than week. He ended up landing on the image of himself in a Hydra lab, all alone with the shield strapped to his back.

At some point Natasha left, and the computer upload finished. Steve let his pencil go still for a few minutes as he watched Stark tap on the transparent screen, looking through SHIELD’s files. Steve had only ever bothered with ones that gave him new targets to kill. He’d never looked at the files filled with drawings of the tesseract and titled ‘Phase 1’. Something about it seemed vaguely familiar, and the image of ‘Phase 2’ and a room number flashed through Steve’s mind.

“I'm going to go for a walk,” he decided, closing his sketchbook. Bucky was leaning against the wall with the shield in his lap, looking like he was half asleep but his eyes watched a mirror in the corner of the room, tracking the scientists as well. He nodded, catching Steve's eyes.

Want me to come with you?

Steve gave his head a little shake.

Steve snuck to one of the lower levels of the helicarrier, walking until he found a heavy set door with a keypad keeping it locked. He waited until the door opened from inside and then stepped away from the keypad, nodding to the officer as they walked past him. He strolled in confidently.

The room was huge but mostly devoid of people. He carefully avoided the few people who were
there, instead quietly inspecting the boxes that were lined up. Nothing of interest.

There was a worktable in the back where the scientists were. Steve had an idea that the glowing objects on the table had something to do with Phase 2, but he’d have to get to them first.

He walked over to the workbench, staring at one of the objects. A scientist came over immediately. “I’m sorry, but you need special permission--”

“These are the… special energy equipment, yes?”

The scientist fumbled a bit, probably unsure how to deal with the small child with the rock climbing gear asking top secret questions.

“I’m part of Fury’s Avengers Initiative,” Steve explained. “We’re in charge of retrieving the Tesseract. Fury wants me to retrieve one of these weapons--” and that was just a shot in the dark “--so he could explain what he was using the Tesseract for to us. You did realize he would explain the Tesseract to us, right? Thanks!” Steve took the object and started striding back towards the door, hoping sincerely that just holding whatever it was wouldn’t kill him.

He examined it once he got into the hallway and realized that he’d been right about it being a weapon. It was a gun, reasonably small but certainly deadly. Part of the barrel glowed blue.

He walked back into the lab in the middle of an argument. Bucky was on the other side of the bench with a poker expression and a twitchy right hand.

“When were you planning on telling us about Phase 2?” Tony accused Fury, pointing at the screen. “When were you going to tell us you were using the Tesseract to build weapons?”

“That’s not--”

Steve set the gun on the table and everyone turned to look at. Tony looked back to Fury, his deep set eyes gleaming with justice. Steve knew the look. “Sorry, what were you lying?”

Nick blinked. “Last year, we had a god visit our planet and we found out just how weak we are. It is SHIELD’s job to protect--”

“Protect? Interesting choice of words.”

“Fury, I need you to look at this screen and tell me why SHIELD ever thought this was a good idea,” Bruce said, jabbing his finger at the screen. The doctor’s voice had gotten deeper, his eyes wide with a kind of anger Steve didn’t expect.

Fury raised his hands to hip level. “Doctor Banner, I think it’d be best if you remove yourself from this situation.”

“I was in Calcutta. I was pretty far removed, until you came and hunted me down--”

“How did you know where he was?” Bucky asked. He had appeared behind Fury and upon speaking all of the others jumped. Steve was the only one who wasn’t surprised; he was always aware of Bucky’s presence in a room. Of lack there of.

“He was on threat watch,” Natasha answered for him. “We all are.”

“Even squeaky over there?” Tony asked, pointing to Steve. “Tell me, are you above or below angry bees?”
“Don’t act like you’re above this Stark, if you still made weapons we all know you’d be knee deep--”

“Hold up, how is this suddenly about me?”

“Isn’t everything?” Bucky retorted, posture shifting defensively.

“Agents, I need you to focus! You are supposed to be a team!”

“This is no team,” Banner growled.

Everyone stopped to look at him. Banner’s hand had wrapped around the shaft of the scepter on the workbench. “We’re no team,” Banner continued. “We’re a chemical mixture created to make chaos.”

“Doctor Banner, you need to take a break.”

“Why should he?” Tony snapped, like a little kid asking why he had to go to bed early. “Why not let the big guy blow off a little steam.”


“Did he just say ‘darn’?”

“Oh yeah?” Tony said. He stepped forwards until he was chest to chest with Steve, who straightened his back and squared his shoulders and looked up to meet Stark’s gaze. “I'm starting to want you to make me.”

In Steve’s peripheral he saw Bucky’s metal hand clench. He stuck out his chin at Stark, lowering his voice. “I’ll fight you. Right here, right now.”

“Goddamnit Steve,” Bucky muttered.

“I'll fight you too!” Steve threatened, but all of the tenseness in the room had faded. “Let's go right now Barnes, I know you fight like my mother.”

“Sounds like a compliment to me,” Bucky said, stripping off the shield and letting it roll away as he got into position like he and Steve were about to wrestle. “Sarah Rogers was the biggest badass I've ever met.”

Steve squared up, raising his fists. “Let’s go. Mama didn't birth no punk.”

“Are you trying to tell me you're adopted?”

Steve jumped Bucky, pretending like he was going for a punch to the face when instead he kicked Bucky’s foot back, making him stumble. Bucky caught him in a headlock (with his right arm) and gave him a noogie, making Steve squawk indignantly. Steve stuck his finger in his mouth and jammed it in Bucky’s ear, making him yip and release his hold.

Steve stumbled back to revamp his strategy when he remembered where they were. The others stared at them, Bruce still with the scepter forgotten in his hand.

They didn't have the chance to react accordingly because at that moment, the entire helicarrier shook. Alarms went off immediately, making Bucky hunch down and grab his shield, teeth gritted.

Steve rushed to his side, grabbing his wrist as the others ran around, stumbling to turn on their earpieces and grab their weapons. “Hey, hey, Buck, I'm right here, it's Steve, everything’s fine--”
Doctor Banner slammed the scepter down on the table and Bucky flinched towards the noise, his hand reaching for his gun.

“Bucky, Bucky, look at me. Look at me.” Bucky finally made eye contact with him, teeth still gritted. “What year is it? What year is it Bucky?”

“2012,” he hissed.

“Good. And what do those alarms mean?”

“Invasion?”

“Number three engine is down! All hands to stations!” Hill commanded on the comms.

“Maybe,” Steve said, not letting go of Bucky. “You good?”

Bucky met his eyes. “I’m good.”

“Cap, come with me!” Tony yelled. “I’m going to see if I can keep this baby airborne!”

He sprinted out the door, Steve and Bucky running after him. “Pretty sure he was talking to me,” Bucky said, able to run with less effort thanks to his damn long legs.

“He said Captain, Sergeant Barnes. Know your rank!”

“Know yours!”

They turned a corner and Bucky shoved him. Steve almost ran into the wall, only narrowly avoiding it. He sprinted to catch up.

“I’d watch yourself Sergeant Barnes, now would be an awfully bad time to trip—”

“Will you two children quit it for two goddamn minutes?” Tony yelled back at them. “We’re under attack!”

As soon as he turned back around Steve had a knife out of his pocket and was aiming to throw. Bucky almost had to tackle him to get the knife away. “He’s an ally!”

“Young mom’s an ally!”

“This is why you're the I.T. guy!”

Steve shoved him and Bucky shoved him back, but they kept running.

“Engine 3 is that way!” Tony said, pointing. “I'll meet you there!”

They sprinted over to the engine, or rather, the hole where the engine used to be. The wind whipped wildly at them as they both took a step back, and Bucky reached over to grab the back of his harness. Steve sent him a glare, but he didn’t let go.

“Here, carry the shield. Add some weight to you.”

“I will fucking cut you.”

Bucky slid the shield onto Steve’s back anyways.

Bucky clambered forwards, holding onto the side of the blown out controls to keep balance. A red
and gold robot swooped by, flying through the air as if it was easy.

Iron Man.

“Stark!” Bucky yelled. “I'm here!”

Iron Man flew to the turbine, rambling technical terms into the comms before calling out “Captain, I need you up there.” He pointed to the controls a floor up, visible thanks to the explosion. “I need you to get to that engine control panel and tell me which relays are in overload position.”

Bucky ran forwards and jumped onto the side, climbing up the debris using almost exclusively his arms. Steve stumbled back into the carrier, finding a set of stairs and climbing up.

“Captain, what does it look like up there?” Tony said over the comms.

“It seems to run on some form of electricity.”

Steve jumped the last two steps, only to find that he wasn't alone. Three soldiers were advancing towards Bucky, making gestures with their hands. Bucky hadn’t seen them yet.

Now this, this was a problem Steve knew how to solve. He leapt towards the first one, sending them flying out of the carrier with much less grace than the robot Stark. He whirled around, catching the next soldier in the stomach with one of his knives and shoving them off the helicarrier, yanking his knife back in the process. Bullets pinged off of his shield and Steve growled, twisting to the side and launching his knife. It bounced off of the soldiers helmet.

Bucky grabbed the soldier from behind and wrapped his metal arm around their neck, snapping it to the side then kicking him off the carrier.

“Damn Barnes,” Tony said in the earpiece. Steve still hadn't turned on his microphone, so Tony hadn't heard any of his grunting.

Steve flipped Bucky his middle finger as he turned his comm on. “What do I need to do at the control panel?”

“Oh Steve, how nice of you to join us.”

Steve looked at Bucky and mouthed I will kill you. Bucky did not look nearly as afraid as Steve thought he should be.

Tony talked him through checking for the relays and then slowing down the rotors. Then Stark flew into the turbine and started pushing it.

The helicarrier lurched and Steve was slammed into the control panel in front of him, the dense metal hitting his ribs and suddenly he was on the floor of Brock Rumlow’s kitchen, fumbling to get his gun out except it was stuck and Brock was looming over him, and he pounced--

“Steve! Now!”

Steve was back on the helicarrier, standing in front of the red level and staring at it in horror. Then Bucky was sliding up beside him, his presence familiar and calming, pulling down the red lever.

“We’ve got it Tony.” He flicked off his comm and with fumbling hands, Steve followed suit.

“I had it,” Steve grumbled. “I need you to stop treating me like a kid.”

“And I need you to focus. ” When Bucky looked at him, it wasn't twitching, scarred Bucky, it was
Sergeant Barnes Bucky, pre-asset, pre-arm, pre-torture, pre-serum. “Do you copy?”

Steve stared back. He made himself blink, and look away. “Yeah yeah, I copy Sergeant Dickwad. Let's get going, I don’t think we're done yet.”

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There weren't. The enemy soldiers had been quick, and even though they managed to secure the helicarrier in the air, in the chaos Loki had escaped. He’d killed one of the higher up agents, a man named Phil Coulson who Steve had never met but apparently Stark knew.

“You would've liked him,” Fury said in a way that didn’t betray much. “He was a big fan. Had trading cards he wanted to get signed.” Fury tossed a set of bloodied Captain America memorabilia on the table.

Tony stared at the cards, eyes wide. He looked up. Then he left, without a word.

“I’ll... check on him,” Bucky said grimly, his Brooklyn accent more apparent than normal. Steve hated when he got like this. It made it harder to go back.

Steve watched as Bucky left, then looked at the trading cards on the table. The cartoon Captain America hardly even resembled Bucky. In this edition his hair was lighter, almost blonde. Steve flicked the cards away.

Thor was in the corner of the room looking like he was mentally beating himself up. If Steve was nicer he would have left him alone, but Steve was never one known for his compassion.

*Brock Rumlow, laying on the floor, a bullet hole in his forehead.*

“Thor?”

Thor turned around and for a moment Steve pitied the poor handsome, tall, muscular god. Then he shook himself back to reality. “Do you know where the others are?”

“Bruce turned into a giant green monster and left. Natasha is with Clint.”

There were more than one thing to question, but Steve found his mind choosing his priorities for him.  “Clint is back?”

“Healing. I am afraid I do not know where.”

Steve nodded and started to turn away before thinking better. He gave Thor’s arm a squeeze and tried to be considerate instead of just jealous. “I'm sorry about your brother. We’ll figure it out.”

Thor gave him a smile. Another thing Steve envied: his easy ability to smile. Steve was working overboard just by forcing himself to not scowl at everyone he met.

“You are wearing Captain America’s shield,” Thor noted, and Steve made a note not to underestimate him anymore. “Why?”

Steve tried for the toothy smile. “What can I say? I’m his biggest fan.”

The glimmer in Thor’s eyes suggested he saw through the act but he didn't question him. For that, Steve was thankful.
“I appreciate your kind words, Steve Rogers,” Thor said. “Now please, go find your comrade. I am quite used to Loki’s actions. I will get over it soon.”

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Steve didn’t have time to find Clint before Stark was speaking in his earpiece. “Rogers, I’ve located the Tesseract, it’s in Manhattan. Loki is going to try to open a portal. Get the others, I’ll meet you there. It’s time for you to earn your paycheck, I.T. guy.”

“I’m on it.”

Steve ran down the hallway, calling for the others in the comms. “Meet on the west airstrip, now. Anyone know how to fly one of those planes?”

“I’ve got it, Rogers,” a familiar voice said in the comm: Clint. “What type of threat it is?”

Steve rounded the corner, pounding on the glass door where Bucky was staring into some kind of pit. He turned and looked at Steve, eyes slightly glazed over before focusing in on Steve and running over. “The threat level is… science fiction. Something something Loki, portals, sounds like an army, bring extra ammo.”

“Oh good, finally something for you to do,” Natasha said, her smirk audible over the comm. “I was worried you were going to get bored. Bring your crayons with us, yeah? In case there’s no buttons for you to push.”

Bucky fell into line alongside Steve as they ran towards the other side of the helicarrier. They flicked their comms off in synch.

“You good?” Steve asked.

“Doing swell.” The gruffness of his voice meant that Bucky was back to the 21st century, even if his words were dated. “I’ll grab the guns and meet you there.”

“Go team,” Steve muttered halfheartedly.

As soon as they assembled they were marching together down the airstrip. Thor, amongst being a bodybuilder and having the bone structure of a Norse god, could also apparently fly, as he demonstrated by flying away as soon as he heard Steve’s announcement. So the four of them marched: Natasha with her thigh holsters and some sort of electrical gloves; Clint with his uniform looking like a professionally tailored version of Steve’s, plus a sheath of arrows and a bow; Bucky with his metal arm on full display and shield over his back, plus the half dozen weapons hidden on his form and the machine guns; and Steve, appropriately 6 inches shorter than everyone except for Natasha, walking with his small backpack over his shoulder and appearing generally unarmed. It went with his false persona of being non-lethal more effectively than Steve would have liked.

An airman jogged up to them, starting with “I’m sorry but you’re not authorized--” his voice trailed off as Bucky pulled out a machine gun and handed it to Steve casually.

They walked past the airman. Steve gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “Tell Fury we said ‘hey’.”

Chapter End Notes
Boom, first half of the Avengers is a go.

What do you guys think about getting updates three times a week instead of two? And, as always, please let me know your thoughts/comments!
As soon as they got on the plane Clint and Natasha started racing around to get it in the air, so Steve took the opportunity to pull Bucky to the corner.

“I told you I'm-”

Steve pulled out a protein bar and very calmly threw it at Bucky’s head. Bucky didn't even try to grab it out of the air, instead opting to focus his attention on scowling at Steve. “Eat,” Steve ordered.

“Yes Mrs. Rogers.”

Steve puffed out his chest, ready to put on the old voice when the quinjet shuddered and lifted into the air.

Natasha strode to the back of the plane to meet them. “Any strategy?”

“We’re just going to use our God-given talents to fend off the army,” Steve said sarcastically. “I'm going to have an asthma attack and Buck here, well he’s the master of interpretive dance--”

“Thanks for the snark, but we’ve got things to do.” Natasha gave him a look that suggested her thanks may not have been genuine. “Steve, what are we up against?”

He shrugged. “Aliens? Other Asgardian supermodels? Why would I know?”

“Because you're supposed to be the one with the information,” she said through gritted teeth. “Or is it possible that you don’t actually know what I.T. stands for?”

Bucky nudged him. “She’s got you on that one.”

“Rogers, what are you doing here? Why are you actually here, because if you're a hostile, I'd prefer to know now rather than later.”

“Guys,” Clint interrupted. “Take a look at this.”

They were close enough to see Stark Tower shooting a beam straight into the sky. Above it was a huge portal with some sort of creatures spilling out.

“Stark, is that you?” Natasha said into the comm.

“Contrary to popular belief, I'm not actually evil, nor am I an alien. Thor's here too, Thor how 'you doing buddy?”

There was a buzz, and then “Fantastic. The small creatures are Chitauri, the large ones are Leviathans. They are not of Asgard; I know not how to defeat them.”

There was the clank of metal and then a mad laugh in the background. “Is that--”

“Loki,” Natasha confirmed.

“Strap in guys,” Clint warned, “We’re about to make an emergency landing.”
“Why--”

Something hit the side of the plane and it went careening to the side, throwing the three of them who were standing against the wall painfully.

They struggled over to seats as the plane shuddered, somehow managing to make a semi-controlled descent with only one wing intact. They narrowly avoided a building and then hit the pavement with a painful jolt, still going far too fast for comfort.

“Nice of you to join me,” Tony snarked into the comms. The shining red and gold robot-- Iron Man, Stark, whatever-- swooped down on the street, being followed by a dozen human sized aliens. “What, did you stop for snacks?”

“Where are we needed?”

“I don’t know Nattie, where are the fucking aliens?”

“Are the ones chasing you the big ones or the little ones?”

Tony laughed in the comm right as a giant metal serpent snaked through the portal, blocking out the entire thing to fit it’s body through. It screeched, metal plates the size of cars all shifting and shuddering together on the beast the size of the street.

Bucky’s metal arm shifted in sympathy.

“Okay,” Steve found himself saying. It was huge and an alien and a little terrifying, but at the same time, it wasn't a hallucination of Bucky shooting Dum Dum’s goddamn face off, so it was manageable. “So that’s one of the big ones; a Leviathan. Stark, can you take care of it?”

“As soon as I get these small fuckers off my tail.”

Stark made another dive down the street past them and immediately their training kicked in and twelve Chitauri soldiers fell to the ground from a mix of bullets and arrows. The ones who were shot got to their feet, like the bullets had only forced them off their galactic hover scooters.

“Dibs,” Clint called out, and within moments the remaining Chitauri were on the ground. He scurried over to retrieve his arrows.

Steve still hadn’t raised his gun. “Tony, where are we most needed?”

“You're supposed to be the I.T. guy! You figure that out, let me kill the snake!”

Well, fuck everything. “Clint, you're on sniping duty, get on top of a building. The three of us will get ahold of some of their guns and do ground support. Buck, let's leave our Paratroopers here.”

“I will be so pissed off if these aren't here when we get back.”

“That’s rather optimistic,” Natasha grumbled.

“Nah, we’ve done this before. Just… with Nazis.”

“Hmm.”

“It’s lots of fun,” Steve reassured. “Let's spread out.”

Bucky started reaching behind his back, saying “Here Steve, take the--”
“Like hell I will. Natasha, go west, Buck and I will go east.”

They dispersed, and Steve already knew they had taken too much time figuring out what they were doing. He and Bucky jogged down the street, and Steve picked up the first Chitauri gun he saw, passing it to Bucky.

“You take it,” Bucky insisted. Steve fixed him with a scowl. “Hey, I need you to spend one goddamn minute not actively trying to kill yourself.”

“Alien at 2 o’clock!”

Bucky shot them, almost without looking. From the sky three Chitauri dropped down on them, snarling. Steve hit them with an equally angry snarl and two throwing knives, while Bucky took out the last one with his shield.

“Take a goddamn gun Steve!”

Steve ripped his knives out of the monsters chests, immediately implanting them in the backs of two more soldiers running in the street. “I’ll be quicker with my knives!”

“You’ll get killed with just your knives!”

A soldier dropped on top of Bucky from the sky and he tore it off of him, punching it in the chest with his arm and watching the metal crumble underneath. He raised his shield just in time to deflect a blast from one of the guns.

A monster launched itself at Bucky’s back but Steve was already there, impaling his knife it its neck and shoving it backwards.

Trash was blown down the street, cars and bikes abandoned in the mad dash to get away. Chitauri blasts kept hitting the streets and buildings, causing general chaos and destruction seemingly without motive.

“Stark! Where are the civvies?”

“Civvies?”

“Civilians! Who hasn't evac-ed yet?”

“I'm scanning… no life signs on your street, besides you two. Wait, no, thirty-first floor of the Sebastian Building reads almost fifty heat signatures.”

“I'm on it. Buck, give me a boost.”

Right as a Chitauri sped above them on a hover scooter Steve ran and leapt onto Bucky’s shield as Bucky pushed upwards. Steve sprang into the sky, barely managing to land on the back of the scooter. The creature snarled and slashed at him with its razor claws, leaving red streaks down Steve’s arm. He grappled with it for the controls and they shot upwards. Steve made his best guess and yanked the controls to the side somewhere around the 30 or 40th floor and they flew inside, glass shattering deafeningly around them. The Chitauri soldier went one way and Steve went the other, and the scooter flew straight forwards and exploded against the elevator shaft, glowing blue fire crumbling more of the shaft inwards before going out.

Then the Chitauri was on him and Steve’s handgun was going off one, two, three times into its head, and it curled over dead. He took its gun and slung it across his back.
It appeared Steve was on the 33rd floor, so he sprinted to the open elevator shaft and climbed down the edges of it, swinging through the open elevator doors of floor 31. A crowd of maybe a hundred people cowered around, guarded by Chitauri soldiers with their guns.

The Chitauri were smart enough to surround the humans and attack Steve, but they weren't smart enough to threaten the innocent people. As soon as they saw him, every single gun in the room turned and fired at Steve. He leapt backwards into the elevator shaft, barely clinging onto the side of it as explosions sounded above him. He counted out to five, trying to ignore the yelling in his earpiece.

“Barnes!”

“This way!”

“To your right!”

“Natasha, I need air support!”

“Is that Bruce?”

“Bruce!”

And then quieter, “That’s my secret, Barnes. I'm always angry.”

Steve threw himself upwards, rolling onto one knee and firing the Chitauri gun. It was like his favorite game of Kill The Termite, except these creatures were aliens, not Nazis. He rolled out of the way as a crater formed in the spot he’d just been in. Hiding behind a desk he aimed three more times, and then the Chitauri were all taken care of.

He checked to make sure his comm was turned off so the other’s still couldn’t hear him, then climbed onto the desk to address the people. “This never happened,” he snapped. “Take the stairs down to the lowest level you can and stay there. Do not go out onto the streets.”

Steve shot a hole through one of the windows and climbed out, climbing across the side of the building until he got to the fire escape. From there he waited until a Chitauri flew past him to jump. It’s head exploded from his blaster.

He tuned in to the comms briefly.

“--congregating in the Evan’s Building, we have to kill them. Is anyone close enough?”

“I'm too far.”

“What Barnes said.”

“Steve? Steve, are you on the comms? Dammit, our I.T. guy is offline.”

“Hulk is on his way to the Evan's building, he’ll take care of it.”

Steve flew the hover scooter directly into the Evan’s building, leaping off before it exploded against the wall. His body throbbed but he rolled himself onto his stomach and elbows, gun positioned.

There was a stairwell on the other side of the room with Chitauri soldiers thundering down them, all heading in the same direction. Steve blew them up.

He liked the Chitauri gun.
“Steve, do you copy?”

If it was anyone else, Steve would have ignored them. But it was Bucky, and even Steve wasn't that cruel.

He flipped the switch on for long enough to mutter “I'm fine, busy,” before switching it off again.

He didn’t hear Bucky say it into the earpiece, but he could feel him thinking it, and Steve was temporarily hit with a wave of Goddammit Rogers.

There were no more Chitauri soldiers on the stairs so Steve dragged himself to his feet and started going down the stairs after them. He wasn't sure how the blaster worked, or how many rounds it had, but it didn't give any indication of running out of ammo, so he kept it raised and ready.

His mind was still a disaster zone, and even though it was long out of his system, Steve blamed the LSD. Never again, he decided.

He was going back to non-horrible stimulants like cocaine. Cocaine never gave him the bad hallucinations.

He’d managed to distract himself to the point that he almost walked straight into certain death. Hundreds, maybe thousands of Chitauri soldiers had congregated and were forming ranks while their leaders gave commands.

They were on one of the floors just barely off the ground. Steve swung over the railing and dropped to the next floor, where more soldiers seemed to repairing a Leviathan. He dropped one more floor to find hordes of the scooters stacked together, some still running.

He was on the main floor, in a lobby area. Steve ran to a window. Nothing much had changed, except the giant green Hulk was destroying the building across the street.

Huh. Apparently Bruce was new to Manhattan.

A horrible idea came to mind when Steve looked back at the glowing hoverboards. He already knew firsthand how easily they exploded. Maybe…

Steve shot open the glass doors and ran across the street. Then he fired into the lobby, dropped the gun, and ran for his life.

He’d managed about seven seconds. Bucky was out on the street nearby, using the shield like he was born to wield it, like his metal arm was built for throwing it like a deadly frisbee. Then Bucky looked up, caught his eyes, and an expression passed across his face that Steve hadn't seen in a long time.

Steve tackled Bucky and they rolled, stopping abruptly when they hit the side of a car. Steve was on the pavement, with Bucky above him, watching in slow motion as Bucky raised the shield to protect them, covering Steve’s head with his metal arm.

Then the main floor of the Evan’s building exploded with so much force the entire street shook. And then, after the briefest pause, all of the building’s supports broke in unison and it crashed to the ground like thunder directly in their ears. They were far enough away for the building’s collapse to not put them in immediate danger, but it was still one of the loudest noises Steve had heard in his entire life. His ears were ringing.

The first thing he heard after the ringing died down was Stark’s voice: “Holy shit.”
Then his ears adjusted more and he could hear Bucky panting over him, still protecting him. “You okay?”

“Better than ever,” Steve grumbled. The building’s collapse had taken hours, it had taken days. They were both filthy.

His brain offered a more accurate time: 1 minute, 17 seconds.

He looked over Bucky, but besides the filth and general scrapes, he seemed fine as he offered Steve help up to his feet.

“You good too?” Steve asked.

“Do I look good?”

“You certainly don’t look worse than normal,” Steve grinned. It wasn't the toothy grin-- it was the type of grin that was reserved for Bucky and Bucky only.

Steve sighed as they started walking. “Reminds me of that one base we destroyed in the war. Remember? Gabe set off that explosion and the entire thing collapsed on itself, killing all the Nazis but also destroying a bunch of data. We thought Roosevelt was personally going to fly over to kill Gabe himself.”

Bucky nodded slowly. “I’d forgotten about that.”

“Yeah? Did the building collapsing remind you of anything else?”

Bucky scowled. “Building in Afghanistan.”

“You were in Afghanistan?”

“I traveled the world while you were freezing your balls off.”

Steve shoved him affectionately.

“I can close the portal!” Natasha yelled into the comms. “Does anyone copy?”

“Wait!” Tony called back. Steve and Bucky stopped walking, holding the earpieces closer to their ears so they could hear better in the chaos. “There’s a nuke headed our way. I’m going to redirect it.”

“Stark, that’s a one way trip.”

“I know.”

Bucky nudged Steve and upon silent agreement they started running. They were headed in the direction of Stark Tower, with it’s giant beam to the sky.

They watched as Stark repositioned the nuke. Stark, in his red and gold Iron Man suit gleaming in the sun, flying straight up into the portal and then disappearing, taking the nuke with him.

Steve flicked on his comms. He said nothing.

One second. Two.

Five.
Ten.

“Do I close it?” Natasha asked, his voice lower.

One second.

Two.

Three.

“Close it,” Steve said quietly.

After a few moments, the beam into the sky disappeared and the portal began to shrink into itself.

One second.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Right before it closed completely, a small form fell through it. It was red and gold and shone in the sun.

“Son of a bitch,” Bucky muttered.

Tony Stark dropped to earth, rolling slightly as he fell.

“He’s not slowing down.”

Steve and Bucky started running, watching in horror as Stark fell. Then a giant green figure leapt away from a building and the Hulk grabbed him out of the air.

Tony Stark was deposited on the pavement and the Hulk clawed his golden mask off. Underneath, Tony’s eyes were closed. He didn't move.

Steve let himself slip to the floor, his legs giving out underneath him. He felt incredibly small, and not because of his height and not because of his scrawniness. He sat cross legged next to Tony, back hunched and chest pulling in and out slowly as his body went to autopilot.


When Steve had first met Tony, he’d noticed immediately how much he looked like the Howard Stark Steve had known, with his intelligent eyes and snarky features. He could see it even more clearly when Tony was lying still.

Steve was considering how horrible it would be to outlive both Howard and Tony Stark when the Hulk roared and Tony jolted awake. His suit was a metal cocoon, but his face was visible as his eyes opened as wide as they went. He gaped like a fish, his facial muscles moving and stretching just to show that they still could. Then Tony set his eyes on Steve.

“Oh look, the princess is back. Sorry, did you have other plans today?”

Steve didn't even scowl at him. Mostly.
“We won,” Bucky informed him in a ‘get up and at em’ sort of way.

“Oh!” Tony’s eyes went wide again, the rest of his body still paralyzed in his suit. “That's great! And unsurprising, of course, I had complete faith, you know I was thinking that maybe we just shouldn’t come in tomorrow? I was thinking a day off would be nice. Have you ever had shawarma? There’s a shawarma joint about two blocks from here. I don't know what it is, but I wanna try it.”

Thor looked up to the tower, looking grim. “We’re not finished yet. Loki is in the tower, and then there is the matter of the tesseract.”

“SHIELD will want it back,” Natasha noted.

Steve glanced up from where he was still sitting on the ground, next to Tony. “Isn’t that what got us into this problem?”

“Shrimpy is right. All in favor of not giving it back to SHIELD--”

“Aye,” Thor said before Tony could finish. “I can take it and Loki back to Asgard. We will deal with him there.”

No one wanted to argue. So they stood and one by one Thor shook each of their hands again. “I am honored to have fought alongside you. You are all valiant warriors. Trust that, if you call, I will be there to answer.”

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They retrieved the Tesseract and Loki and Thor left, artifact and prisoner in tow. Once they were gone, the remaining Avengers stared at the spot where they had been, trying to process.

Bucky was the first to speak up. After the battle and exhaustion of the day, he managed two gruff syllables: “Shawarma?”

They fell into line, Natasha and Clint, Steve and Bucky, and Bruce and Tony. The Hulk had gone into Stark tower to get Loki with them, and had come out Bruce, dressed in fresh clothes. Tony left his battered suit in the tower as well, so both of them looked back to the way they had that morning, if not more ragged.

Was it really just that morning? Steve felt like it had been years ago that he walked on the helicarrier for the first time.

“You know,” Tony said from where he walked a few feet in front of Steve, “technically, we did act in complete opposition to SHIELD today. And, obviously, SHIELD is funded by the government, so, just wondering, does that make us terrorists? Are we technically on the run?”

“Oh no,” Bucky mocked quietly, “You’re considered a terrorist in one country, boo hoo.”

Apparently the others heard it, which made Steve grin and Bucky’s eyes go wide before he went back to assassin-face. It could also just be called plain-face or poker-face, but assassin-face summed it up better for Bucky.

After they’d been walking for a few minutes, Bucky nudged Steve. “Hey. I swear I'm not trying to mother you.”

“Good.”
“But your arm’s covered in blood.”

Steve had to use all of his self control not to look down. “Yeah, I know.”

“You know?”

“It does that sometimes. Its whatever.”

“You’re going to get an infection and die.”

“I thought you weren’t going to mother me?”

“He’s right,” Tony said without looking back. “If your arm gets infected you’ll have to amputate it. But hey, on the bright side then you two could have a matching set.”

“Tony,” Clint snapped. He and Natasha were both walking stiffer, like they'd turned from old friends into prison guards, marching Tony to his execution.

“What? Come on Clint, now you’ve ruined it. I was just joking; now I'm worried Captain America is going to shoot me in the back of the head.” Tony glanced back at him. “You don’t have a gun on you, do you?”

“No,” Steve deadpanned. “We’re both completely unarmed.”

“Pun! Ha, I like you Rogers.”

“That wasn’t supposed… ugh.” Steve buried his face in his hands, quickly pulling back when he realized his hands were absolutely disgusting.

When they got to the Shawarma place Steve made a point to find the sinks and wash his hands, and then made Bucky wash his hands too. Bucky rolled his eyes but didn't object. Steve also washed his arm, which looked notably less mauled without the dried blood on it. All that was left were long red lines like claw marks, already healing. His skin felt tight.

Good. No stitches.

When they left the bathroom Tony waved them over to a long table after successfully convincing-slash-bribing the owners of the restaurant to feed them. The restaurant itself looked worse for wear from the battle, but intact.

Steve sat next to Bucky (surprise) and immediately scooted their chairs as close together as possible so he could rest his head on Bucky’s right shoulder. The tough material of his combat suit wasn't a very comfortable pillow. Steve scowled at it to show it who was boss, then laid his head back down.

“The guns are still by the quinjet,” Bucky mumbled, so quietly only Steve could hear him. His lips barely moved. “I am going to be so upset if they're gone.”

“Ya gonna throw a temper tantrum?”

Bucky raised his eyebrows like the idea had definitely occurred to him. “I'm not not going to have a temper tantrum.”

An older woman hurried over to the table, setting out a few trays of unfamiliar food for them. Tony talked to her in another language that made Steve’s head hurt, and she pinched Tony’s cheeks.

Steve wondered if Howard had been a lady killer like Tony was. He definitely had charms, even
though the only times Steve had ever seen him he was too engrossed in science to so much as notice females in his vicinity. Steve considered asking Tony about his mother. He thought better.

Bucky picked up a plastic fork and started disassembling something that resembled a burrito. He pushed a basket in front of Steve.

“Eat.”

“Don’t wanna.”

“I give you twenty minutes before passing out from hunger. Twenty-five, since you're a stubborn bastard.”

Steve scowled as he picked at one of the wraps. “I'm going on a hunger strike to protest your tyranny.”

“Fine, pass out, I don’t give a damn. It just means I'll have to carry you like a baby back to the quinjet.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Then eat.”

Tony cleared his throat and Steve tried to expand his worldview past Bucky. It took… effort. “I would like to make a request. We just saved the world. I think we all could use a shower and a nice bed, and I have an abundance. Plus, I almost got nuked today so I think you guys owe me.”

It was another situation where no one had any reason to disagree with Tony, so they all did a mixture of nods, shrugs and grunts in dubious agreement.

Bruce’s eyes fluttered closed. Steve watched him fall asleep in his chair, surrounded by a bunch of killers. Bruce’s fearlessness was admirable, though Steve wasn’t sure if he would be afraid of much if he could turn into a super muscular rage monster.

They chewed in silence. Occasionally, Steve would finish a wrap and Bucky would silently push another red basket to him. It was even worse because Bucky wouldn’t look at him, so he didn't get to witness the glare Steve had personally cultivated just for him. Finally, as Bucky was reaching for the fourth basket, Clint spoke up and said “Barnes, I think Steve doesn't want any more.”

Clint was a mission-assist.

Back at the tower, Tony brought them up to a cozy looking guest floor and pointed them all towards individual rooms. “Nattie, you and Barton can take the second one on the left. There’s two queen beds in that one.”

Natasha did the pressed-lip Peggy smile at Tony and she and Clint retreated to their room. “Then Bucky, you can have the next room over, and Steve, the room across the hall--”

“We’re good sharing,” Steve interrupted.

“There’s enough rooms--”

“Thanks Tony,” Steve said dryly. He slung his arm around the back of Bucky’s neck and they walked to the room together.
The room had a plush queen sized bed with an obnoxious amount of throw pillows on it, a comfortable looking chair with a reading lamp, and a fully stocked bathroom and a closet. The closet had gray sweatpants in sizes extra small to extra large, along with t-shirts in a similar size range. Unfortunately, all of the t-shirts had the words ‘Tony Stark Fanclub’ written across them in obnoxious red ink.

“You can shower first,” Bucky decided. “I need… a minute.”

He sat down on the bed so heavily Steve guessed he needed more than a minute, but he didn’t question it.

Fifteen minutes later, he and Bucky were sitting together on top of the covers, both freshly showered and decked out in Stark merchandise. On the plus side, the fabric was much more comfortable to lean on than that of Bucky’s tough uniform.

Steve did a quick inventory: knives in the nightstand, one on the side of the bed, one in his pocket, guns in the closet, shield on the floor…

“You gonna sleep?” Bucky asked.

Steve grunted.

Chapter End Notes

As you may have noticed, I'm thinking of posting three times a week instead of two, in which case updates would continue every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday like it's been this week.

Please comment and let me know what you think!
When Steve woke up he found himself tucked under the covers, alone. The bathroom door was open, meaning that Bucky had already left.

Steve got out of bed quickly, ignoring the way his head swirled with the fast movement and walking through the dots clouding his vision. Outside, in the living area of the guest floor, Bucky stood as straight as a staff while Natasha looked up at him with pity. Her hand was outstretched, touching his flesh arm gingerly.

“He doesn’t like touch,” Steve commanded, marching towards them. Natasha retracted her hand and took a small step back, hunter eyes looking Bucky up and down. Steve put his hand on Bucky’s left shoulder, right up against his neck so he didn’t accidentally touch the metal. “Hey. I don’t know if you remember, but yesterday we killed a bunch of aliens. I was hoping to sleep more than four fucking hours.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows at the cuss word and Steve made a mental note to be better about that. In order to keep up his reputation as a non-threat, he had to keep his potty mouth in check.

Bucky didn’t respond so Steve squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. The gesture made his muscles relax a little, and he shifted from foot to foot. “You slept for 7 and a half hours. I thought you were dead.”

A shit-eating smile slowly crept up on Steve’s face. “Yeah? I didn't get your hopes up too much, did I?”

“I’m not sayin’ anything. But... you waking up was definitely the lowlight of my morning.”

Steve cackled, patting him on the shoulder. He made to leave, then noticed Bucky subtly letting his arms drift further away from his body, a simple gesture for something Bucky didn’t know how to say.

Steve stepped forwards and wrapped his arms around Bucky’s midsection, letting his chin fall so his forehead could rest against his back. Steve breathed in the scent of the stupid Stark tshirt, the scent of Bucky. “Mmm.”

“This just in, Steve Rogers gets off on sniffing shirts,” Bruce said, peering over his glasses at them from the kitchen, his hands on the counter. “Scandalous.”

“You wanna make something of it Banner?” Steve threatened into Bucky’s shirt.

“I wonder how many people you’ve threatened to fight in the last 24 hours,” Tony mused, “And how many you've actually faught.”

Steve was about to respond, but was cut off by Bucky talking instead, his voice humming through Steve’s body from the contact. “You think this is bad? Imagine living with him.”

Steve smothered his smile in Bucky’s shirt. He wanted to praise him on talking to the others, but kept quiet and listened.
Natasha’s curious tone: “You two live together?”

“Surprise, motherfuckers,” Bucky said and Steve was actually shaking with laughter because, oh God, that voice. “We’ve lived together since his mom died. With… a small break in between.”

Steve clawed his way up the back of Bucky’s shirt so he could lean his chin against his shoulder blade. “Hey, don’t be getting sappy on me Sergeant.”

Bucky had a slightly awful tendency to forget that death was a big deal. Steve figured it had something to do with his record of mass murder. Therefore, Steve tried not to get offended or upset when Bucky mentioned things like the death of his mother offhandedly.

“I'm not gettin’ sappy. If anything, you're probably crying all over my shirt now.”

“Naw, not crying.” Steve lowered his voice so that only Bucky, with his enhanced hearing could hear it. “That my friend, is a completely different type of liquid.”

Bucky shoved him off of him, both laughing. Bucky felt his shirt, confirming it was dry, and then shot Steve the look that he knew meant you sick fucker.

“Well that was fun,” Clint stated. “I don’t know exactly what I just watched, but--”

“That was the mating dance of the Rogers,” Stark waxed, “The least dangerous of all the small, flightless birds, but undeniably the strangest.”

“I'll fight you too,” Steve threatened, pointing a finger. “I'm adding you to my list, right after… Buck, who did I say I was going to fight?”

“Um, everyone?”

“Bucky, I will fight you too.”

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They didn't speak about what happened. At some point, the six of them found themselves spread out across the two couches and the floor in front of the TV, watching news footage from the attack.

Steve sat with his back against the armrest of one of the couches and his legs laying across the cushions. Bucky laid against him, head tilted towards the screen, left arm across his chest. Steve played with his hair absently. It was longer than Bucky ever would have let it grow in Brooklyn, but he decided he could give Bucky a break every once in a while.

Tony was spread out on the other couch with his feet in Bruce’s lap, and the two agents were on the floor, both haphazardly wrapped in blankets. Steve wondered how close by Clint kept his bow.

The TV gave no good news. Casualty counts were suspected to be high, but were still low at the moment. Teams had come in the night before to start cleanup, but civilians weren't allowed back into their homes yet. New York had a minor refugee crisis on their hands.

The camera cut away to an image of the building Steve had reduced to a pile of rubble. Banner
“I’m guessing that wasn’t Thor’s doing.”

Clint half turned and patted Bruce on the knee. “Don’t worry about it. Tony had detected hoards of Chitauri in that building-- hundreds, at least. Who knows? Destroying it may have turned the tide for us.”

That didn't seem to make Bruce feel proud of himself, but it did placate him.

Bucky caught Steve’s eye. Neither of them said anything.

The news channel moved on from talking about the wreckage to talking about the people who caused it. “An anonymous source has informed us that this wasn't the work of the military, but instead of a private group called the Avengers. Little more information was given, however security footage shows--"

“Shit,” Clint hissed.

Steve missed a few words as he focused on the image on the screen. It was of the others, circling around as to watch each others backs, weapons raised.

“Attached to the anonymous tip were names. From left to right we have Hawkeye, standing with his bow; Black Widow, shown here with a handgun; the Hulk, who was involved in a military base explosion three years back; Captain America, shown with his shield--"

In the video clip, the shield was on Bucky’s left arm, hiding it, which meant that so far, no one knew about the metal arm.

“--Thor, who was involved in the destruction of a city in New Mexico last year, and Iron Man, who has been a hot topic of debate ever since his first appearance in 2008. Already, an emergency meeting with the President of the United States is in session to decide how to react to these ‘Avengers’. More information, after the break.”

The show went to commercial and Tony raised the remote, muting it. Slowly, one by one, all eyes turned to Steve.

“Hey Rogers, would you mind watching my things tomorrow?” Tony snapped. “I had plans, but it looks like I'll be on trial that day.”

“You got out of it,” Clint noted, shaking his head. “Lucky bastard.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows at Clint. “You could've gotten out of it too, if you hadn't fought.”

“Watch it,” Bucky snapped simply, still laying against Steve’s chest. Steve hadn't stopped massaging his hair. “Stevie fought. He just fights quieter than you guys.”

“Quieter,” Tony repeated. “Hmm. Yeah, if I'd gone and cowered somewhere, I'd be pretty damn quiet too.”


“You're right, we won, and all it took was all of our ammo and me almost getting trapped in space --”

“Tony,” Bruce interrupted in a monotone. “Guys. We have bigger problems right now than
wondering if everybody did their fair share. There’s a city to clean up, apparently now there’s aliens, and we’re also in trouble with the President. Pointing fingers isn’t going to help anybody.”

“But will it necessary hurt anybody? Besides Steve, I mean.”

“Stark, do you wanna go?”

“I would, but I'm morally against beating up children.”

Bucky winced as Steve pulled a little too hard on his hair. It wasn't an accidental wince (Bucky could handle much worse pain without moving), but an intentional one. Steve moved his hands. “Bucky, get up. I need to show Stark just who--”

“Aren’t you supposed to be righteous?” Clint interrupted, frowning at Steve. “I read it in the comic. The serum also made you more righteous--”

“Serum?” Bruce questioned.

“Oh, haven't you heard?” Tony said obnoxiously. “My dad designed a serum to create the perfect super soldier, but he chose the wrong subject to test it on.”

Bucky sat up abruptly, reaching for his pocket. Steve’s body reacted before his mind did, throwing himself forwards and tackling Bucky off of the sofa right as he’d pulled a knife from his pants. They went rolling, both of them shouting and shoving at each other before Steve managed to stop them, on top of Bucky. “Bucky, NO. I can take care of myself!”

Bucky gritted his teeth, his fingers squeezing the handle of the open knife in his hand. “There was not a goddamn thing wrong with you, not a goddamn thing.”

“Okay, Buck. Hey Buck, it’s okay, it’s--”

Bucky gently shoved Steve off of him and pulled himself to his knees and then his feet. He sent Stark the mother of all glares and then turned, absently flicking the knife closed and shoving it in his pocket as he marched to their room.

Steve sent another glare Stark’s way before hurrying to follow after him. “Bucky, hey Buck--” he said once they were in the room, but Bucky cut him off.

“I’m getting out of here. Need to… need to…”

“Okay.”

Steve went to the bathroom and retrieved their clothes from the day before that he’d hand washed. They were still stained red in some spots but there wasn't any actual blood left over. Steve knew how much Bucky hated wearing clothes with dried blood on them.

Everything felt better wearing his gear. He doubted it was the same for Bucky, but at least he wasn't wearing a shirt with Stark’s name on it. Bucky left the jacket on the bed, instead just wearing the pants and a different Stark shirt inside out.

Once they were properly armed and ready to go, they exited the room and left through the front door. Steve stayed back, looking at the others who were watching them from the living room. “We’ll be back. Just need some air.” He sent Stark a look.

“Don’t get spotted,” Clint commented. “You have an advantage. Don’t get clumsy and lose it.”
Steve sent him a nod, then left.

His first instinct, once he was outside, was to find a library, which was stupid. Anyone worth killing would require a commute to get to, and all public transport in Manhattan had been closed down.

Instead they ended up walking side by side in silence. They kept an eye and an ear out for anyone who didn't make the evac, but found no one.

That didn't mean the city was uninhabited. As they walked they watched cats climb nimbly around the rubble, birds fly past and pick at slabs of crumbled concrete.

“It reminds me of Brooklyn, a little bit,” Steve said after they’d been walking for twenty minutes. “All the alleys. You remember them?”

“I remember you getting beat up in all of them. My knuckles never had a chance to fully heal before you’d go up and find another fight.”

“You didn't need to help,” Steve said with the startings of a smirk. “I always had them on the ropes.”

“Sure pal.”

Steve bumped into him too forcefully to be an accident, and Bucky responded by sticking his foot out for Steve to trip over.

“Hey, that was rude. Bumping you wasn’t going to hurt you at all, but getting my nose smashed in by concrete would actually hurt.”

“Good, maybe it’d smush it down a little bit.”

“Hey, I'll have you know that my nose is amazing, alright? A lot better than that honker of yours.”

They walked for a while longer before turning back to go to the tower. When they got there, Bucky sloppily saluted the others and then retreated to their room.

Steve went over to where Natasha was sitting, her body draped across an armchair. “Where’s Tony?”

“One floor down in his penthouse.”

Steve took the stairs and eyed the large living room as he walked inside. He was about to call out when he heard a noise in the kitchen and decided better.

Steve crept forwards, peeking into the open doorway. There, Tony stood with his arms wrapped around a tall blonde woman in a professional looking pantsuit. They kissed each other slowly, neither noticing Steve.

He quickly backtrack ed, leaving them to it. When he came back into the guest floor, Natasha looked up from her chair with a little too much interest.

“Thanks for that,” Steve grumbled. “How long has she been here?”

“Her name’s Pepper Potts,” Natasha orated, smiling with her eyes as opposed to her lips. “She flew in via helicopter about twenty minutes ago.”

“Hmm. I should have noticed that.”
“No one would expect you to. After all, you're not an agent.” Natasha tilted her chin up slightly, waiting for Steve to object.

Steve stared at her. “You know Nattie-- can I call you Nattie?”

“Oh absolutely not.”

“You know Nattie, I think you're really beautiful. Like, drop-dead gorgeous.”

“Do you really want to play this game?”

Steve smiled, clasping his hands in front of him and swaying side to side. “I think you're one of the most beautiful dames I've ever met. Let’s run away together, we’ll live on a farm, you can cook and clean for me and I'll provide for you. Whaddaya say, Nattie?”

Natasha stared at him. “I think I just threw up in my mouth a little. You win this one Rogers, but only because I'm not in the mood to get up and fight you.”

“Aww, but dollface--”

“Holy shit Steve,” Clint said, running over to Steve and grabbing him by the shoulders, pulling him back. “She’s going to kill you. I need you to jump out of the window, I'll call witness protection program. I am so sorry but we’re going to have to get you a new identity, you're new name is Fredrico Gonzalez--”

“We’re just playing, Clint.” Natasha said, sending her fake smile to Steve. “I'm sure Rogers knows better that to flirt with me.”

Steve extended his hand. “Call me Steve. Or ‘Honey’. Your choice.”

“That's it. I'm not getting in the middle of this.” Clint shoved Steve forwards like he was throwing him into the lion’s den and ran back, looking around until he spotted the refrigerator, and proceeded to leap on top of it with impressive grace. He turned around and watched from his crouched position.

Steve nodded slowly. “Is there any reason--”

“He likes perching.”

“Oh.”

The elevator dinged open and out stepped Tony, leading Pepper by the hand. “Hello fellow terrorists, I'd like you to meet someone. Terrorists, Pepper; Pepper, terrorists.”

Natasha was the first one up and over to the door, shaking Pepper’s hand. She looked absolutely delighted, which most likely meant Pepper was a threat. Natasha’s next victim, perhaps? Steve was sure there was a list, he just wasn’t sure where.

“Pepper, long time no see.”

“It feels like it's been ages! I love the haircut by the way, very sheek.”

Steve wondered what sort of Commie agency had taught Natasha how to smile like that. He wondered if she actually had poison dripping from her teeth, or if his mind’s perception of her being a snake was a bit dramatic.
Probably not.

“This is Clint...”

“Why hello Clint.”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Potts.”

“...Bruce…”

Bruce had come out of his room and shook Pepper’s hand firmly, pushing his glasses up his nose. “It’s a pleasure.”

Steve noticed as Bucky left their room silently, trekking over to stand by him.

“And that's Steve and Bucky.”

Steve realized then that he was also expected to have niceties on hand. This was an issue; the last time he’d introduced himself to a girl…

1941? 1940? Did Natasha count as a girl?

“I'm Steve,” Steve said unnecessarily once he’d come close enough to shake Pepper’s hand. She had a firm grip. “This is my… Bucky.”

“Bucky,” Bucky agreed, shaking her hand. He hesitated, shook her hand a little longer, then let go, shoving his hand in his pocket.

Tony gave them a look like God, you guys are a mess. Pepper didn't seem to mind. She smiled in a people-pleasing manner, that unlike Natasha’s grimace, seemed genuine. “It’s lovely to meet you. And I would like to be the first to thank all of you for your work yesterday, you should all be very proud. You are not terrorists; please ignore Tony.”

“Oh no,” Clint objected, “The terror thing was a group decision.”

“We’re planning on taking over all of New York next,” Bruce said dryly. “Then maybe conquer a few smaller states. Then some European nations, a few African and Asian countries, and then Australia. After that comes world domination.”

Pepper laughed. “I don’t doubt it for a minute. I saw you on the news, by the way. I admire your work, Mr.Banner.”

Steve noted that Bruce had been introduced only as Bruce, without the Banner part. Tony grinned as Bruce became flustered.

“Well, um, thank you, miss.”

Steve poked Bucky’s side and Bucky responded by leaning against him, muttering “There’s a lady present.”

“So we agree Romanoff is not a lady?”

“Agreed.”

Natasha gave them a look. She was too far away to hear their whisper conversation, but Steve figured she understood they were bad mouthing her. Steve smiled with his teeth.
“The only person I didn't see in the newscast was Steve, but maybe I just turned it off too soon,” Pepper was saying, making Steve snap his attention back to the main conversation.

“No, you didn't,” Tony said, a little too happily. “He didn’t fight.”

“Or maybe I just didn't get caught on camera.”

Natasha smiled. She was most definitely evil.

Tony mauled over his statement. “So you admit to fighting? You're just saying that, when you were fighting, not a single camera in the city caught you? Interesting story Rogers, but are you sure that's the one you want to stick with?”

Steve shook Pepper's hand again. “It was nice meeting you, Pepper. You have wonderful taste in men.”

“Don’t I know it.” Pepper’s tone was a mixture of sarcasm and genuineness, like she was teasingly going along with Steve's statement without fully insulting her boyfriend.

Steve added her to the list of possible threats. She was lower than Natasha, but on the same list.

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Steve and Bucky left as soon as they could. It seemed like the others were planning on sticking around until the trial, but Steve and Bucky had no intention to hang around for more sleepovers and group bonding.

They allowed themselves one full day to recover once they got back to their apartment. They showered, changed clothes, refueled, read, slept. The next day they geared up and continued with their mission.

In their absence, SHIELD had uncovered a secret lab that they believed to be involved in very illegal, very unpatriotic human experimentation. One six hour bus ride later, Steve and Bucky were in their gear, climbing up the side of the building.

“I'm so fucking ready for this,” Steve grumbled. “I swear to fucking God, I can’t stand being nice. Not cussing is so fucking annoying.”

“You know Tony?” Bucky said quietly, pulling himself up onto a thin ledge, following close behind Steve.

“Yeah?”

“I think I killed his parents.”


“Yeah.”

Steve grabbed onto the bottom of a railing, letting himself dangle by his arms. He slung a foot over and pulled himself up.
“That's the type of thing I shouldn't tell him, right?” Bucky asked. “Like, that'd be mean, right?”

“Probably. The… righteous thing to do would be not to lie. Or maybe… to look out for his feelings? I dunno. I think the serum they gave me was kinda loopy.”

Bucky snorted and leapt over the railing, landing silently next to Steve.

_Stupid long legs._

“So we agree that I should… either do something or not do something. Great. I'm glad we narrowed it down.”

Steve was about to comment when Bucky shushed him, pressing himself against the wall and sneaking a glance at the window. “Someone walked by. Let's go in.”

Steve drew two knives. “Finally. Today is a good day for Nazi-killing.”

“Fury said this was a non-lethal mission. We want to be sneaky.”

“I swear to fucking God, you two are trying to ruin all of my fun. You know what, tell Stark. The asswipe deserves it.” Steve ignored the way his stomach grumbled at his words.

“Behind me,” Bucky mumbled, slowly lifting the window open. No alarm sounded, not that they expected any. Most people stopped securing their windows after the first five or so floors.

Bucky smoothly crept in and Steve followed, sliding in behind him and landing in a roll. He stared at the Captain America shield on Bucky’s back and got another one of those feelings, like his own back was too light. He needed… he wanted…

Bucky gestured left and Steve followed him, watching Bucky’s six. An office door opened and a woman in a lab coat stepped out, looking at a clipboard. Before she had even looked up, there was a bullet in her shoulder and a knife in her knee-- neither that deadly on their own, but together her chances of survival decreased below 10%. Bucky mumbled a curse and put a bullet in the middle of her forehead. His gun had a silencer on it, making the kill eerily quiet.

“Goddamnit,” Steve mumbled. “We suck at nonlethal. Why isn’t Natasha doing this?”

“Natasha is very lethal,” Bucky commented, already creeping ahead. Steve wasn’t sure if he was in his soldier headspace or asset headspace, but it was definitely one of them. “But you’re right, she’d probably be better for this job than we are.”

They found a map and immediately took the stairwell down thirteen levels to the basement “authorized personnel only” zone, which either meant it was a lab or a janitor’s closet. Halfway down, a man in a lab coat saw them and reached for his walkie talkie, but Bucky hit him in the head with the butt of his gun and he crumpled. Steve dug a security pass from his pocket.

They used the pass to get into the lab, sneaking around the darkened room until they got near the center. The only light was a single spotlight than shone down on a large, metal chair.

“Stevie,” Bucky muttered, right as his eyes glazed over in fear and he yanked his gun up, firing behind Steve, the noise like firecrackers in his ears. Steve jumped back, spinning and releasing a knife in one motion. The knife found its target in the chest of an agent that surged towards them.

It was an ambush. A bullet shot across Steve’s thigh, making him grit his teeth hard to contain the scream.
“It’s no juse fighting,” a voice said over the intercom. Steve pressed his back to Bucky’s, unsurprised as the shield was shoved into his hands. Agents crept out of the shadows, surrounding them, and Steve held up his gun, ready to shoot but knowing it wouldn’t work. He and Bucky had taken out more agents in one go than the number currently surrounding them, but that was also when they had surprise and preparation to their advantage. This time, they had neither, but the enemy had both.

“Ve don’t intend to kill jou,” the voice continued over the intercom, heavily German and vaguely familiar, though Steve wasn't sure if he actually recognized it or not. At his back, Bucky became as tense as a wall of bricks. “However, I do have orders for Mister Captain America. Starting vith: Sputnik.”

There was a pause. Steve waited for something to happen, waited for the voice to continue and explain, or the soldiers to surge forwards, or something.

“Good. Now-- restrain him.”

There was a heavy hand on Steve’s arm and the only thing that kept him from panicking was that Steve knew that hand. “Bucky?”

“Jour Bucky is gone,” the man said, sounding pleased as Bucky took the shield from Steve’s arm and slung it onto Steve’s back holster. Bucky took the gun from him, keeping it for himself before grabbing Steve’s hands and holding his wrists behind his back in an iron grip.

“Jou are Steve Rogers, jes? I have heard of jou. Somehow I am… unimpressed. I'm sorry to inform jou, but jour friend is gone. In his place is ze Vinter Soldier, Asset of Hydra. Soldier, pat him down.”

The shock had Steve frozen in place as Bucky began to pat him down. “Bucky?”

Bucky’s expression was stone cold, and he didn't so much as blink at the name. Steve had to kick him, punch him in the balls and stick his finger in his ear, but they were surrounded by agents. As soon as Steve tried anything, they'd be on him.

Bucky ran his hands over Steve’s torso, then knelt to pat down his legs. His touches, for once, were uniform and without affection. Steve was simply another prisoner.

Bucky pulled out Steve’s other Glock, as well as five throwing knives. His hand patted over Steve’s thigh, where the last knife was hidden, and then retreated, leaving the knife where it was.

“The Winter Soldier rose to his feet, pulling Steve’s hands back behind his back and holding them tightly. He was an assassin, all darkness and leather, with six inches of height and over one hundred pounds of weight on Steve, who continued standing frozen in place.

The Winter Soldier’s right hand, the flesh one, gave Steve’s wrist a quick squeeze.

Bucky.

“Jes, I suppose ve should test him. Soldat, put jour gun to his head.”

Bucky did, without hesitation.

“Have him fire,” one of the soldiers said. “It’s the only way to be sure.”
“No, I believe Steve Rogers may be useful to us jet. Soldat, I want you to break his wrist.”

Steve watched Bucky’s eyes as he put the gun away temporarily. His eyes moved around more than the times he had become the Winter Soldier in Steve’s presence. Though his movements were sharp and precise, he still stood close to Steve, his knee pressing into Steve’s leg. It was Bucky, from the way he was breathing to the way his eyes absorbed details. Which meant that he was pretending to be the Winter Soldier, which meant--

Bucky grabbed onto Steve’s arm in the flesh hand and his hand in the metal one, and with only the shortest, briefest pause to give Steve warning, he snapped his wrist.

Steve screamed, stumbling back into the Soldier’s chest. His wrist, whatever bones or ligaments or whatever the hell made it up, had been snapped like twigs, and he cradled it in his other hand, no way to hold it without the entire thing screaming in pain.

“I believe there is jour proof, soldat. Now, Asset: take him to ze chair.”

There were chairs scattered around the whole giant room, but it was clear which one the voice was referring to. The voice, the voice, Steve knew it, he’d heard it before. The name clicked into place and his eyes widened as Bucky grabbed him by the back of the neck to drag him to the chair.

Why would Bucky grab him by the back of the neck? It would be smarter to grab him by the forearm.

The soldiers parted way for him to walk past, their guns beginning to lower as it became obvious their role had been, for the most part, completed.

As they got closer to the chair, Steve could see Bucky’s eyes flicker more. He shoved Steve down onto the metal device, which was positioned with the back to the soldiers, so Steve couldn't see them. He raised his gun once again.

And whipped around, firing at the soldiers.

Steve scrambled to kneel on the chair, peeking his head out to see the action. Bucky used the chair as cover and bullets bounced off of it uselessly. Steve shoved his good hand down Bucky’s pants and retrieved one of his guns that had been so gracefully stowed away there (thanks friend) and turned it on the soldiers.

The shootout lasted either two minutes or two hours, with Arnim Zola yelling in angry German through the intercoms and the soldiers dropping like flies, all from bullets to their necks or faces, like both Steve and Bucky were too shaken to aim properly. Steve held the gun with only his right hand and with every shot the gun recoiled backwards painfully.

Steve was still looking for targets when Bucky was grabbing him by the neck and yanking him to his feet, metal hand wrapping around the back of it as he shoved him forward. The shield protected Steve’s back as they ran, but it was the metal hand that the stray bullet pinged off of. Steve spun halfway around and released his one knife with so much force it implanted itself through the final soldier’s bulletproof vest.

“Come on,” Bucky urged impatiently, pushing Steve to go faster. They ducked through a corridor and Bucky lead them to an exit without second thought, not even having to consider a turn before making it. He kicked open the emergency exit and they sprinted up the stairs into the light of day.

They kept running, sprinting through alleys until Bucky slammed open the back door to some building and dragged Steve in.
“I am so so sorry,” Bucky was saying, and it was Bucky, 100% Bucky. “How does it feel? Can you move your wrist?”

“Not unless I wanna fuckin die,” Steve grumbled out as he slid to the ground, his back against a wall. He knew that wasn’t the case, but the broken wrist hurt more than it had a right to. He looked at it as Bucky held it, the touch making his wrist burn and throb. His hand was bent at an odd angle, red and beginning to swell, and his fingers were turning white.

“I’m going to set it,” Bucky announced, and Steve barely had time to shove the side of his hand in his mouth before Bucky snapped the bone back into place and he let out a muffled yell.

“Thanks! Fuck you!” Steve said as soon as Bucky let go.

Steve let himself collapse against the wall, muttering obscenities as Bucky dug through Steve’s pants pockets (because fuck privacy), looking for the ace bandage. At this rate, Steve should look for a place to buy those in bulk.

“Fuck you,” Steve muttered to the sweat making his skin sticky, the smear of blood on Bucky’s arm. “Fuck you. Some fuckin friend, snapping my fucking wrist. Where were your survival instincts? It’s a good thing my name isn’t America, otherwise you’d be fired.”

Bucky ventured back outside and returned with two sticks. He held them up against either side of Steve’s wrist and used them as a splint as he wrapped the bandage around it tighter. “I’m an asshole, aren’t I?”

“The biggest-- Ow!-- asshole around. You're-- fuck!-- such a dick, you know that? I'm replacing you-- sonuvabitch-- with Tony Stark. I bet he'd never break my fucking wrist.”

“I bet not. He’s too much of a pussy to break your wrist.”

Steve laughed, gruff and painfully, like he was either choking and chuckling. “I hate you, you asshole. Come here.”

Steve yanked Bucky into a sitting bear hug, his hand covering the back of Bucky’s neck, just like Bucky had done for him.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if anyone noticed, but this chapter is titled "Familiar Faces In Unfriendly Places" which I know isn't all that accurate because our lovely speaker friend did notice show his face, but come on, alliteration.

I loved this chapter :)
“I’m surprised to see you here,” Tony said, his expression hard to read.

Steve shrugged, not even trying for the fake smile. He was wearing his SHIELD uniform for the first time in a while, and the collar made his neck itch. He refused to scratch it. “There were cameras at SHIELD, and I was a significant part of stealing the quinjet. I got the court order two hours after Bucky did.”

Tony nodded casually, like he wasn’t surprised. He was dressed in a fitted suit, his beard trimmed, red tinged glasses on. Steve wanted to hate him, but every time he tried he remembered watching the iron man suit falling out of the sky.

“Don’t be worried,” Steve added, hyper aware of Bucky walking up and stopping a few yards behind him. “You did a good thing. They're not going to get you in trouble.”

Stark looked a little surprised, but he hid it well. “Can’t say what I expected from you, I guess I forgot that you’re as aggressive as a small kitten. Yeah, I’m not worried, going to court against the government loses its pa-zazz after a while. Oh, Captain America, nice to see you. Anyways, I’ll be off. See you in the courtroom.”

Steve lifted his hand in a wave, watching Tony as he walked away. “Wow,” Bucky said behind him, his tone holding more Brooklyn than normal. “You didn’t even try to bite his head off. Is this character development I see?”

Steve shoved him without any force behind it. “Nah, I had an edible on the way here. You know weed always makes me nicer.”

Bucky snorted and slung his arm around Steve’s shoulder, leading them to the courtroom.

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Surprise, surprise, no one was actually interested in locking up the heroes who saved New York from an alien invasion. They just wanted to understand exactly what happened and to find a way to control them, to feel a little less powerless. Of course, there were always other things, minor charges they tried to pin on the Avengers, but due to a mixture of Tony’s lawyers and Tony and Natasha’s sharp tongues, they didn’t pin a single charge on them. Steve imagined that if they stayed in court any longer, Tony could have argued them medals of honor.

They were on trial for a little under a week, and before they had even won, Tony announced there was going to be a party at Stark Tower and they all were coming, no exceptions. “Hey, bring your friends, girlfriends, boyfriends, whatever. I promise there will be enough booze for everyone.”

Steve and Bucky didn’t invite anyone, because who would they invite, Fury? However, once they arrived at the tower, it became clear that they were the only ones who hadn’t invited anyone.

When they arrived, Tony’s breath already smelled like liquor and he had his arm linked with his girlfriend Pepper, but he had enough good graces left to introduce them to his friend Rhodey. “Or Lieutenant Rhodes, War Machine, whatever.”
“Lieutenant Rhodes,” Steve said, immediately saluting, though not trying too hard. “Nice to meet you. I’m Captain Rogers and this is--”

“Captain America,” Tony interrupted. “He knows who you two are, I told him all about you two, the Tinman and Dorothy.”

“You're hilarious, Stark.”

“So they say. Okay, here’s the low down. It’s open bar, obviously, so get whatever you want. Mingle, talk to people, whatever, and after a while we’ll probably do some drinking games or something. I do have one request though, and that's not to get in any fights without giving people time to make bets, m’kay? That's just not cool. I'll see you around.” Tony patted Bucky’s shoulder as he and his entourage left, Pepper and Rhodey being a little more polite as they walked off.

Steve and Bucky tried to mingle, but frankly, it was boring and exhausting. Eventually they ended up sitting in a cluster of couches across from Natasha, Agent Hill, and Bruce.

“Hey squirt,” Natasha said by way of greeting. “And Captain, glad you could come. This is Maria Hill, Hill, this is--”

“I've met them before,” Hill said casually, giving Steve and Bucky little waves. She glanced at Bucky’s drink appraisingly, like she was considering taking it. “What kind of beer is that?”

“Whatever it is, it’s not strong enough. Do you think it’d be weird if I got a glass of tequila? Like, a beer glass, not a shot glass. It might work. Stevie?”

Steve shrugged. “It wouldn't taste very good.”

“I'm impressed. You've only been here, what, ten minutes, and you already want to get piss drunk?” Bruce commented blandly. “Actually, I think that's what Tony’s doing. Disregard.”

“Actually, Bucky and I don’t get drunk,” Steve said casually. “It’s our metabolism, what with the serums and all. Our circulation is just too darn fast.”

Bucky nodded seriously. “You guys should hear his heartbeat, it’s like a damn hummingbird.”

Clint took that moment to walk by, handing Natasha a drink the color of blood-- it probably was actually blood, knowing her-- with she took and sipped happily. “Hey guys, long time no see. By the way, I never got to ask about it but Steve, what happened to your wrist?”

Steve had changed out the makeshift wrap for a medical grade brace a day after the injury, and was still wearing it. He only had a few more days until he would take the brace off, and then another week or so until it was back to normal.

Steve looked at the brace, remembering the events that had laid up to it; being surrounded, the icy shock at the Winter Soldier’s apparent appearance, the realization of the trick, and then the Snap! He remembered after it, fighting with one hand limp and in pain, and then running away and Bucky’s face as he apologized and desperately tried to fix it.

“Oh, you know,” Steve said, trying to make himself blush or at least seem sweet and innocent. “It was an accident, clumsy old me. I tripped and landed wrong.”

Hill leaned over. “Is it broken?”

“Stevie’s really clumsy,” Bucky added helpfully, sipping his beer.
Steve watched Hill’s expression carefully. She knew about him and Bucky’s abilities, as well as Steve’s lie. Hell, she’d probably read the report they’d filed on the ambush. But, as she leaned back at picked up her own drink, she betrayed nothing.

The party continued on for a few hours until eventually, the only ones left were Hill and the Avengers, minus Bruce, who’d claimed he was tired and didn’t care, and stalked out. Steve supposed Thor was also an Avenger, technically, though he didn't count. Thor hadn't been there forshawarma or their post-aliens sleepover, or the trial, meaning he’d missed out on pivotal bonding moments. He didn't make an appearance at the party, and Steve doubted anyone else had even noticed.

It was about two in the morning when everyone pulled some of the couches together to make a close, semi-crowded circle. Bucky had stopped talking a few hours ago, and he sat on the floor and laid his head on Steve’s legs, letting Steve play with his hair. His eyes remained open and when Steve asked him a question he grunted, so Steve knew he was still mostly aware.

They shared their couch with Hill, who sat with her knees tucked up on the couch and her bare feet hidden in the cushions. Her hair was half down, for once, and she apparently owned other clothes besides just her SHIELD uniform, but her posture and confidence remained the same.

Tony had dramatically draped himself over the couch next to them. He went in between having fast arguments with people one on one to loudly disagreeing with the main group topic, throwing in sarcasm and quips whenever possible. Steve felt himself grow a little jealous; he wished he could be an asshole, but no, he was playing the non-lethal card so he had to be sweet.

On the next couch over Natasha leaned heavily on the armrest, nursing her blood-drink, and Clint perched on the opposite armrest, looking like he was either going to take flight or take a nap. Everyone was a little drunk, except they all held their liquor rather well, besides Tony. Steve was obviously stone cold sober, but tiredness made him loopy and softened his filter.

“Hey Natasha,” he said at one point. “Did you ever read that thing in the paper about Alice Paul? She reminds me of you, ‘cept you're probably more hostile. My mom framed that paper, you know, got it special and everything ‘cause she was living in Brooklyn by then. You should try to meet Alice Paul sometime, ya know? You’d get along.”

Bucky sighed, like he wanted to say something, but didn't. Instead, he leaned back further against Steve's legs, letting his eyes close for a few seconds.

“Alice Paul?” Natasha asked. “Who’s she?”

Hill looked personally offended. “She was the leader of the Silent Sentinels, the women who picketed outside the white house for women’s suffrage. How do you not know who she is?”

Natasha shrugged. “My education was a bit different from yours. It was also in Russia.”

Clint leaned forwards, balancing on the edge of the couch with ease. “Steve, how long ago was that newspaper?”

“It was a few years before I was born, I think, so like… jeez, that's like, almost thirty years. Wow.”

“Except you were frozen,” Hill reminded, her voice taking on a tone that wasn't normal for her—gentleness. “That was around 1920, and it's 2012 now.”

Tony whistled. “Wow, your math was off.”

Steve felt his features twitch. “Right. Yeah, sorry, I guess I just… yeah.”
All of the side conversations had died out, so everyone’s eyes were on him.

“What was that like?” Clint asked out of the blue. “Waking up after 60 years…”

_Well, I thought Bucky was dead and the war was over so I tried to strangle myself to death on the curtain cords_, Steve thought. “Well…” he said instead, “It was abrupt. But I think I handled it well.”

Bucky snorted. He creened against Steve’s legs like a cat that wanted to be pet. Steve obliged.

“What’d you do after that?”

_Hmm? You mean the murder?_ “I worked with SHIELD for awhile,” Steve said carefully, “and then I traveled around the country a little bit. I did lots of volunteering at soup kitchens, dog shelters, homes for at-risk youth…” Hill nudged him, and Steve brought it back a little, “I.T. stuff.”

Bucky looked up at Steve and met his eyes. “Then, after four years, I found Bucky.”

“What was the reunion like?” Natasha asked. She sounded sincere, which was a weird thing to relate to Natasha.

“It was… casual.” _I went to go kill a guy but it turned out that Bucky had already killed him, so instead I washed Nick Fury’s blood out of my clothes and we cuddled._ “It was definitely a bit emotionally loaded,” Steve said, finally throwing in some truth, “but we’d been separated four years, so we’d earned it.”

Bucky met his eyes again, the message coming across as clear as if Bucky’s said it aloud. “Well, I guess it was longer than four years.”

The natural flow of the conversation was to then ask Bucky about his time before finding Steve again, but it was pretty obvious he wasn’t going to be doing any story-telling that night. The others picked up on it easily and didn’t press it, and for that, Steve appreciated them.

Instead, Natasha and Clint started telling a story about one time when they were on a mission together and they were split up for half a week, and when Natasha finally found Clint again he was dressed in drag and speaking in a bad accent.

Based on the way Hill smirked, Steve had a feeling she knew the truth about that mission too.

Tony started getting antsy part way through the second story, probably because he wasn’t the subject of it. He started adding in suggestions to make the truth more interesting, and somehow instead of getting annoyed at him, Clint got excited. Soon he and Tony were pinging ideas off of each other of ways to add ‘pa-zazz’ to the story.

They ended up breaking into smaller conversations again, and Hill looked over Steve and Bucky assessingly. “Is he asleep?”

“Just relaxed.”

“You know, I had a Captain America poster hanging in my room as a kid. I never read the comic book, but there was a cartoon I watched every Saturday morning.”

Steve forced his expression to remain neutral instead of scowling. “What was the cartoon like?”

The question seemed to surprise Hill. “Funny. It was one of the ones really wrapped in lore, and
even though it took place in World War Two, there were monsters and mad scientists. One of the recurring villains was a guy named ‘Redhead’, and believe it or not, his entire head was bright red.”

Steve cringed. He checked to make sure no one else was listening in to them before saying “Please don’t remind me about Red Skull. I've repressed those months so far back not even the Winter Soldier can find them.”

Bucky snorted. He looked up at Steve with a look of what may have been adoration; Steve returned the sweet smile.

“He was real?” Hill clarified.

“T'm sure there are files on him somewhere; I submitted reports. But yeah, he was real. I fought him during the three months after Bucky… fell.”

“And then you plummeted into the ocean.”

“And then I plummeted into the ocean.” Steve wetted his lips. “What was I like in the cartoon?”

Hill smiled sadly. “You were a nerd. A wimp.”

“You know that stuff’s all made up, right? I swear to God, I'm going to set the record straight one of these days. I'll write a book. I'll make Bucky write a book. I refuse to go down in history as a nerd.”

Hill snorted. “There was this running gag about how you couldn’t pick up Cap’s shield. It’d drop somewhere and you’d run over and grunt and heave and then he’d pick it up like it was nothing.”

“Oh, that's harsh. And blatantly untrue.”

At the point Bucky was full on grinning. Steve tapped him with the back of his hand, like a slap without any power at all behind him. “Stop grinning, ya sadist. This is my legacy we’re talking about.”

“I doubt he cares,” Tony interrupted, and Steve realised the others had stopped their own conversations and were all tuned in to the Captain America talk. “After all, his legacy is the best of any of ours.”

“Oh yeah, if I left it up to him Bucky and I would be sitting in a farm somewhere raising pigs or something.”

“As opposed to what you're doing now?” Tony challenged. “Speaking of, what do you two do, actually? When you're not braiding each other’s hair, I mean.”

“They work at SHIELD,” Hill answered for Steve. “You know this Tony.”

“I'm just saying. In the Chitauri battle--”

“God, Tony, you're really hung up on this, aren’t you?” Natasha said, coming to their defense. “Get over it. We won, in case you haven't noticed.”

“Did we win? Really? Or was it all a fluke? We won for now, maybe, but those things are still out there. Fury saw it, he had a team prepared in case something like that ever happened; that's us. But what if we’re not enough? Because I can tell you right now that we aren’t.”
No one responded. They all knew that for all his arrogance and peculiarities, Tony Stark was about as far from stupid as you could get.

“Well, on that note, I think Buck and I are going to go to bed,” Steve said finally, being careful of Bucky’s head as he rose to his feet. “This has been a real fun shindig, Tone’, sorry we couldn't get all soused up and dish it out with you--"

Bucky wrapped his arm around Steve’s shoulders and lead him out, sending a tired wave to the others.

“--But maybe we could talk about aliens and the end of the world another time, over a cuppa something, arsenic or coffee, whichever, maybe both. But it was nice seeing the rest of you and shooting the breeze.”

“God, you're a mess,” Bucky whispered as he pulled Steve away. “Are you on something?”

“I am not high, Buck-!”

“Then sleep deprived. For fuck’s sake, it hasn't even been a full day yet. I'm fuckin glad you didn't fall of that train with me, you know? Because if they tried to make you into a Winter Soldier you’d be too much of a brat.”

They ducked into the stairwell and started going down, half heartedly trying to shove each other down them. “I fucking hate you, you know that right? You're a grade A jerk, Barnes.”

“And you're a punk Rogers, what else is new?”

The next two weeks, Steve and Bucky were almost obnoxiously domestic. There were no new leads on Hydra for them to follow, and while Arnim Zola was apparently still alive in some form, neither of them were in the mood to chase blindly after him.

Instead, they did spring cleaning and scrubbed their apartment from top to bottom, which seeing as the apartment was tiny, did not take too long.

One afternoon Bucky left with twenty dollars and came back with a stack of used books. He immediately sat down and took the first book from the stack and didn't stand up again until he finished it at eleven that night.

“Oh, so you're not dead,” Steve commented lowly as he felt Bucky climb into bed behind him. Bucky wiggled up next to him and Steve immediately rolled over to his other side, tiredly chastising Bucky about “getting fresh” with him. “Roll over, will ya?”

Bucky rolled over to his other side and Steve cuddled up to his back, spooning him. He stuck his feet in between Bucky’s calves like he’d always done before he got super-circulation, and draped one arm over Bucky’s waist, sighing into his back.

The next day Bucky waited long enough to have breakfast and talk to Steve a bit before getting comfortable on his chair and starting the next book. And so went the course: they ate together, exchanged affectionate insults, and then Bucky sat down to read a book and didn't get up again until he was done. Sometimes Steve would grab a book and sit across from him, but he could never sit still long enough to finish it in one go. Sometimes Bucky would look up at random, as if remembering
something important, and ask “What time is it?”

The answer was always somewhere around two or seven in the afternoon. Then Bucky would ask if Steve had eaten (no), and Bucky would tell him to eat. Steve got his revenge by waiting until Bucky finished his book and tried to climb in bed with him to order him to shower.

“But Steeeeeeevie,” Bucky’d drawl, “All I’ve done for the past three days is sit still in one spot. How would I have gotten dirty?”

They’d argue for a few minutes before Steve’s super-stubbornness caused Bucky to groan and drag himself to the shower.

While Bucky spent his days reading, Steve became more comfortable with the internet. After they’d signed on with SHIELD they’d been given a laptop to use, and he spent a few hours browsing each day. Steve found himself gravitating towards Reddit, where he made mental notes about the slang used and did his best to assimilate it into his vocabulary.

A few days into their unofficial vacation, Steve took the brace off of his wrist and started using it normally. It was good that they were taking a break from fighting since he needed at least another week before trying to throw a knife with that wrist again.

Another week later, a package arrived at their doorstep with a handwritten note reading: *From your best pals at Stark Industries, I pinkie promise it’s not a bomb!!! Xoxo.*

Even if it wasn't a bomb (doubtful), just the fact that it was from Tony Stark made Steve request they dispose of it, preferably over a bridge. Bucky prodded at the box for a while, making sure it didn’t actually detonate before deciding that they should at least open it.

“That’s what Bucky would have done in the 30’s,” he argued, speaking about himself in third person. “And he seemed pretty smart.”

“You're right, the 30s was your peak.”

Instead of arguing, Bucky grinned. “It was all downhill from there.”

Bucky pulled out a knife and opened the package, revealing another note and two smartphones. ‘They're the latest StarkPhones,’ the note read, in the same handwriting as the front of the box. ‘I monogrammed them myself, just for you two, and you may notice other features that were hand chosen to meet your needs. For example, Steve’s phone is set on child mode, though I am sorry I didn’t have time to make the phone smaller to fit into your tiny baby hands. And for Bucky, I have also included one XL touchscreen glove so that you can use your StarkPhone with ease.

*Inside the phones are the personal numbers of Bruce Banner, Natasha Romanoff, and Clint Barton, as well as my own personal phone number. These numbers are to be used only for emergencies or to send funny gifs to the groupchat. Enjoy!*

*Xoxo*

*Tony*

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Whenever he and Bucky left the apartment to go somewhere in public, Bucky wore a jacket and a glove to hide the arm. He’d also taken to wearing a baseball cap, which was also good because it kept his grubby hair out of the way.

Steve, on the other hand, didn’t really need a disguise, but it never hurt to have one on hand, which was why he acquired a pair of non-prescription glasses. He wore them home one day, and as soon as he came inside Bucky noticed.

“What are those?"

No ‘Hi, Steve, how are you, Steve?’ Just ‘What are those?’ Typical. “They're glasses.”

“The serum perfected your vision.”

“I thought your serum did too, and you still had to ask what these are. How many fingers am I holding up? Buck, how many Steves are in this room right now?”

Bucky shook his head, looking back to his book. “You look like… what's that word? You told it to me yesterday. You look like a hipster .”

Steve shrugged, setting down his other bags on the counter. “Yeah, well, I bet no one expects a hipster to pull a knife on them, do they?”

Along with the glasses, Steve bought a few more things to add to his wardrobe, including some short sleeve shirts, all in varying tones of gray, brown and black and one in a dark navy blue, as well as more casual clothes and a sweater. He wasn't planning on getting the sweater, but once he'd looked at it closely there was no way not to. The sweater in question was made out of ‘polycotton’, was just a little too big on Steve, and was a very nice shade of light pink.

Steve waited until the next day, once Bucky had gotten used to the glasses, to wear it. When Bucky saw the sweater Steve crossed his arms, daring Bucky to say anything. He didn't.

For a few hours. Then, when Steve was least expecting it: “God, how many flamingos did they have to kill to get that color?”

Finally after about a month of rest, they put on their uniforms again and went back to work. The went on a wild goose chase across the US, overseas to Germany, down to South Africa, and up a few countries to the impoverished country of Wakanda, who clearly were not hiding any sort of infrastructure, much less one with enough power to sustain a Hydra base. It was unclear what they were chasing— Zola was supposed to dead fifty years prior, but they agreed that it was his voice in the lab.

June and July were eaten up in the chase, and August in the resulting reports. They poured over files and cases, looking for information on Zola, but found none.

By the end of August, Steve’s methods of self medication were beginning to get out of hand. “You're reliant on them,” Bucky accused. “You couldn’t stop if you tried.”

“I could if I wanted to.”

“Oh yeah? Prove it.”

“And what do I get out of it?”
“I don't know, an extra few years to live?”

Steve jutted out his chin stubbornly. “If I go one week without any drugs, you have to cut your hair.”

“One month.”

“If I go one month without any drugs, I'll be cutting off your head, not your hair.”

Bucky smirked smugly. “And you say you're not reliant.”

Their conversation devolved into a wrestling match, in which they accidentally broke a lamp and Steve landed a punch Bucky was supposed to block, bruising his cheek.

“Two weeks clean and I cut your hair,” Steve relented after Bucky let himself be pinned.

“It’s a deal.”

Steve followed through, which was absolutely no surprise at all. He was stubborn before the serum, and he sure as hell was stubborn after; Bucky believed that the stubbornness was the sole reason Steve survived the ice.

At the end of the two weeks Steve appeared in Bucky’s peripheral snipping at the air with a pair of safety scissors. “To the bathroom!” he ordered simply, as if he hadn’t just spent the past two weeks sweating an addiction out of his system.

Bucky sat lopsided on the toilet and let Steve snip, snip, snip away his long locks. Whenever Steve cut off a particularly big chunk he’d hand it to Bucky, letting him pout with a sad smile. Every once in a while Steve would make a comment like “Oops, I didn't mean to do that” or “Well, you can always wear a hat” just to rile Bucky up, but besides that and the snip of the scissors, they were quiet.

After most of the length was gone, Steve produced an electric razor and knelt to clean up the edges. His skinny fingers pushed Bucky’s forehead back and Bucky’s eyes glazed over and he automatically opened his mouth for the bite guard.

Steve sat down on his ass, flicking the razor off and staring at his hands, waiting for Bucky to blink back to life. When he did, Steve asked quietly “Is it the sound of the razor or sitting down?”

“Both.” Bucky’s voice was scratchy and low, the voice of the soldier who hadn't spoken in weeks. “And… the pressure. Right… here.” He inhaled and exhaled deeply, then gave Steve permission to keep going.

“The others are really interested in my arm,” he said after Steve had started up again. He didn't have to explain that he meant the Avengers; Steve understood. “Tony wants to mess with it. Natasha and Clint… don't know about it, but they're curious. Natasha mentions it a lot. So does Bruce.”

Steve didn't say anything, just continued clipping his hair.

“You never even seemed to notice it,” Bucky continued. “You looked at the arm like it wasn't even there, like it doesn’t matter.”

He didn't ask a question, but he lifted up the end of the sentence in a way that suggested one.

“I never cared about you arm,” Steve said, still making careful, precise strokes with the clippers.
“Not before the metal arm, not after. I don’t like what they did to you. But I don’t care about the arm.”

He huffed and turned the clippers off. “Get up. The top is uneven.”

They traded spots so Steve was sitting on the toilet and Bucky was standing. Steve widened his knees and dragged Bucky to sit in between them. Steve manhandled his face, tilting it from side to side to cut the top to the right length, all while Bucky looked up to him with big, trusting eyes. Bucky wouldn’t even let most people shake his hand, and here he was, at Steve’s feet.

“You look good,” Steve decided. “Watch out ladies, Sergeant Barnes is on the prowl.”

Bucky mimed locking and loading a shotgun, and Steve laughing, mussing up his hair. “Captain America. I'm going to have to get you a pair of glasses. You'll be like Clark Kent.”

“I bet Clark Kent was never hosed down after a mission.”

“Hey, the comics can only tell so much of the story.”

Steve helped Bucky to his feet and then hugged him from behind as Bucky looked in the mirror, running his hands through his new hair to test it out. It wasn't as short as Bucky used to keep it in Brooklyn, but wasn't far off. “I did a good job, right?”

“It's perfect,” Bucky said, somehow without any sarcasm. “God, it’s like I'm twenty-three again.”

Steve grinned at their reflection in the mirror. “And to think, you're hardly 95 years old.”

“I'll be a centenarian before we know it.”

The new haircut gave Bucky a new set of confidence. The next day, he announced he was going to become good at being friendly. “I'll be Captain America for real. Or at least, be able to fake it really well.”

That meant that for the next week, Steve spent a lot of time sitting on park benches or leaning against street corners, watching Bucky practice chivalry. He’d been the biggest charmer in Brooklyn at one time, so he knew the moves, but it was as if he’d only seen another person do it and never tried it himself. Bucky stuttered his way through asking an old woman if she wanted help crossing the street, and she accepted out of pity more than need. Later in the day he tried holding doors open for people leaving the shops, smiling and pretending his hands weren't sweating and his heart wasn't racing. Once they'd left, Bucky would drop the smile and look at Steve in panic across the street, and Steve would give him the thumbs up.

“You're doing God’s work,” Steve said one night as they talked about it in a cleared out Hydra facility. To be more specific, it was a recently cleared out Hydra facility, and they had to step over bodies to get to the files. There was a lot of information, but never any on Zola.

The next night, Bucky tried his hand at charming some dames at a bar. It did not go well, and as much as Steve tried, he wasn't any help.

After that was a flop, Bucky announced that he was going to see if any girls needed to be walked home. “Go gettum tiger,” Steve said, pulling out a stick of gum and leaning against the street corner. He watched Bucky for a few minutes, making mental notes to tell him later. It appeared that the girls in the 21st century were not very interested in being escorted home. Steve shook his head as one pulled out pepper spray and threatened Bucky with it.
He didn't get to watch the rest of the interaction however, because at that point a slightly drunk man stumbled up at him and asked if he was a ‘twink for hire’, so Steve had to punch him and kick his ass as the guy stumbled away. Bucky jogged over at that point, looking a bit flustered but trying for a modest smile. “Hey. Who was that?”

“Dunno. He came over, asked me to deck him, and I thought it’d be rude to turn him down. Let’s head back now?”

Bucky kept trying for four more days without success. Then, on the fifth day, he woke Steve up by waving his phone in his face.

“Look at it Stevie, look! Flexible hours, anyone over the age of 12 open to apply.”

Steve opened his eyes, squinting at the screen. “Stop moving it ya jackass, I can’t see. Is it a job?”

“Volunteering position cleaning kennels and walking dogs. Sounds perfect, doesn’t it?”

Steve continued squinting at the screen. “Yeah, if you like dog shit. When does it open?”

“An hour ago.”

Steve sighed, flopping back down on the bed. “If you make me breakfast, we can be out the door in fifteen minutes.”

Twenty minutes later— it was a ten minute walk— they stood outside the dog shelter.

Steve made a face. “One of the guys I ‘investigated’ before finding you again had a guard dog. The guy was easy to get rid of, but the dog put up a real fight.”

“Did you kill it?”

Steve looked at Bucky like he was mad. “It ain’t right to kill a dog. Eventually I locked it in the closet, and I called someone to pick it up after I’d left. I'm not a monster.”

Inside the kennel, they were given a tour of the facilities by a smiley woman with frizzy hair. “Are you both wanting to volunteer?”

“Just me,” Bucky said, reaching over the desk to shake her hand. “James Buchanan.”

His hands were no doubt sweaty and gross, but she still seemed at least a little charmed. “I'm Nancy. We’re so happy to have you! Now, were you wanting to volunteer to clean, to do laundry—”

“To walk the dogs. Ma’am.” Bucky threw in the ‘ma’am’ haphazardly, then widened his eyes like he wasn't sure if he'd messed up or not. Nancy didn't seem to notice. She scribbled down some notes then got up to give them a tour of the facility.

“You're doing great,” Steve whispered, patting Bucky’s back. “You've knocked her socks off.”

They both knew that was more than just a little untrue, but Bucky took it. They followed Nancy around a corner and through a locked door into a large industrial room full of kennels. Every single kennel had a dog in it, some with more than one, and it seemed like they were all barking.

Bucky grabbed onto Steve's wrist, squeezing. Even Steve had to grit his teeth. The room smelled like cleaning supplies and piss, with the lingering scent of wet dog over everything else. Nancy was undeterred— proving once and for all that she was a badass— and lead them around, showing them the system for checking out dogs to walk and how the markings on the whiteboard worked.
They passed a room with a big dog behind the glass door that barked so loudly at them they froze. “That's Christopher,” Nancy explained, pointing to his clipboard on the door. “As you see, he’s a level 3, which means extra training is needed to take him on walks, and no one under 16 can take him out.”

As they neared the end of the tour, Bucky admitted sheepishly that he’d changed his mind about walking dogs. “Is there another thing I could do, maybe--”

“Of course! We always need help cleaning and washing the dogs blankets and toys.”

Bucky ended up signing up to do that. He was scheduled to come in every Monday morning for two hours, but he was allowed to come in any time the shelter was open to see if they needed help. He bashfully explained that his work schedule was extremely inconsistent, and Nancy gave him a number to text if he ever couldn't come in.

“Good job,” Steve said once they'd left. “You said so much to her.”

“Yeah, well, that shouldn’t be hard.”

Steve shrugged. “Maybe. Either way, you did good. Does this mean we can do good cop bad cop with our interrogations now that you're such a sweet talker?”

Bucky smiled, but his eyes seemed a little unfocused. “I thought dogs would be… safe. Better than volunteering with people.”

“It was loud,” Steve admitted. “Even I was kinda intimidated. Kinda.”

Bucky nodded at the joke, but didn't laugh. “I remembered, once we got into that room. Part of my training. To be the Asset. They locked me in a room and sicced dogs on me with nothing to defend myself. Made me kill them.”

Steve felt his heart drop, but he made himself remain passive, shaking his head. “It ain't right.”

“What kind of monster kills a dog?” Bucky recited from their conversation earlier that day. He looked disgusted.

Steve cringed inwards. “Don’t feel guilty for your survival instincts, they got you this far, didn't they? Just think, Buck. Your whole life has lead up to this moment, standin’ right here with me.”

“Hmm,” Bucky hummed, though some of the edge was gone. “So what you're saying is,God hates me?”

Steve cracked up, shoving him automatically. “Yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying. This right here is eternal damnation, you smooth fucker. Now come on, I'm craving some perky-c’s but I could stand to get a milkshake instead. Are you coming or what?”

Chapter End Notes

Note: perky-c is slang for percocet, a highly addictive pain relief drug.

Also, hi. I love the party scene in this chapter. And I love the corrupt Captain America propaganda that's spread around, and I love snappy Steve, and I am very proud of how
everyone is characterized in this chapter. Please let me know what you think!
The Avengers reconvened for the first time in nearly seven months at Stark Tower for a Christmas party. Steve and Bucky had been invited through text, and informed that it was ‘an informal get together with games, hot chocolate, and a special eggnog with a high enough alcohol content to get even a super soldier buzzed. Bring a Secret Santa present and come wearing an ugly Christmas Sweater.’

Bucky’s Secret Santa person was Bruce, and Steve’s was (blessedly) Natasha. They went shopping the day of the party to get ugly Christmas sweaters.

Steve found a light blue sweater that had three dimensional garlands strewn across it like a half hearted Christmas tree. “I’m thinking that my New Year’s Resolution will be to work on my Steve Rogers persona,” he explained as they walked to the tower. “Like your Captain America one. The persona will be categorized by a sweet and friendly demeanor and general non-lethality. What do you think?”

“It depends. What are you packing right now?”

“Six knives, no guns. It’s Christmas.”

Bucky snorted and shook his head. “Non-lethality. Well, I’m convinced.”

After much deliberation, Bucky had chosen out a sweater that had a classy joke about ‘snow-balls’ on it. As bad as it seemed, it was actually better than the alternative, which had a large drawing of mistletoe on it and the caption “kiss me under the mistletoe” with an arrow pointing south. They’d agreed that, while they were going to an ugly Christmas sweater party, they wanted to make the others laugh, not give them battle fatigue from looking at a sweater.

They agreed that that was definitely the right choice when the elevator doors opened to reveal that no one else was wearing a Christmas sweater, a lot less an ugly Christmas sweater.

“Aww, Steve, you look so cute!” Natasha said as soon as she saw him, striding over in her tasteful deep red dress and matching heels.

Steve immediately plastered on a smile (with teeth) and exclaimed “Natasha! Look at you! Tell me, does the red hide blood well?”

“Extremely,” she said automatically, also smiling obnoxiously. “And Captain, your sweater is so funny.” She batted her lashes at Bucky, casually putting a hand on his chest. “You know, short hair suits you.”

If it was still the 40s, Bucky would have given her a flash of his sly smile, maybe touch her back. It wasn’t the 40s, and though Bucky tried to play at casual Steve could see him gnawing on the inside of his cheek. “Thank you. I like… your dress.”

Steve wasn’t smiling anymore. “Alright, alright, you win this round. Go… impersonate a diplomat or whatever it is you do.”

Natasha looked far too pleased as she left, leaving Bucky to hurriedly smooth over his rumpled sweater.

Steve gave him a once over. “You okay?”
“You didn’t see her fight. She had these… electric things on her hands. I kept on waiting for her to zap me.”

Steve patted him on the back, leading them away from the elevator. “I’d be careful with her, she can probably smell fear.”

They wandered over to where Tony was standing, grinning at them. He was wearing trousers and an expensive looking black button up. “I see you got my text.”

“Nah, these are our new tac suits,” Steve replied dryly. “You like ‘em? You’d never know, but Bucky’s got a M249 Paratrooper down the back of his sweater.”

“Oh, I believe it. I’ve gotta say though, I'm disappointed you cut off your hair. I was really digging the ‘homeless Captain America’ vibe you had going on, honestly, what a statement. Oh, you still have your secret Santa gifts, well shit, I'll just take those--"

“Language,” Steve chided, looking Tony in the eyes, dead serious.

Tony the gifts and set them on the bar, squinting at him. “Did you just say language? I'm sorry grandma, I didn't mean to offend--"

“Grand pa ;” Steve corrected. “Actually, if anything I'd be your Great Grandpa. Buck and I did the math the other day, I'm ninety-two.”

“That's nothin’. I’m ninety-five, I'll be a hundred in 2017.”

“Wow, who invited these old men to my party? Pep’, was that you?”

Pepper Potts took her position at Tony’s side, claiming innocence. “It’s nice to see you, Captain. Steve.”

“I go by Barnes,” Bucky corrected, trying to smile. “Pepper, right?”

She beamed. “Good memory.”

_Ha!

“Hey Steve!” Natasha called out from across the room. Steve sent Bucky an apologetic glance before excusing himself and striding over, hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Yeah?”

“We’re playing pin the tail on the donkey, but with knives. Come on, join us!”

‘Us’ apparently being Natasha, Hill, and Clint, who grinned when he saw Steve’s sweater. “Nice,” he complimented, “If I had known we were dressing up I would've brought my antlers!”

“Here, take these,” Natasha said, cramming three knives into Steve’s hands. She pointed to the wall, a good ten feet away, where a crudely drawn donkey without a tail was hung up. “Just throw them, and see if you can hit where its tail would be. Easy.”

It was easy. If Steve wanted, he could probably throw all three knives at once and get them to stick, one on the head, one in the chest, and one on the ass. If he wanted, he could throw them one at a time and give the donkey three respective tails, or throw one carefully so that after it stuck, it slid and dangled like a real tail.
The only problem was that if Steve was just Bucky’s I.T. guy, he should not be able to do any of those things.

Hill was sat on the couch, sipping wine casually. At least someone knew what he was actually capable of, because Steve was about to humiliate himself.

He waited until the others were out of the way then yanked his arm forwards like he wanted to knife to fly straight without any rotations at all. It hit the board and clattered to the floor.

“Jesus,” Hill muttered.

Steve tried with the other two knives, purposefully not rotating his body, not snapping his arm, and designing each spin to have as little power as possible while still looking like he was trying.

“Harder,” Natasha suggested after the second throw. “Come on Steve, stick it right on that ass.”

Once he’d released the last knife (without following through) Natasha went “Oh, that was rough.”

Steve shrugged, getting ready to sit down. “Aw, shucks.”

“No no no, come here.” Clint gathered the knives from the floor and pulled Steve back over to where he was standing. “I’ll show you. It’s easy, it’s all in the posture--"

“Thanks Clint, but I’m fine--"

“You can do it, I promise. So for an over the shoulder hammer throw, you want to rotate your hips and step forwards, okay? Use your stomach.” He placed one hand on Steve’s stomach and Steve almost jumped out of his skin. “When you release, I want you to flick your wrist--"

“Flick your wrist for the release,” Hill repeated dryly. “Very important.”

Clint slid in behind Steve casually, adjusting his hips and his posture without thinking about it. “I’ll help you! Here, take one knife. That’s it, now pull it behind your shoulder… no, other way… here, I’ll help you.”

Steve’s face was most definitely bright red. Clint was pressed right against him, which Steve didn’t mind for it’s sexual nature as much as he minded the humiliation, along with, oh right, holy SHIT he’s touching me. Steve did not have an issue with touch like Bucky did, but after five years of his only touch coming from either Bucky or someone trying to kill him… Steve had become sensitive.

Jesus, the innuendoes just kept coming.

With one hand pressed to Steve’s stomach and the other helping Steve hold the knife, Clint didn’t have to speak above a mumble for Steve to hear.

Behind them, someone (Tony) wolf whistled.

“On my mark, you release,” Clint said, ignoring it. “One, two…”

With Clint’s help, Steve threw the knife. It hit right below the donkey and fell to the floor.

It was a horrible throw, but Clint still gripped his shoulders and congratulated him. “It can take years to master. You’ll get there.”

It took me less than a minute to ‘get there’. I was lethal with a knife before your parents were even conceived.
Instead of saying that, Steve just forced a smile and thanked Clint. When he turned around it became clear that everyone had been watching him. Steve made a beeline to Bucky and took the glass out of his hand, drinking it without asking.

“That was horrible,” Bucky said, always the supportive friend. “Also, eggnog is gross.”

Steve came up for air, wiping his mouth. “Oh, so that's what it is? I'm guessing this is the super-soldier grade alcohol Tony had promised us?” Steve started chugging again before Bucky could answer.

“Great job over there,” Hill complimented, crossing her arms as she walked over. “You know Steve, I think you have a gift.”

Fuck off. “You're too kind.” Steve went back to his eggnog.

“I'd be careful with that if I was you. Tony claimed that one glass of that stuff had the force of a horse tranquilizer.”

Steve raised his glass to her. “Here's hoping.”

Steve did manage to get drunk that night, but only light and tipsy, nothing more. The alcohol could be viewed in his posture, the way he held himself and the droop of his eyelids, but nothing else betrayed him.

Eventually Steve found himself sitting upside down on a couch with his knees over the backrest, listening in to a conversation about superhero names. Natasha’s superhero name was the ‘Black Widow’, which if anything confirmed his theories about her being poisonous. They had just been discussing what Agent Hill’s superhero name would be (either ‘The Agent’ or something vague and dramatic like ‘Oneshot’) when the conversation turned towards Steve.

“Wait, Steve, you weren't on the news thing after Manhattan, so they didn't say your superhero name,” Clint realized. “Do you have one?”

Steve may have been warm and tipsy (and lightheaded from hanging upside down), but he wasn't stupid enough to say ‘Yeah, I'm the Nomad.’ Instead, he shook his head.

“We need to give a name!”

“I'm Steve Rogers,” he drawled out. “The I.T. guy.”

“Is there some way to make I.T. sound intimidating?” Clint wondered genuinely. “Maybe something with computers.”

“I've got it!” Tony said, snapping his fingers. “Microchip!”

Steve groaned. The calculations ran through his head automatically: how fast he could pull out a knife and stab himself in the heart with it, how fast Bucky would notice and block it, whether there were any curtain cords nearby…

“Its perfect! Whaddo you think, Steve?”

“I think SHIELD should have left me in the ice.”

“Wow, a little dark, don't you think, short stack?” Natasha’s eyes glimmered evilly. “Microchip?”

You have no idea. “Bucky, it’s getting late, don’t you think?”
“Whaddaya mean, Stevie? I was thinking we should stay for a few more hours, it’s been so nice catching up with everyone.”

It had not been nice catching up, Bucky was having a horrible time; he just liked seeing Steve in pain, the sadist.

There was Christmas music playing over the speakers, and Steve was spared from further abuse when Jingle Bell Rock came on and Natasha jumped up, kicking off her heels and running over to grab Bruce. He clearly panicked as she dragged him to the wooden floor to dance.

Steve was beginning to get a headache, and he was pretty sure it wasn't just from being upside down.

“Did I ever dance?” Bucky asked in a way that suggested he thought he knew the answer but wasn't sure.

“Yeah, you danced. You Lindy’d like your feet were on fire.”

Bucky’s head twitched to the side. “The Lindy. The… Lindy Hop.”

“What’s that?”

Bucky’s face slowly lit up. “Come on Stevie, we've gotta show them!”

“But Buck, I was never any good--"

“Come on, off your ass.” Just like that Bucky was behind the couch, yanking Steve to his feet easily. Steve tried to blink the spots away from the blood rush.

“The Lindy is easy,” Bucky said, almost like he was trying to tell himself. “You just… rock forward, and you step step, and you… you walk…” he swung Steve around lightly, still trying to get his bearings.

“The music’s not fast enough,” Steve complained.

“We haven't had enough practice for fast music anyway. Come on Stevie, just try it, for me.”

Steve did try, but the Lindy Hop wasn't the type of thing you just knew how to do. Even Bucky, who'd practically been the town champ, was rusty after sixty-some years without practice. He wriggled his hips and stepped without rhythm, spinning Steve and kicking and stomping on his feet.

“Ops! Sorry bout that!”

“It's a good thing I'm not a dame, or I would've already ditched you,” Steve said, already breathing faster. Bucky grabbed both of his hands and swung them side to side, then let go of one and spun Steve around.

“You two are so graceful,” Tony said in a way that was probably supposed to be mocking. “Is that dancing or did someone put bugs down your collars?”

“Don’t be jealous, Stark,” Bucky said with so much ease it physically hurt. “I'm sure your girl would love to Lindy with you, why don’t ‘cha ask?”

“Oh, I am very fine, thank you,” Pepper said, probably bright red.

Bucky pulled Steve around to face him and they managed to kick one, two on either side of their
legs in a blissful moment of synchronized bliss. Then Bucky got excited and accidentally kicked Steve in the shin.

“Ow! If we keep this up any longer you're going to cripple me.”

Even Natasha and Bruce were laughing in their peripheral, though Steve knew this time was different from their laughter at his knife throwing. “Barnes, you're so suave,” Bruce commented in an affected tone.

“Mmm, Steve, lookin’ good!” Natasha catcalled. “I’d tap that!”

Everyone burst into a snort filled laughter, and even Steve and Bucky managed a few grins as they kept dancing.

Steve was beginning to get into a rhythm. He went back and forwards, moving his feet like a tap dancer and grabbing onto Bucky’s hands onto to release into a spin or a switch. At one point he even managed to spin Bucky, and they almost both went down in the process.

“Woah,” Bucky said before they could even regain their footing, “What makes you think you're the guy?”

“While I sure as heck ain't the dame!”

Bucky pulled him into his chest for a move like a waltz, but faster. “Heck?” he muttered, suppressing his laughter.

“What can I say, I'm non-lethal. I'm non-lethal as… frick.”

Bucky laughed again and pulled away, trying to spin Steve again, but Steve didn't let him. Instead he used Bucky’s pulling to make them switch places, and continued to dance like nothing had happened.

“You two are like two baby gazelles who've never walked before,” Tony called out.

“I'd watch it Tony. Buck here used to be the king of the Lindy. Once he gets his footing back, we’ll have to hold the girls back.”

“It’s true,” Hill confirmed. “Even Pepper’s going to ditch you for the real man in the room.”

“He’s not even a man, he’s a cyborg!”

“Still more of a man than he'll ever be,” Steve mumbled into Bucky’s ear. Bucky laughed, long and obnoxious and Bucky.

The song ended and they bowed dramatically, already sweaty. The others clapped exaggeratedly.

“Wait, don’t sit down,” Tony commanded, standing quickly. “Everyone, over to the fort. We still need to open the Secret Santa gifts.”

The fort turned out to be a little cluster of lush blankets and pillows on the floor in the corner of the room right next to a heater.

“I want you to know that this is not a fort,” Natasha insisted as she sat down.

“Yeah, if anything it's a nest.”
The nest metaphor really excited Clint. He made himself a stack of pillows-- a perch-- and somehow balanced sitting on top of them.

Steve and Bucky immediately wedged themselves into a corner, sitting against the wall and crossing their legs over each other.

Bruce, who apparently followed commands given out by Tony, passed out the gifts, and one by one they opened them. Steve had gotten a book for Natasha that Bucky had read and insisted it was good, but was still a brightly colored teen romance, just to be a little demeaning. He’d also gotten her two bright pink feather boas, both of which were immediately confiscated by Clint and Hill.

“What do you think?” Hill asked, mock posing. “Should I add some color to my wardrobe?”

Apparently Tony had never done a secret Santa before, because he’d put everyone in pairs instead of mixing them at random. That meant that Natasha was able to get revenge on Steve by getting him a pocket sized butter churn. It was nice to know that she was beginning to attack him on his age instead of just his appearance.

“Its for the days that you feel homesick for your childhood,” she explained, batting her eyelashes like she was just the sweetest thing. “You can churn yourself some butter and be reminded of home!”

Steve sent her a huge smile with teeth. “Thank you! I grew up in the depression so we actually never had butter or milk and it was also the 1930’s, so no one churned their own butter. But thank you!”

He had a few other comments he wanted to sneak in, but unfortunately they didn't necessarily match his whole sweet, innocent, non-lethal persona, so he kept them to himself.

Most of the other presents were actually genuine-seeming. Bucky had gotten Bruce a high quality glasses repair and cleaning kit, which Bruce stared at in awe as Bucky quietly explained (using as few words as possible) that it was because Bruce’s glasses always seemed to bother him and fall down his nose, so now he could fix that and clean the lenses while he was at it.

“That's… so thoughtful,” Bruce said. Suddenly he was Junior, sitting in the tent and getting sentimental about a bar of fancy chocolate.

Steve forced the thought out of his mind. The Howlies had been a special group. They grew up together in a time when showing emotion was looked down upon, but they all trusted each other enough to do it anyways. Things were different now; it was okay for men to get emotional, even over silly things like a glasses repair kit.

Bruce was flustered as he told Bucky to open his gift. “It’s not that thoughtful. It’s just a movie I like, you'll probably think it's lame.”

Bucky unwrapped the gift and a limited edition copy of *Pride and Predjudice (2005)* fell onto his lap.

Steve tightened his grip around his butter churner. Goddamnit. He’d have to go buy another gift.

Obviously, Bucky was ecstatic, because it was an amazing present that *Steve had thought of first!* He thanked Bruce and when Steve looked up, everyone was smiling.

The continued until everyone had exchanged presents, though in truth, Steve wasn't paying that much attention. He ended up leaning his head on Bucky’s shoulder, and then Bucky leaned his head on Steve's, and everything was good.
But that wasn't the end of the night.

After presents they all stood and started in the vague direction of the door, taking any excuse to stop and talk a little longer.

Attached to the ceiling by the bar was a piece of mistletoe, which Steve had spotted early in the evening and purposely avoided the rest of the night. Apparently however, no one had informed Pepper.

“Oh noooo,” Natasha said, sounding way too happy about this. “Pepper, you're under the mistletoe.”

Pepper looked up. “Oh drat, I guess you're right.”

“I think a friendly cheek kiss is in order?”

“Oh yes, definitely.”

Pepper and Natasha then proceeded to lean in and kiss full on the mouth, taking their time to separate, both grinning.

Tony was the first to speak up. “Um, excuse me, hi, that didn't look like a friendly cheek kiss.”


Steve spluttered.

They left soon after that, everyone saying their goodbyes and teasing each other like they'd been friends for years, not reluctant-allies-turned-comrades.

Steve and Bucky walked home together in the snow, hands in their pockets but arms brushing against each other. The image of Natasha and Pepper curling together in a kiss played over and over in Steve’s mind, with the same words captioning it each time: *Wait, that's okay?*

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It’s three in the morning, Christmas morning, and Steve is already half awake when Bucky’s hand wraps around his throat and starts squeezing.

The initial panic to waking up under direct attack made Steve lash out, trying to knock Bucky’s arm away, but it did nothing. He was too confused to manage a coordinated attack, and after a few moments his vision was getting spotty and his lungs were stretching out, searching for any air. Bucky was on top of him, straddling him, eyes cold and deadly and mussed up hair falling in his face.

Steve stopped fighting altogether. He reached up and rubbed at the tension in Bucky’s neck, gently massaging him with one hand and forcing his body to remain still as his vision went to black.

Steve sat up, gasping for air. He hadn't passed out, not really, there were just a few seconds where he'd come close.

A hand pressed to his back, helping him up, a warm body to the side of him and ever single nerve in
his body screamed safe even though it was that warm body that had just tried to choke him out.

“Steven Grant Rogers,” Bucky whispered to the wall, to the ceiling, into the darkness. “5-4-9-8-5-8-7-0. Steven Grant Rogers, 5-4-9-8-5-8-7-0.”

Steve still felt lightheaded, but he managed to grab onto Bucky’s shoulder and pull him into his chest. Bucky keeled over, tucking into himself until Steve was the big one. Steve held him as his lungs regained their breath and his eyes searching the room for any more threats.

When Steve eventually woke up again, Bucky was already up. “Merry Christmas. I made pancakes.”

Steve hummed, pulling himself to a sitting position. “Are these normal pancakes or ‘sorry for strangling you in the middle of the night’ pancakes?”

Bucky scowled so intensely Steve couldn't help laughing. He dragged himself to his feet and grabbed onto Bucky’s shirt collar, pulling him down to press a kiss to his forehead. “Merry Christmas.”

Bucky spent the rest of the morning being nice to Steve and pretending nothing was out of the norm, and Steve spent the rest of the morning enjoying the special treatment and trying to get on Bucky’s nerves. He was very effective.

At noon, Bucky announced he was going to go to the shelter. “But it’s Christmas,” Steve complained.

“Yeah, and dogs still need clean blankets and food dishes. I'll be back.”

Steve got his revenge later that night by making Bucky sit still so he could sketch him (in a new thick stock sketchbook, “oh Bucky, you shouldn't have”). After they finished that-- and Bucky bullied Steve into eating dinner-- Steve put in Pride and Prejudice and made Bucky cuddle with him as they watched it.

Bucky’s right hand traced over the back of Steve’s neck, making him want to squirm at the coolness, but Steve managed to reign it in. He pretended to be unaware as Bucky felt around his neck, checking for bruises. Any bruises that remained would fade by morning.

Steve actually twitched when Bucky’s metal hand touched his collarbone. He made a passing comment about the ballroom in the movie, as if he hadn't even noticed the touch, and Bucky flicked his ear with his flesh hand.

Bucky almost always avoided touching Steve with the metal hand. Steve knew that it had pressure sensors and fine motor control and who knows what else, but that Bucky avoided it for other reasons. Steve and Bucky were extremely close, and Steve knew his body like it was an extension of his own. But Bucky’s left arm was foreign.

Steve pretended to pay attention to the movie as Bucky’s hand trailed over his collarbones, his shoulder. The hand was warm but still felt like metal to the touch, like the flat blade of a knife trailing over skin. Bucky sat up a bit, and with a newfound burst of confidence, wrapped the metal hand around Steve’s neck, forcing Steve’s chin up. He squeezed, just enough to add a little bit of pressure, but not enough to cut off Steve’s air supply. Steve sucked in a quiet breath and tried to stay perfectly still. After a moment, Bucky’s fingers fell, trailing over his adam's apple while his thumb remained firmly in the crook of Steve’s jaw.

Steve couldn't help himself; he caught Bucky’s gaze, lips still parted slightly. It was a challenge
without meaning to be, a silent *what are you going to do next?* Bucky held his gaze for a count of three then dropped his hand, pulling it away. He shrunk into the couch, tucking his head against Steve’s shoulder like that show of dominance had met his quota for the week.

Steve exhaled and cuddled a little closer.
“We should start doing drills or something,” Tony said as they strode towards the quinjet, the others having already loaded up. “Emergency procedures, practice with group fighting styles, you know, stuff like that.”

It sounded like a horrible idea, but Steve didn't say that. “Do you know what it is we’re actually doing?”

Tony shrugged. Steve became vaguely aware of Bucky falling into step behind them, but didn't point him out. “I told you everything I know so far. Fury said there were a woman with some sort of creepy fire powers who SHIELD sent in a team to extract, and she blew them up. I hope your uniform’s fireproof.”

There was a definite possibility that it was. Steve’s uniform had been upgraded, and though it looked pretty much the same, it was made of a better, more durable fabric. It was supposedly bulletproof, meaning that if it was hit by a bullet, he’d probably get a welt or a bruise instead of having the bullet actually penetrate. Therefore, Steve shouldn't try to block bullets with his torso, but his chances of having to get out a new ace bandage were lowered.

Bucky had vied for Steve’s new uniform to have sleeves, but Steve had vetoed it. “Overrule his veto,” Bucky had told the agent, “Spousal rights.”

“Ignore him, we’re not married.”

“Shuddup, wifey. Yes, give him sleeves.”

“We’re not even dating. In fact, I’ve never seen this man before in my life.”

“Can you make the sleeves bulletproof too?”

“Security?”

Steve won out, obviously, since Bucky had absolutely no case to why his opinion should be relevant. Bucky was so pissy afterwards Steve was have worried he was going to actually drag him down to the courthouse to get hitched.

“Its legalized now. Did you know that? Only in a few states, but it's been legal in New York since 2011. We could go out and get married right now if we wanted to.”

Steve cocked his head to the side. “Right. If we wanted to.”

“If we were like that.”

“You mean, if we were queer.”
“Yeah, if we were queer. And you know, if we weren't wanted terrorists in multiple counties.”

“That does put a damper on the romance, doesn't it?”

“Then there’s the whole issue of me trying to kill you every other fucking Tuesday.”

“Aww Buck, don’t let yourself get down about that, it’s just part of your charm.”

So, long story short, Steve’s uniform did not have sleeves.

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“Steve, sweetie, would you like a snack?” Natasha said, holding up the bag of goldfish she’d been eating out of.

Steve smiled with teeth in response. “Yes, please, thank you Natasha.”

Natasha smiled and passed him the bag. Steve ate out of it for a minute while Natasha watched him, smiling pleasantly. She didn’t blink once.

“Natasha, would you like a snack?”

“Yes, please, thank you Steve. How generous.”

“I'm so uncomfortable,” Clint said from the front of the quinjet.

Bruce looked back at them, but they both ignored him. “What are they doing?”

“A mating ritual?” Tony suggested.

“I think they're trying to be… friendly,” Clint said, like the idea left a bad taste in his mouth.

“Hey, travel sized,” Bucky said lowly, tossing a water bottle at Steve. Steve caught it without even looking, then realizing what he'd done, proceeded to drop it.

“Smooth,” Natasha snarked.

“Gosh darn it, I can be such a klutz.”

Bucky cringed, the plates on his arm humming and shifting at the awkwardness.

Before too long they got to the building: an evacuated apartment complex on the outskirts of Vancouver. “Stark, are you picking up on any heat signatures?”

The mask snapped over Tony’s face and he was quiet for a moment (godbless) before announcing “Only one, somewhere near the middle of the building. Jarvis is telling me whatever it is is a lot hotter than a normal human.”

“Okay. Stark, you and Clint go and try talking to her, though Clint should probably hang back a bit. Natasha, you go with them but go an alternate route, you're their backup. Bruce, you guard the quinjet and be a lookout, I'm hoping you won't need to hulk out on this one. No offense.” Steve threw in the ‘no offense’ because it sounded like something Clint would say, and Clint was a specimen of friendliness. “Bucky and I will split up and do a perimeter check, but don’t hesitate to call for backup. We clear?”

“Someone’s trying to earn his paycheck,” Natasha said smugly.
Steve smiled at her. *You should try it sometime.* “Great. Everyone’s got comms? Let’s head out.”

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Steve half-expected Bucky to be upset that he wasn’t doing more, but he’d forgotten about Bucky’s training as the Winter Soldier. There was a reason the Winter Soldier was a ghost story; he was a one-shot type of soldier. He didn’t fire at random and hope that he hit, like most Hydra agents did. He only fired when he knew he was going to hit. And he always did.

That meant that by some miracle, Hydra had trained Bucky to be patient.

As they departed and Bucky raised his gun, Steve could see his gaze slide over— the Winter Soldier was taking control. Bucky once explained it like you were going underwater; all of a sudden, you were lighter and could move easier, and everything else was blocked out. His mission was a brightly colored shell or an abandoned shoe at the bottom of the water, and getting it was all that was important.

Even if you had to drown to get it.

Steve tried not to think about it too much as he headed in the other direction. He’d walked the perimeter of the building a full time and passed Bucky once before the others had even reached the floor with the woman on it.

“Approaching,” Tony said quietly in the comms. “According to Jarvis, her temperature has returned to baseline.”

Steve noticed a movement in the lobby of the building and quietly slipped in. Tony had said there was only the one heat signature.

The lobby was empty, though had a few small signs of disarray: a houseplant that had toppled over, a chair smeared red, a magazine in the middle of the floor. Steve wanted to walk over and look at it, but it felt too much like bait.

“We’re talking to her,” Tony said in the comms. “No issues so far.”

Steve took another step along the wall and was hit with a horrible smell. He made a face but forced himself to continue forwards. It smelled like… gunpowder and rotting fruit, or meat, something like that.

Something creaked, and Steve froze. Ever so slowly, he turned around.

The creature launched at him out of nowhere, it’s cold, clammy hands grabbing onto him right as a bullet was put through its forehead. It collapsed like it was being yanked down by gravity, and Steve had just enough time to stow his gun and grab two knives when another one grabbed him, sending him rolling backwards. It leapt onto him and lapped at his face with a sticky, dry tongue before the knife sunk into it’s skin, as if it were made of canvas instead of flesh.

“There’s been a new development in the lobby,” he said into the comms. He flicked it off as two more slithered from the shadows; humans, or human shaped, but dry and grayish. The two jumped him at once as more crawled from the shadows, aiming for his knees and putting raw force into trying to twist his body in unnatural directions. They had no weapons, no color and no breathes. Whenever they touched him they were always perfectly room temperature. Whenever he killed them
they dropped like stones, dying as soon as the blade entered their bodies.

“Update!” Tony said into the comms, sounding more panicked. “Diplomacy is a no go, she just melted a table!”

Steve didn’t have time to respond as more of the creatures launched themselves forwards. Two dropped, knives sticking out of their foreheads, and Steve pulled a gun, taking a full second to aim, shoot, follow through, and repeat, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven creatures dropping. He shot one in the stomach, and another in the leg, and the bullets did nothing.

One grabbed him and tried to break his elbow backwards. He tried to resist, then gave in, spinning into the hold and kneeing it hard in its canvas stomach. He slashed across its body and implanted a knife in another one at the same time. One creature slid onto his back and licked his forehead as it prepared to snap his neck, but before it could there was a knife in its forehead.

Steve stabbed, shot, and threw, alternating between weapons and focusing on clean hits. It was target practice, they were hydra agents, they were whatever they needed to be for him to focus. Kicking them did nothing; broken bones didn’t affect them; bullets or knives anywhere but the forehead and upper chest barely even made them react. But when he did hit them where they were weak, they died and were collapsing almost before he could pull his knife out.

They pulled at his weapons, gnawed on his skin, twisted and tried to snap his limbs off of him but Steve just kept going, turning and dancing through their ranks, focusing on the counting, one and two and three and four, four headshots, four creatures down. He had four knives left; three knives left; he dropped a gun when it locked back, drew another, two knives, fifteen rounds. A surge of a half dozen at once grounded him and hands slipped up his pants legs or grabbed around his shoulders and dragged him away from the doors. They kicked a door open and revealed a room of corpses in ripped up STRIKE uniforms, half dismembered and beginning to decompose. Steve’s breathing became faster as he slashed one hand off, kicked one in the face, got to his knees and fired onetwothreefivesixseveneightnine --

A warm hand grabbed him and threw him backwards against a wall, right next to a creature with his knife sticking out of it’s skin. He retrieved the knife and threw it again, then fired, hitting all of his moving targets square in the foreheads.

The Winter Soldier had appeared in the room, aiming and shooting with just as much practiced ease, undeterred by the creatures wriggling around him. He retrieved his shield and it embedded itself in the wall next to Steve, decapitating a creature in the process. Steve felt a bit like he was underwater himself, like the thumping of flesh on flesh was somewhere else. People yelled in the comms, but Steve wasn’t able to focus on who it was or what they were saying.

Steve launched the shield through the air, knocking down more of creatures. They tripped him, tried to rip his fingers backwards or dislocate his limbs but Steve slipped through them, slicing and stabbing with unprecedented grace. A twist to his wrist made his drop his knife and for a moment, Steve was disarmed. He watched as his skinny arms wrapped the creature in a headlock and snapped, but as soon as he’d let go it just righted itself and readjusted it’s neck.

There were hardly any creatures left. Steve was about to go help Bucky when he was tackled from behind and they both went rolling over the room temperature bodies on the floor. It tried to put pressure on Steve’s back but he managed to roll on top of it, his knife going into its chest and tearing downwards. The inside of its body smelled, and looked, like death.

Steve rose to his feet in time to see the Winter Soldier decapitate the final creature with his shield, and it dropped like a stone.
“Bucky,” he started, and then his ears dialed in again and he realized people were yelling on the comms.

“The Hulk is out, I repeat, the Hulk is out! Captain, Rogers, what are your positions?”

“We’re downstairs, in the lobby,” Steve called back. He stepped around the bodies on the floor—dozens of bodies, and the creatures looked more and more like humans they longer they lay—and retrieved his knives.

“Subject is contained, but she’s going to explode any second!” Natasha yelled. “We’re almost to the lobby!”

Steve frantically hid away his last knife and stuffed his gun in it’s holster. “Wait, don’t-!”

The stairwell doors slammed open and out came Natasha and Clint, both looking a bit charred around the edges. They both stumbled back in horror at the slaughter before them.

The Winter Soldier yanked his shield out of the wall, sliding it onto his back.

“What happened?” Clint asked, almost panicking.

“We came in and found them here,” Steve explained. “A few weren't dead yet and they attacked us. There were five, maybe, but the rest were all already here.”

“They're… bodies.” Natasha said in horror. Steve stared at her, trying to get a read. She wasn't supposed to feel horror, was she? She was supposed to be stone cold, to have complete control over her emotions. So was she faking it?

Steve hoped so, but it didn't look like it.

“Where’s the Hulk?” He asked instead. “We need to get out of here.”

The Hulk was gone but Bruce Banner stood outside, surrounded by more of the creatures, also dead. There were only a dozen or so, but it didn't look like the had been shot or stabbed. It looked like they'd been bludgeoned to death, and judging from the carnage, they hadn't dropped as easily as they had from bullets and knives.

Iron Man landed next to them. “What happened?”

“I-I don’t know,” Bruce admitted weakly. “The Other Guy did this.”

Right at that moment, about twenty floors above them, something exploded. The glass shattered and rained down and Steve crouched, waiting for it to hit him. The glass hit the street with a horrible shattering noise, but none hit Steve. When he looked up he realized the Winter Soldier was holding the shield over them.

Luckily, the explosion only took out the glass, not the supports, so the building didn't appear to be in danger of collapse. Either way, no one wanted to take their time getting airborne again.

Iron man dragged one of the creatures’ corpses into the quinjets holding bay and they took off, with a slightly weathered looking Clint at the wheel.

Bruce ended up curling up in the corner. Steve grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around him; the poor scientist looked utterly traumatized. Even Natasha, who was managing to keep her expression together, looked mildly panicked.
Bucky still hadn’t returned. In his place the Winter Soldier sat upright with assassin-face in full
effect. Steve gave him ten minutes, before getting tired of waiting.

“Hey, soldier. Sergeant Barnes, what is your serial number?” Bucky didn’t even blink. “I am your
Captain, you need to answer me. Dum-Dum, Jaques and Junior are in the mess hall, and I need you
to tell me your serial number. It’s Captain Rogers, Steven Grant Rogers. Sergeant Barnes, what is
your serial number?”

Bucky’s assassin-face turned into more of a upset scowl. “My serial number,” he repeated.

“I’ll give you a hint, it starts with a 3. 8 digits. Let's go, soldier.”

Bucky frowned in concentration, then slowly said “3… 2… 5… 2… 7, 03.”

“32557038,” Steve corrected. “Bucky?”

Bucky looked up at him, and finally his eyes settled so he looked like he actually saw him. “Steve?
What's--”

“We completed our mission. You got really into character. We’re headed back to the tower.”

“Did I--”

“No, you didn’t.”

“‘Completed our mission’ is a bit of a strong choice of words, don’t you think?” Tony asked,
crossing his arms. “If I remember right, this was a diplomatic mission.”

“You remember wrong. Our job was to handle a threat. The threat’s been handled.”

“Guys,” Clint interrupted. “A woman just exploded. The lobby was covered in bodies. We’re safe.
Now is not the time to argue or figure out the next step in the mission, now is the time to binge eat
granola bars and nap. There will be plenty of time for arguing later.”

Steve sighed and made himself look away. He wanted to fight, wanted to glare Tony into
submission, wanted to do something, but Clint was right. There was more than one reason why
Steve needed to back down. He ran the calculations in his head, did the math, and yeah, maybe a nap
was a good idea.

Steve looked at Bucky wearily. He was still looking a bit shell shocked. Bucky met Steve’s
questioning eyes and brought his left arm up to cross over his torso. He couldn't get much more
obvious than that.

Steve ended up retrieving another blanket and finding himself a corner to lay against.

When he woke up he found Bucky sitting next to him, still awake, not touching him, but there. It
reminded him of nights on the run, sleeping in alleys with Bucky awake beside him, gripping a knife
in the folds of his jacket.

They touched down and Tony halfheartedly directed them all back to the guest floor they’d stayed in
after the Battle of Manhattan. They all went to their respective rooms and closed their doors behind
them.

Chapter End Notes
For the record, when imagining the creatures I imagined something like the lizard mutants from Hunger Games 3.

Fun things about this chapter:
- "Shuddup wifey. Yes, give him sleeves."
- Steve and Bucky both disassociating
- "Update, diplomacy is a no go, she just melted a table!"
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Five hours later, they met for briefing.

“Just to confirm-- you did see her explode, right?” Nick Fury asked, hunched over the conference table. “Tell me one of you saw her explode so we will know for a fact that it was her, not a bomb.”

“She was the bomb,” Tony agreed. “Look, we didn't see her, but she melted a table with her hands. She implied pretty heavily that she was going to blow us to bits, and then she started glowing red. I repulsed her into an office and locked it behind her, and one minute later, she blew.”

Fury looked to the others who were there to confirm it. Clint and Natasha both nodded. They sat next to each other at the table, both holding almost the exact same slumped posture.

Bruce sat at the end of the table, playing with the edge of his jacket. He'd left the blanket behind in his room, but part of Steve wanted to get him another one. It was clear that turning into the Hulk was not a fun experience for him, and if his account of the events was true, it hadn't been his choice to turn.

Steve sat opposite of Natasha, more bored and tired than emotionally disturbed. He missed the days of emailing Fury written reports of cleaned out Hydra bases. That place you said wasn't a Hydra base was a Hydra base. There was a lab in the basement, and we were ambushed upon entrance. Bucky pretended to be the Winter Soldier to gain their trust, and then we both shot the place up. I also broke my wrist. Toodles!

Bucky leaned over the back of Steve’s seat, looking even more worse for wear than he had in awhile. He wore the same persona as he had on the day the Howling Commandos broke him out of Zola’s lab: battered, distressed, and quiet. The night of the rescue they celebrated, but the days following Bucky had a hard time getting back on his feet. Sure enough, Bucky had spent the past few hours silent and exactly one and a half steps behind Steve. Upon entering the board room he’d opted to stand instead of sit, and so far in the conversation he’d been silent.

“Agent Rogers,” Nick prompted, turning towards Steve, “You're saying that you didn't see the woman at all?”

“Correct.”

“You did a perimeter check and then went into the lobby?”

“Correct.”

“Where there were bodies of those creatures already dead on the floor.”


“You informed your team of this over the comms, and then Barnes joined you as a few rose up from the floor and attacked.”
“Correct.”

“And Barnes killed them.”

“Correct.”

Poor little Steve, doesn’t even know how to throw a knife or shoot a gun properly. Poor, poor, non threatening Steve.

Fury turned to Tony, who was sitting two seats away from Steve. “Tony, you ran the tests on the creature that the Hulk killed?”

“Yes,” Tony said, jumping in easily. “It was human. But, not when the Hulk got to it. I don’t understand quite yet, but it was undead in some way, like a zombie.”

“It died from being mangled, right?” Bruce asked, sounding like he needed a hug. “I saw it’s limbs, all gnarled and--"

“Surprisingly, no.” Tony shot Bruce a pitying glance. “It seems to me like the Hulk tried literally smashing them to death, but that didn't do anything. The limbs were mangled, but due to the lack of blood or a functioning nervous system, it didn't appear to affect it. But a sharp rock had been impaled into its chest; I think that's what killed it. They’re practically indestructible, except for weak spots in the forehead and chest.”

“That'd make sense,” Steve scratched the back of his neck. “They didn’t use any weapons or things like that when we they attacked us. They went for joints, trying to dislocate them. All of the dead agents were mangled. So they try and mangle their victims, while they themselves can’t be harmed like that.”

All eyes turned to him. “The dead agents?” Fury repeated.

“Oh. Uh, yeah. There was a pile of dismembered agents in a room nearby.” He paused. “I think they were the ones that killed most of the creatures,” he added helpfully.

Natasha was staring at him, her slightly puffy eyes flickering over his features. Shit, right.

Steve forced out a shaky breath, wringing his hands. He considered sniffling, but that seemed like a little much. “It was… really hard to see. Very… upsetting.”

He waited a count of three before glancing up to see if the others bought it. Fury was staring at him with a look on his face like you’ve got to be kidding me.

“Yes, I suppose that would be hard to see for someone as… sensitive as you, Rogers. We have therapists available on site, if you feel--”

“No, no,” Steve sniffled, waving away the offer. “I'll be fine. I just need… some time to recover, you know? Time to… be with my friends.” He tilted his head back, meeting Bucky’s darkened eyes. Bucky blinked at him.

“We’ll do whatever we can to help you,” Clint offered. “Just… let us know what you need.”

What the fuck?

The others nodded their agreement.

Fury looked like he was about to kill Steve.
“Our research team will search the databases for any information on the creatures,” he said.

“Have fun with that,” Tony interrupted, “there’s no data on them, or the Jericho-woman.”

“You only have level 4 clearance--”

“Right, because I totally only checked the level 4 databases.”

Steve couldn’t help but be impressed. Apparently, Steve wasn't the only one who Fury hated.

Fury straightened, rubbing his head. “Meeting dismissed. Once we have more information on whatever it is we’re dealing with, there will be a strategy meeting to determine our next moves. Don’t stray too far.”

They all filed out of the room, with Steve being the first one out, Bucky one and a half steps behind him. Bucky slid through the doorway without touching the door, and Steve had no doubts why the Winter Soldier was a ghost story. When Bucky wanted to disappear, he practically melted into the shadows. Even Steve with his enhanced Bucky-dar was having slight trouble keeping track of him.

Bruce brushed past Steve, patting him on the back in comradery. Steve had to focus to avoid leaning into his touch. “It’s going to get better,” Bruce said quietly. “Hang in there.”

Steve glanced at the others. Surely at least one of them noticed he was acting. But all of them were giving him pitying looks.

Steve swallowed sourly. *It was because he was small.* They had no trouble at all picturing him as a victim.

“What do you guys want for dinner?” Tony asked, filling the silence. “I was thinking Mexican, but I don’t know if I can handle spicy food right now. Maybe some Cuban? Flavor, without the spice? I could really go for some *Pollo Con Mojo* right about now. Or, if that doesn’t sound good, we could do something else, I'm not that picky, we could even get a few different types of food, you know, everyone could get their comfort foods, that’d be really cool, right? Hey Clint, what’s your comfort food?”

Clint hesitated. “Chocolate milk shakes.”

“American it is! Does that sound good to all of you? Captain America, what do you think, should we be extra patriotic--”

Steve turned around, purposely putting himself in between Bucky and Tony. “American sounds great,” he threatened. “Why don’t you order that for us?”

They had a short stare down before Tony kept talking, brushing past him. He walked past Bucky like he wasn't even there, which wasn't too far from the truth.

They got back to the guest quarters and Steve immediately barricaded him and Bucky in their room. They’d been too tired to really care when they got there earlier that day, but now they had enough energy to notice the changes. The bedspread, once plain and monotone was now bright blue with a large Captain America comic on it. All of the clothes in the closet were either Steve’s size or Bucky’s, no in between, and to their relief most of the shirts weren't memorabilia, Captain America or otherwise.

Steve laid down on the bed, his entire body stinging numbly. His back ached where Bruce had touched, not in pain, but in longing. His skin was too loose, his body too cold. Steve needed to be
However, that didn't look like it was much of an option, as Bucky had pressed himself in the corner of the room with his arms wrapped around his legs.

Steve laid there numbly until the disembodied voice in the ceiling announced food had arrived. _Jarvis_, Steve remembered. They’d been introduced before.

Bucky did not like Jarvis. Steve had a feeling that had to do with the whole disembodied voice coming from the ceiling thing, even though Jarvis’s accent was British, not German.

Either way, Steve dragged himself out of bed and Bucky followed, still one and a half steps behind him.

Tony had set up a spread of greasy American food from some fast food restaurant, complete with burgers, nuggets, fries, and chocolate milkshakes. Clint was already sitting on top of the fridge, sipping at one dutifully.

Steve loaded up his plate and sat himself on the floor in front of the TV, turning it on and absently flipping through the channels.

“If you go to the menu, you can open Netflix,” Tony offered. “Here, I’ll show you.”

As it turned out, Steve hated Netflix. He hated that it wasn't included in his employee benefits package from SHIELD.

“Does this look okay?”

Tony had selected a movie and was looking at Steve for permission. _God, how traumatized did they think he was?_

Steve retrieved his phone and did a quick Google search, checking a parenting website for the movie. It was PG-13 for mild sexual content and light swearing; good.

“Yeah, that's fine.”

All of the others ended up joining him on the floor, picking at their food and idly watching the movie. Bucky stayed in the kitchen, having a staring contest with a cheeseburger, and it crossed Steve’s mind how _wrong_ it was. Bucky was the one who reminded Steve to eat, and Steve was the one who reminded Bucky to be hygienic, yet here they were, with Steve eating and Bucky not and it was so wrong.

Steve stood and went over to Bucky, who was now holding the hamburger bun in his right hand, still not eating it. Steve grabbed a shake and all but shoved it into Bucky’s other hand. “Eat, goddamnit,” he muttered.

Bucky frowned down at the shake. Then the metal plates on his arm shuttered at once and the shake exploded.

Steve was so shocked that he staggered backwards, dropping into a fighting stance. He barely managed to keep himself from drawing a knife.

“Oh my God,” Clint was saying in the background, behind the buzzing of adrenaline in Steve’s ear. “The shake traveled so far! Nat, do you think I could do that?”
Bucky was still holding the plastic cup in his metal hand, now crumpled. He stared at it in horror.

“Hey, it’s okay, don’t worry about it,” Clint was saying, already grabbing paper towels and handing a stack of napkins to Bucky. “We’re all a bit shaky today. Do you want to go sit down? Steve and I can get the mess.”

Bucky’s hand seemed to twitch, releasing the cup, which splattered on Clint as soon as it hit the ground.

Clint, to his credit, pretended not to notice. Bucky was still frozen in place.

“Hey Buck, why don’t you go sit down?”

His eyes snapped up, focused on Steve, then drifted again. He dragged himself over to the dining room table and slumped into a seat, hiding his head in his hands.

Steve and Clint cleaned up the mess silently and efficiently. When they were done, Clint offered Steve a smile, and they returned to the living room to watch the movie.

As the movie continued, Steve was vaguely aware of Bucky slowly moving closer, changing spots every five minutes or so. Steve let him. His own skin still burned numbly.

Finally, at the climax of the movie Bucky appeared by the edge of the couch and held eye contact with Steve, who gestured to his lap subtly. Bucky exhaled in relief and went around the couch, climbing in between Steve’s legs and laying against his chest, just like they had done the night he’d been rescued. Steve sighed, the itch in his skin finally being scratched, and he wrapped his arms around Bucky’s chest, burying his nose in his hair. Under his hands, Steve could feel Bucky’s chest slowly deflate.

The others watched from the corners of their eyes. They were no Howling Commandos.

But maybe they’d do.

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Steve was extremely, horribly, miserably desperate for touch after violent missions. As soon as Bucky crawled back into his grip, Steve refused to let him go. He did for long enough to let him use the bathroom, but for once, he was tempted to go through on the threat he’d made when they’d found each other again two years prior and not let Bucky out of his sight at all.

“You’re not leaving?” Bucky had said when Steve made his intentions known.

“Hell no. I don’t even know if I want to let you go to the bathroom on your own.”

Bucky’d laughed silently. “You’ll be like a little Koala. Just clinging on to my leg. There will be no escape.”

“I just got you back and you already want to escape? Damn Buck, I’m sorry to smother you like that.”
The four years before finding Bucky again had been the loneliest of Steve’s life. He’d been completely isolated, only talking to people when he was reciting their death warrants and only touching people in violence. In a way, he and Bucky had gone through the same isolation, even though Bucky’s had been coupled with all sorts of other breeds of bad, and Steve had the opportunity to escape.

Really, it was no wonder they clung onto each other the way they did. That night they lay together in bed, facing each other with their limbs all wrapped together. Bucky’s left arm was wrapped around Steve’s back, pulling him closer, and Steve had to force himself to control his emotions. He either wanted to cry into Bucky’s chest or rut against his thigh that was so carefully positioned in between Steve’s legs. It wasn’t out of lust, but out of desperation.

Steve did neither of those things. Instead, he pushed his arm up the back of Bucky’s shirt, rubbing over the hyper-defined muscles and the column of his spine, just to have more skin on skin contact. Steve was careful to avoid the scar tissue and metal plates engulfing his left shoulder blade; Bucky may be resting his metal arm over Steve’s back, but it was covered in a sleeve, so it barely counted, and even then Bucky had chosen the contact. Steve made no decisions regarding Bucky’s metal arm; he had absolutely no right to even look at it.

Bucky tilted his head to press his nose against Steve’s forehead. He exhaled: “I'm sorry”.

Steve massaged his back, closing his eyes at the skin-on-skin. “Okay.”

“I'll be better tomorrow. I promise.”

Steve groaned against his skin, writhing under the sheets to get any closer to Bucky. Bucky’s grip tightened in a comfortable way, and Steve let his lips fall open.

“I don’t need you to ever be more than you are right now,” he murmured to his skin. “I just need you to be here, right here.”

Bucky made a noise almost like a moan. His right hand dug itself into Steve’s hair, planting itself firmly and holding Steve right where he wanted him. Skin-on-skin, bodies pressed together about as close as they could get with their clothes still on.

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Steve was awoken when he felt Bucky slide out of his grasp. He groaned, trying to grab onto Bucky’s shirt and pull him back, only to have his fingers carefully slid off. Steve forced himself not to reach out again; despite his and Bucky’s extreme closeness, there were still some things that were acceptable in the dark that weren’t in the light.

Bruce was the only one in the commons when they left their room. Steve had a brief conversation with him in which Bruce asked how he was holding up, like Steve was the one who’d needed a trauma blanket after the fact.

“I had nightmares,” Bruce admitted. “The other guy… well, he took over yesterday. I don’t know what I… what he did. But I saw the bodies.”

Bucky was listening intently as he prepped their breakfasts. “You didn’t hurt anyone,” he said gruffly. “You defended yourself. Those creatures weren’t human, no matter how much they looked it. Inside the lobby, Steve and I were doing the exact same thing.”

Bruce nodded slowly, and to his credit, he let a generous pause linger before asking the question. “Steve? I thought you’d said Bucky killed all of them.”
“He’s not completely incompetent,” Bucky said in his Brooklyn drawl. “Just mostly.”

Bruce was looking at Steve like he’d just found out something fascinated. Steve shrugged. “I got a lucky shot.”

“Directly at one of the weak spots?”

“I was aiming at him,” Steve said, nodding his head towards Bucky.

Bucky brought over two bowls of cereal silently, placing one in front of Steve. Steve frowned. “What’d I say?”

Bucky shook his head.

“And you call me the damn housewife. Come’on, don’t mope. It was a joke, like with the shield thing, remember? The dent on the shield, we told Howard ‘bout it, remember?”

“We told him the dent got there because you were distracted by my nose.”

“It was a pretty believable lie.”

Bucky shook his head. “Bruce, never listen to a word Steve says. He’s full of shit; ‘e’s been trolling people since before it was a word, righteousness my ass.”

They finished their breakfasts and continued making casual conversation with Bruce, then took their bowls to the sink and announced their leave. “We volunteer at the shelter every week,” Steve explained in a sugary sweet tone.

As soon as they closed the door, Bucky punched him on the arm. “You’re full of shit,” he accused. “What’re you going to do while I’m gone?”

Steve grinned and Bucky groaned.

“You’re a horrible person and I hope you get AIDS.”

“Aww. I hope you get bitten and get fuckin’ rabies.”

“Yeah, as if I don’t have enough fucking problems without foaming at the mouth.”

Steve leaned over him to press the elevator button, using it as an excuse to stand a little closer to him. They stood in silence until the elevator dinged.

“Jerk,” Steve muttered.

“Punk.”

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Steve was digging through the kitchen cabinets of his and Bucky’s real apartment when his phone buzzed. He waited until he’d finished his task before walking over, chewing on a stick of gum.

From: Tony Stark

Group training in 10
From: Steve

Buck and I are busy, do it without us

From: Tony Stark

What could be more important than spending time with your team?

Um, anything?

From: Steve

We’re volunteering

From: Tony Stark

Fine, thirty minutes

From: Steve

We can’t be back until noon

I'm sorry

I don’t mean to be an inconvenience

From: Tony Stark

Well you are one

...

It’s fine

We’ll train at noon

Steve grinned at the message. He had Stark wrapped firmly around his finger.

Either way, he still only had a few hours to work with so Steve decided to get started. Bucky wasn’t home, so Steve brought his drug kit out on their bed and hummed while he mixed and dabbed the disinfectant on his skin, still chewing the gum. His humming didn’t stop as he pierced the needle into his skin and pushed the contents into his bloodstream. He put away the kit, stopping only for a moment to sigh wistfully as the stinging in his skin subsided. He was subdued-- just how he liked it.

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The track mark on his arm faded almost as quickly as the morphine had. By the time he and Bucky were in the elevator on the way to the training floor, all that was left was a warm feeling in his chest and a small indent in his skin, easily mistakable.

Steve wore his old combat clothes, sin weapons (besides the two blades he kept on him at all times).
He adjusted the harness on his back, hoping silently that he'd get to use the shield.

Bucky was also wearing his old combat clothes, (mostly) sine weapons, with said shield slung over his back. He looked more at ease than he’d been earlier in the day, and while Steve didn't understand how doing laundry in a room full of barking dogs could be peaceful, he wasn't going to complain.

The elevator opened, revealing a small hallway with huge glass windows shining in to the biggest gym Steve had ever seen in his life. There were benches lined up by the window to see in, but instead Steve made a beeline for the door, pushing it open and inhaling the thick chill of air conditioning.

The training facility was separated into multiple parts, including a weights area, a line of stationary bikes and treadmills and other assorted torture devices/workout equipment, a climbing wall, a boxing ring, and an obstacle course. There was a door across the room that suggested that there may even be more.

All of the other Avengers were already standing by the obstacle course, stretching. “Nice of you to join us,” Tony called over. “We were considering kicking you off the team.”

“A shame,” Steve muttered, quietly enough that the others wouldn't hear. Louder, he asked “What are you wanting us to do Tony? Because I don’t know if I'm recovered enough--" "Just an obstacle course,” Tony insisted. “With some special challenges. But don’t worry, it will be no weapons, and you’ll just be fighting us. We’ll go easy on you.”

Natasha grinned in his peripheral.

Tony stopped stretching to pull out his phone, frowning and tapping at it for a few moments before looking up. “Change of plans. Fury’s calling us in; office building in Rockland, Maine is under attack by the creatures. Suit up.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit shorter than I would have liked (I usually aim for 5k per chapter) but as you may have guessed the next scene is longer and I felt like it needed it's own chapter.

Fun things about this chapter:
-Steve's report about the Zola incident: 'Oh, and also I broke my wrist, Toodles!'  
-"I hope you get rabies" "I hope you get AIDS" friendship <3  
-Oops drugs

Casual reminder that this story does have drug use/abuse in it, and as it is tagged and is a constant in this story, I will not be doing warnings at the beginning of chapters for it. However, I will be tagging chapters will significant violence or gore in them, and if there's something else you'd like me to tag, let me know and I can do it.

Please comment your thoughts. I post new chapters every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday!
Rockland, Maine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Back in the quinjet, Bucky passed a wrapped up set of throwing knives to Steve. “Hold these for me,” he said, as if he wasn't actually arming Steve. “And this.”

Steve turned to the side so Bucky could slide the shield into its holster. He tried not to grin. “Yeah yeah, I’ll be your weapons caddy. So glad I’m being used to my fullest potential.”

Stark fiddled with his armor, his expression dark. “Well, there’s no small children for you to fight or ants to step on, so yeah, that is your fullest potential. Oh, sorry, I was wrong. You’ll only be a good weapons caddy until you turn off your comm.”

Steve did his best not to glare at Tony. “Do you have a problem with me?”

Tony sighed, digging his fingers through his hair. “I just don’t know why you’re here. You don’t fight, and the past two times we’ve been in battles, you’ve disappeared and became unresponsive. So maybe this time, just do your best to read out the information Fury sent us and try not to get traumatized, kay?”

It was harsh, but when Steve looked around, Bucky was the only one who would meet his eye. Steve had honest to God convinced them he was an utter weakling.

Bucky’s eyes burned into him. “Don’t let this happen, Stevie,” he said quietly.

Steve shook his head. “Stark, give me the damn report.”

Steve ignored the insults and focused on the task at hand. He read out the information Fury had given him on the creatures--rag dolls, Fury called them. Aim for the brain or heart, don’t use brute force, don’t let them disembowel you. Simple.

“I’ll do air support,” Stark decided. “Bruce, do you wanna try that thing we talked about?”

“Not really. But I will.”

“Great. The Hulk will do ground support. Cap, Widow, and Hawkeye, go into the building and eliminate the rag dolls. Microchip, you’re on evac duty.”

Steve was supposed to snarl. He was supposed to be filled with anger and rage, supposed to need to be held back, supposed to reach for a knife or a gun or Stark’s throat. Instead, Steve leaned back on his heels, tilting his chin upwards. “You’re right. We should all go where are strengths can be put to good use.”

The quinjet landed with a thump, and before Steve knew it they were running towards the building. The creatures, rag dolls they were called, were gray and room temperature. They seemed to be harassing the civilians more than attacking them, though Steve could already see the marks of violence. Bodies had begun to pile up by the walls on the inside, and based on the carnage Steve could guess the fight was mostly contained to the inside until recently.
Clint and Natasha immediately ran towards the first stairwell, taking shots at the creatures as they run. Bucky lifted his gun, but before he could do anything Steve yanked it down. “Hey,” he said, making eye contact. “I need to stay with me. You can’t let the Asset take over again.”

It felt like a cruel order, asking Bucky to stay in the moment instead of letting someone else handle the violence and gore for him. Still, Bucky nodded, and when he hefted his gun it was with the flickering eyes of a sniper, not the focused gaze of an assassin.

Steve took the stairwell opposite from the one Clint and Natasha took, ripping apart the package of knives and stuffing them into the various compartments of his uniform as he ran. It was good that his team didn't know about the knives, and that the legend of the Nomad was surrounded in so much lore, otherwise they would undoubtedly recognize him. He was wearing the same clothes he’d always worn when he leapt from rooftop to rooftop and the weight of the shield on his back was a familiar comfort.

“I’ve got second floor,” Natasha said into the comm.

“I've got third.”

“I'll start at the top,” Steve mumbled before resolutely switching the comm off so they wouldn't be able to hear him. Tony said something about the Hulk being active, but already Steve’s brain was beginning to filter information into boxes depending on which ones were necessary for his immediate survival or not. A soldiers’ instinct, he realised. Just like Bucky could click off his emotions to focus on his mission, Steve could give his brain into subjectivity. After all, he was created to be the perfect soldier; he may not be a muscly freak like they'd intended, but he was still built to fight.

The office building was six floors total, and Steve ran up the stairs until they ran out, then shoved open the door to floor six, forcing himself to at least try to be quiet. The floor was empty.

“If you're hiding, now is the time to come out!” he called through cupped hands. It took a count of three for the first woman to stand up from behind her desk. He gestured her over, tapping on the comm. “Iron Man, are we planning on keeping the building intact?”

“I always plan on keeping buildings intact, but it doesn't always work out that way. But yes, at the moment.”

Steve ran over to one of the windows-- shatterproof. “Is there a fire escape?”

“It’s locked,” the woman said, despite looking more than just a little shaken. “This attack was planned. We were waiting for them to come and get us too.”

“We?”

She looked behind her and slowly, a few people came out of hiding.

“How’d you know?”

“I, I was downstairs. I got here, but--”

The door was pushed open and a creature launched itself forwards, dropping to the ground mid-arc from the knife embedded in it’s forehead. Steve turned back to her. “But what?”

Her eyes were wide as she stared at the body on the floor, her hands cupped over her mouth.

“Listen,” Steve snapped in his Captain voice. “Everyone, go into a storage locker, an office,
“They’re all locked,” one man said, gripping a picture frame tightly. “Someone asked us to report to our team meeting spots and once we did, all of the doors locked except the stairwells. We’re trapped!”

“Then barricade the doors,” Steve ordered. “And if a creature does get in, stab them in the heart with… this.” He yanked the knife out of the dead rag doll’s forehead, slamming it on the desk.

He ran back out the way he came, sprinting down the stairs. Another creature came running towards him and received a knife to the forehead. Steve yanked out the knife and kept running.

“It’s a coordinated attack,” he said into the comm, shoving the door to floor 5 open. “Someone chose this building very specifically to trap people inside.”

“Yeah, we noticed,” Tony snarked. “Haven’t you been listening?”

“I’ve been kinda busy!” Steve turned a corner and found two people being cornered by three creatures who seemed to be taking their sweet time, licking their lips and growling in a way that really wasn’t human. Each got a knife to the back of the head and fell, and the two workers screamed.

“What was that?” Tony demanded.

“People are scared,” Steve said simply. He quickly turned off his comm.

“Floor 2 is clear,” Natasha said quietly. “No civilians remaining.”

Steve grunted. That's not what you're supposed to clear, he wanted to say, but obviously the civilians weren't the ones to fall at Natasha’s hands.

“Follow me,” Steve ordered to the two people cowering. He started running again, not caring if they were following or not. “Check in!” He yelled into the comm. “Who’s still alive?”

“I'm still flying high, and Hulk’s doing his thing.”

“I'm here,” Natasha said. “Hawk, Cap, you still around?”

“Yep.”


“I'll never get over the fact that Captain America speaks fluent Russian. I can’t wait for people to find out and stop buying your merch because they think you're a commie.”

“Someone’s jealous,” Natasha muttered, without her usual teasing tone.

Tony huffed. “Ever since he reappeared his merch has been more popular than mine! You see how that's a problem.”

Clint’s voice interrupted their arguing just long enough to say “I'm headed to floor 4. Floor 3 is clear, with half a dozen people still alive and hidden.”

“I'm on my way to floor 4 too,” Natasha stated without tone.

There was the sound of a gun locking back, and Bucky muttering a quiet “shit” before his comm
“Well that wasn't ominous as fuck.”

Steve rounded a corner and found a bald man backed into the corner with three creatures snarling at him. Steve threw one knife, then used another to stab one in the back and whirl around, hitting the monster with the butt of his blade. It fell backwards and got up too fast, jumping him. The knife clattered out of his hand and it rolled him over, licking his right arm as it’s wiry fingers positioned themselves on either side of his elbow, preparing to snap.

Steve forced a roll to his right, crushing the creature under him. He brought his knee down on its stomach and it lurched, but didn't seem to be in any actual pain. Its hands let go of his arm as soon as the knife went into it’s chest.

Steve looked up, expecting to see the bald man pressed against the wall in fear. Instead, he was standing tall, smiling confidently, with a gun pointed to Steve’s head.

“My master vas vondering if jou vere vorth his time,” the man said and the German accent made Steve start, even though this man was very clearly *not* Arnim Zola. He gestured casually to the corner of the room, where a security camera was trained directly on them. “I see your team may be worth his time. Vhoever is left, I mean.”

Steve drifted his hand to his holster, reaching for a knife but the man clicked. “No, no. None of zat. Turn on your communication device, go on, I vant your friends to hear zis.”

Steve reached up, touched his ear mildly. His comm remained off.

“Tell Tony Stark that his past is coming to haunt him. Zeese creatures…” he kicked at the rag doll by his feet, face bunching up in disgust. “Zeese creatures, zey are nothing. Failed attempts at something much greater. I promise jou, zeese are ze last of zem.”

Steve’s heart was beating in his ear. Once the man had finished relaying his message, he would shoot Steve; that's why he wanted the comm on. Steve wasn't supposed to be around to relay the message back to the others.

That was also why he kept his comm off.

“My boss is... vell, a genius. Better zan Stark. He had found something very big, and when it is unleashed, the entire world vill feel it.”

Steve’s comm crackled to life, the panicked voice at the other end too familiar. “Steve, do you copy? I *repeat*, do you copy!?”

The bald man smiled widely. “But don’t worry-- jou won’t be around to see that.”

He lowered the gun, and the soldier instincts kicked in. Before the gun could go off the shield was yanked off his back and thrust at the man with all his strength. The gun was hit downwards and he shot into the floor. The shield ricocheted up to hit the man in the face and Steve snatched it from the air, slamming the edge against the man’s throat while kicking him backwards at the same time, the gun clattering to the ground. Steve kicked it to the other side of the room.

The man’s eyes seemed glossy and he reeked of sweat, yet he kept on smiling. “Jes, jou vill be formidable opponents. My master vill have fun bringing Stark to his knees.” The man's eyes glowed red and the shield began to glow with heat. Steve’s mouth dropped open in horror and his legs launched him backwards, rolling and ducking under the shield right as the entire room danced with
red and the man exploded into fire, the explosion flinging the shield one way and Steve’s body the other.

Chapter End Notes

Oops.

In case you missed it:
- Evil guy says "turn on your earpiece so they can hear my dramatic monologue that will be useful in them continuing their mission"
- Steve says no and doesn’t do it, full well knowing the man is planning on shooting and killing him, because
- Steve doesn’t want Bucky to hear him get shot over the comms

Again: Oops.
Firefighters checked for a pulse on all of the bodies, and if there was one they would assess the injuries and lift them up to remove them from the building.

Steve knew because one moment he was laying on the floor, praying for it to absorb him into the ground five floors below, and the next he was being lifted up. His skin stung like his entire side had been dipped in boiling acid and then given a freezer burn, and he hissed in pain as his white hot flesh was rubbed against rough fabric.

He squeezed his eyes closed and let himself be carried. Every time he thought the rough jolts of the stairs were ending, there was just another flight, until finally it leveled out. The pain made breathing more difficult and he heaved, bile and vomit rolling up his throat but not coming out.

The world became a little dizzy, and Steve squeezed his eyelids tighter.

When he opened them again, there was a mask over his mouth and nose, ensuring his breathing. His head lulled.

He was broken out of his fog of pain and dizziness again when the mask was removed. “I’m sorry, but there are people who need it more.”

Fuck them, Steve thought lazily, not fighting as they took the mask away and he was forced to breath in the harsh warm air of reality. They may need it more, but do they want it more? Reeeally?

Steve sat on the end of an ambulance, his feet dangling a few inches above the ground. At one point, someone handed him an open water bottle and he drank greedily, ignoring the fact that people were shit and he was probably about to get roofied. Boy, do I have bad news for them. They didn't need to waste their money on the drugs.

A few minutes later, a thick trauma blanket was placed around his shoulders. It was just as well, Steve was very, very traumatized. He’d thought Bucky was dead for four years, four years, holy shit. Also, he’d just been blown up.

The drogginess was just beginning to fade when Steve heard the crunching of gravel, the running of feet, and then he was being engulfed in a hug. “Goddamnit Stevie, goddamnit.”

The touch was very nice, except for where it wasn’t. “Watch your hands mister, I'm fuckin’ delicate,” Steve chided as he noted what a pretty pink the sky was.

Bucky pulled away, pushing aside the trauma blanket like he had a right to it.

“Hey, watch it shithead, I ain't your dame. You gotta say pretty please before gettin’ all handsy.”

Bucky looked over Steve’s arm and his side, checking the acid burns. Or, rather, normal fire burns, Steve supposed, but they definitely felt like acid. “Like hell you ain't,” Bucky muttered, eyes getting sharper with the objectivity that Sergeant Barnes and the Winter Soldier shared. “As soon as we get out of here, I'm gonna wifey you up, mark my words.”

Steve hummed, smiling a bit wider than he should've. Bucky finished checking Steve’s scars then
pulled him forwards again, wrapping around him like an octopus. Steve couldn't hug back, what with the blanket, but he closed his eyes and smiled, leaning his head against Bucky’s shoulder.

Before long, Steve’s wits returned to him and he managed to survey his smokey existence. In front of the building, bodies were being laid out on the tattered lawn, some moaning in pain with burn wounds or dislocated limbs, some still. Some of the bodies had a grayish tint, and Steve was reminded of the way the creatures looked more and more human the longer they’d been dead.

The Maine sky was indeed pinkish in that nice pre-sunset sort of blissful color. Bucky’s arms were still wrapped around him, engulfing Steve rather nicely, and for a few moments Steve didn’t mind that the serum hadn’t drastically affected his size.

Bucky’s shoulder smelled like firecrackers and kevlar and clean sheets, which made Steve equal parts happy and confused.

When Bucky pulled back, he tilted Steve’s head to the side and Steve let him. Bucky carefully pulled out the comm, red with blood. He tapped the comm in his own ear. “I found him. He’s fine.”

Steve scowled. “I most certainly am not.”

Bucky scratched under Steve’s ear like he was trying to subdue an irritated dog, which normally would have irritated Steve further, except it was really nice. Bucky listened to the comm and for once in Steve’s life he stayed obediently quiet.

“But he’s got some burns, some scrapes. Will do. I'll tell him.” He flicked off the comm. “Clint wanted me to let you know that they were worried.”

“How rude of them to lie like that. Are we supposed to help with cleanup?”

“Nah, Fury’s authorized us to go back to Stark Tower as soon as we found you. Assuming we found you.”

“Always the optimist.”

Steve stood with Bucky’s help. His right side was the one that was burned, so it worked well for Bucky to loop his right arm around Steve’s back and supporting him under his right armpit.

When Steve tried to wrap his arm around Bucky’s waist he realized Bucky had the shield over his back, which was horribly unfair because it was Steve’s turn. It also meant that Bucky had first found Steve’s shield and a bunch of ashes, but no Steve.

Together they hobbled onto the quinjet, and immediately all eyes turned to him. Steve gritted his teeth, getting ready for another parade of pity. Pretending to be weak was exhausting.

But instead of pity, when the others looked up and saw him he was met with smiles.

Fakers.

“Steve!” Bruce exclaimed, hurrying over and opening his arms like he wanted a hug. “We were really worried, I'm so glad you're okay.”

Bucky stuck out his left arm in front of Steve, chastising “He’s got some nasty burns, he can't hug,” as if he hadn't been trying to ingest Steve venus flytrap style not five minutes ago.
Bruce looked slightly embarrassed, but mostly relieved. Clint came over and said more of the same, though it sounded really genuine coming from him, as most things did. The ramp lifted up and Clint put them in the air, but they still didn't leave him alone. Even Tony fussled over him a little, not-frowning and making comments about flame resistant cloth and human sized hamster balls. Finally, they stopped and Steve carefully made his way over to Natasha, who was emulating an angsty teenager. She sat against the wall with her head tilted back, looking like she was about to complain about curfew or stupid rules. Her left arm was bent at a weird angle at the elbow.

“You're so pretty,” Steve said obnoxiously as he slid to sit next to her. “You're such a bombshell. I'd love to have a conversation with you, but I can't get over how beautiful--”

“Shut up, Rogers,” Natasha said, giving him a tired smile. “I can’t hear you anyways. You're just so… far down. Maybe if you yell?”

“Hey, I'm taller than you. I'm 5’6” and a half.”

“Congrats.”

Steve leaned over, looking at Natasha’s arm. “It looks like its dislocated. I could set it for you.”

Natasha looked absolutely exhausted, yet somehow she still managed to give Steve a semi-bored glare. “Yeah? And how do you know how to do that?”

“I was a Captain in the second world war. You learn some things.” Steve had never set a dislocated elbow in the war, but he had done it once when he was Nomad-ing on his own.

She gave him that lazy smile again. “Thanks. But HQ isn’t too far away, and we have medical on standby. Doctor Helen Cho, ever met her?” Steve shook his head. “You should introduce yourself. She might want to collect samples, though.”

“I'm sure once I meet her, I'll want nothing more than to share my DNA with her.”

The others burst into laughter at the innuendo and Steve made his cheeks go pink and hid his face in his hands, pretending like he hadn't intended it.

“Anyways,” Steve said quickly, as if trying to move on, “I got more information about what's been going on with the rag dolls. There's some sort of evil scientist behind it. He called out you in specific, Tony.” The others had gone quiet, absorbing the information. Steve shifted, moving so he could look at Tony easier. “Something about using the rag dolls to test if we were worth his time. The creatures are a botched attempt at something-- he promised we’d seen the last of them. He, um, also said stuff about your past coming to haunt you. And then he glowed red and exploded. Any of that sound familiar?”

Tony shook his head slowly, tired eyes wide. “That could be… anything. Old weapons contacts, arc reactor bullshit, my dad’s old business partners’ kid, a random girl I met in Versailles, fucking Afghanistan …”

“Language,” Steve chided, mostly just to fuck with him.

Tony fixed him with the mad-scientist-death stare. “Fricking Afghanistan.”

Steve nodded thoughtfully. The quinjet was cold, and it hurt his exposed side. He was in pain. Fun.

Tony dug his fingers through his hair. “Now at least we know the rag dolls and exploding people are related. And apparently, we don’t have to worry about the rag dolls anymore.”
“And apparently, Steve’s not useless.” Everyone turned to look at the soft-spoken man in the back of the quinjet, his arms crossed. “I don’t think we’ve been treating Steve fairly,” Bruce continued. “Look, Fury put Steve in the team for a reason. I think it’s about time we started trusting him.”

Guilty expressions all around. A few small nods.

Bruce waited. “Okay, fine, I'll start. Steve, I don’t know why Fury thought it was so important you’re on our team, but I don’t even understand why I'm on this team, so there’s that. But for whatever reason it is, I trust you.”

The quinjet was silent. Steve nodded slowly, muttering a muted thanks.

“For what it’s worth, I trust you too,” Clint said, glancing back from where he was steering the quinjet. “I think I've trusted you since we met at SHIELD for the first time. I'm glad you're a part of the team.”

They waited. Steve made eye contact slowly with Tony, and then Natasha. Natasha was poker faced, but Tony was nodding slowly, like he was at least considering it.

Steve thought back to what Clint had said, about how he trusted Steve without question, and his stomach rolled.

_Ah, righteousness, my old friend. I thought I'd lost you._

That night, the itch under Steve’s skin was a warm buzz, a ball of want which Bucky seemed plenty happy to roll out. Steve was injured; he was burned and Dr. Cho had done some sort of medical voodoo to make it better, but it was still bad. Therefore, Steve was allowed to be needy. He was allowed to tuck himself under Bucky’s arm as they walked, allowed to curl up against Bucky in bed and tuck his feet in between his calves, allowed to be quiet and warm and pliant. The persona Bucky chose to wear was newer to Steve, even though he had seen it before. After a while, he named it Captain America-- commanding, in charge, but comforting and eager to please.

They ate dinner in the space in between the kitchen and living room, sitting on stools and kitchen chairs and the back of the couch. Steve and Bucky sat on the stools, after having pushed them close enough together for their legs to brush against each other. Steve swung his legs lightly, bumping against Bucky’s, but he didn’t mind, despite keeping his legs stationary. Every once in a while Steve would look over and realize that Bucky was smiling at him. Steve had known for a long time that he had a specific smile that belonged to Bucky and Bucky alone, but he’d never realized that Bucky had one of those for him too.

Earlier in the day, in Dr. Cho’s labs Natasha’s elbow had been set and placed in a nondescript black cast. She would need to take a break from fighting for a while; unlike Steve, who could expect his burns to be barely noticeable within a weeks time, Natasha didn't have a healing factor. She’d have to wait it out like any other person.

At dinner, somehow they ended up playing a game of ‘who could make Steve blush the most’. All of Steve’s blushes and head ducks were fabricated, of course, but it was still fun. Tony was the best at it; he would take someone else's innuendo and somehow make it worse.

Bruce stayed mostly quiet during the game, occasionally adding a monotone quip of “Tony, if she was looking for ass she should have just looked up” or “yeah, and I'm sure that fixed everything. I'm pretty sure lube doesn’t help much after the fact.”
Clint and Natasha, as agents who sometimes had to presume false identities, had a variety of ridiculous stories that had less to do with sex and more to do with pretending to have sex. Apparently, once in Budapest they'd been undercover as lovers and, for whatever reason, Natasha was pretending to be a man. They’d been in pursuit by a sub-branch of the mafia, and had hidden in plain sight by pretending to jack each other off in an alleyway.

“What?” Natasha said when the others burst into laughter, even Bucky. “Public displays of affection tend to make people uncomfortable! It worked, didn’t it?”

Clint wiped at his eyes, his face bright red and his smile just about as wide as Steve had ever seen it. “I’m pretty sure at least half of the mafia saw my dick that night.”

“And to think,” Tony said in mock contempt, “they didn’t even buy you dinner first!”

Before long, Steve didn’t have to pretend to be shocked and flustered anymore; his fluster was genuine. He’d never been in an actual relationship before, and while he’d been in the army and heard a variety of both amusing and horrifying stories, that had been in the 1940s. Even his own back alley scandals were nothing in comparison to what the twenty first century had to offer. Apparently, things had gotten much more interesting.

But eventually, the others weren’t just content with telling their own stories, and they started pushing Steve for some of his own. “Come on, don’t tell us that a guy like you has never had some sort of experiences.”

Steve grinned.

Bucky swatted the back of his head. “Shut up.”

“I never even said anything?”

“I know what you were going to say, and you’d better keep your trap shut. There is a lady present.”

Bucky slapped his his hand over Steve’s mouth, muffling his immediate “Where?”

Eventually, the others jeering became too much and Steve had to tone it back down. He was after all, non threatening, non lethal, etc etc. “I’ve never been with someone before,” he ended up lying, forcing himself to keep a straight face. “I’ve never even kissed someone.”

Bucky flicked him and Steve elbowed him, and soon they were having a grinning, sitting shoving match while the others were obnoxious. Bruce was smiling to himself and being pitying; Tony was undoubtedly saying something rude and demeaning; and Clint and Natasha argued obnoxiously about who should get the honor of deflowering him.

Steve pinched Bucky and Bucky swatted at him so hard he almost fell out of his chair. “Hey, be gentle with me! I’m injured.”

That only brought on a new round of pinching and tickling that made Steve squawk and shove Bucky. “You’re horrible. Horrible! I’m-- hey!– I’m leaving you, I’m moving in with-- ouch!-- I’m gonna get a factory job and I’m taking our kids with me. James Buchanan Barnes, I swear to our Lord in heaven above, I will divorce-- hey!”

He swatted Bucky’s hand away and shoved him backwards, harder than he’d meant to. The stool tipped and Bucky fell backwards, crashing to the ground and rolling into the table.

Everyone stopped talking. Clint looked slightly worried.
Bucky slowly got to his feet, walking over to Steve. His smile was gone.

“T’m locking you in the attic until you learn how to be a good wife,” he said, still expressionless. Then he smacked the back of Steve’s head, just for the dramatic affect.

“Who knew Captain America was such a misogynist?” Bruce asked vaguely. “I thought he stood for American values and-- oh wait.”

Tony snickered. “Did you come up with the attic line on your own, or was that a quote or something?”

Steve swiveled his head, giving Tony a confused smile. “What do ya mean? That’s just a thing people say.”

Clint coughed. “Not anymore. At least, they better not.”

“Did people actually used to do that?”

Steve made a face. “Only the…”

“Dickwads,” Bucky supplied.

“Yes. Only them. I had these neighbors growing up who had fights like that all the time.”

“And the attic line was from my uncle,” Bucky supplied. “But people actually don’t do that anymore?”

“Maybe a few crazies, but no, not really.”

Bucky looked to Steve, who shook his head. “Times have really changed, huh? It’s nice to know some things have improved.”

“Wow,” Clint drawled. “That is the singlehanded most depressing yet hopeful thing I have ever heard.”

“Who knew?” Natasha agreed, nodding philosophically. “Steve has more depth than just being sweet.”

Bucky looked like he wanted to roll his eyes into the back of his head.

Steve put on his aww, shucks face in full force. “I just wanna make the world a better place.”

Right after I burn it to the ground.

Steve glanced over at Bucky who, based on his slightly traumatized expression, was thinking the same thing.

The others cooed and awwed, except for Tony, who smiled and rolled his eyes. Oh, Steve. You kidder.

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That night in bed Bucky slung his arm around Steve, pulling him a little closer to his chest. “You’re an ass,” he announced quietly.
Steve snorted. “You just figuring that out?”

“They think you're nice.,” Bucky continued, saying the word like it disgusted him. “They actually think you're a weakling. You've convinced them that you don't even know how to throw a knife.”

Steve burrowed a little closer, smiling sadly into Bucky’s shirt. “Yeah. I know.”

That night, for the first time in a long time, Steve had dreams. He dreamt of one of the big Hydra bases they’d dismantled, and then of some of the agents he’d removed from service; Brock Rumlow, standing in his kitchen, Jasper Sitwell, bleeding under Steve’s boot. Bucky leaned against the counter, his arms crossed. He didn't even blink when Steve finished Sitwell off with a bullet.

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“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,” Fury said in a dead tone.

Steve looked down. “It’s nice, isn’t it? I think the pink really brings out my burns.”

Steve was wearing his shield issued Avenging uniform, complete with the sleeveless bulletproof(ish) shirt, pocketed pants, and harness for his shield, all tailored to perfection. He looked good. He also looked like he maybe, possibly, could potentially be a little bit of a threat, which was why Steve had taken matters into his own hands and acquired a pair of nice pink combat boots, just to make sure no one took him too seriously. He’d initially wanted to get a pair of converse like he'd seen Tony wearing once, but when he tried them on in the store it was clear they would have absolutely no support, which was something he demanded from his fashion statements. Luckily, Bucky had found a pair of combat boots-- Steve had recruited Bucky to help him, of course, and Natasha had invited herself along-- that had just the support he needed. Natasha found them in the right size (“wow, I didn't know they made sizes this small”), and in the end, it worked out perfectly.

More than perfect, actually, because the boots had the added bonus of annoying Fury. “This is a serious interview,” he said. “It will determine whether you six sign new merchandise contracts or become vigilantes.”

Steve shrugged. “Being a vigilante isn’t all that bad. Look where it got me.”

Fury rubbed his face. If he had any hair, Steve imagined he’d pull it out in frustration. Maybe that’s exactly why he didn't have any hair. “You know, I'm getting really tired of this little act of yours, Agent. In order to work together, your team needs to trust you.”

“‘They do trust me,” Steve defended, leaning into the weight of one pink combat boot.

“Maybe. But the question is-- should they?”

Soon after that, some politician was making an announcement and the six of them filed on stage, with Tony leading their precession. He walked coolly, flashing a few peace signs and winking at random people in the audience.

The goal of this not-press conference was, as Fury stated, to get the public on the side of the Avengers. Everyone in the nation had woken up that morning with a picture of Iron Man and Hawkeye on the front page of their newspaper. In the picture they were rushing around, helping with
the aftermath of the battle, which was good because it showed them as helpful, but also bad, because it meant that now people associated dead bodies and general chaos with their team. Which wasn't wrong, per se, but it definitely wasn't ideal.

Steve sat at the end of the table, his new ‘kicks’ mostly hidden by the long black tablecloth. Bucky sat closer to the middle, with Clint in between them, which was done purposefully. Apparently, cuddling with Captain America on stage at their first press conference was not advisable, and after the aggression of the day prior, Steve needed a lot of affection.

The questions that were asked at the interview were all asked by ‘civilians’ who were prescreened. Fury had done everything he could to orchestrate the event in their favor.

The first person to ask a question was a short, round woman who wanted an explanation for the events of the day before. Tony took it, explaining the event without too much detail and focusing on their rescue efforts. The next person was a middle aged man, who asked Bucky directly if the information posted about Captain America being defrosted from a river in Russia was true.

Bucky, who sometimes couldn't even speak to Steve in more than monosyllables, leaned into his mic to address America. “Yes,” he said, and the crowd waited for him to continue. He didn't. Instead he leaned back, pretending to look relaxed.

When Fury had released the story about Captain America being defrosted from a river in Russia, Steve had wanted to laugh. The report was less than 100 words, tops, and somehow managed to be filled with almost as many lies as the damn comic book. It did not include any information pertaining to Hydra, and claimed that Captain America was given the metal arm by Howard Stark back in the war. Steve had actually felt sick reading it.

The next question was directed at Steve. The man holding the microphone scowled at him. “Who the fuck are you?”

_Nice screening process, Fury_ Steve thought to himself. He pretended to be embarrassed. _God, this is getting old._ “I'm Steve Rogers. I do research for the team.” He paused, knowing he shouldn't say it, but he just couldn't help himself. “I'm just really happy to be here.”

That night, Steve sat against the headboard of his bed, chewing gum and grinning as he scrolled through the _Avengers_ tag on Tumblr, which was trending in the number one spot, and rightfully so. He saw more than one gif of him. The “I'm just happy to be here” was one of the more popular ones, always captioned with same . There was another zoomed in photoset of Steve’s pink shoes as he walked away from the conference.

In the end, the event was deemed a success, and Fury sarcastically asked Steve if he wanted his ‘Steve Rogers Plushies’ to have pink shoes. Steve didn't even have to think about it before saying yes.

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“Fuck,” Steve muttered, rubbing his side. It had been a few days since the fight so the burn had begun to heal over with fresh skin, but it still hurt when he pushed himself too much.

Hill retrieved a few knives, giving him a weary look. “It's weird being with you without the others around. Sometimes I forget that you're not actually a cinnamon roll.”

“Thanks.”

“It wasn't really a compliment.”
“Yeah, but it means it’s working.” Steve wiped his forehead, letting his posture relax. “I’ve tricked the mightiest heros in the world into thinking I’m not a threat. Not bad for one year, huh?”

“Jesus, it’s been a year already? Manhattan was last May, wasn’t it?”

Steve nodded. He picked up a knife, flipping it casually. “Yep. A full year of being nice, and not cussing, and pretending I don’t know how to fight.” He threw the knife for emphasis, and it embedded itself directly in the middle of the target. “It’s exhausting.”

“And why exactly are you keeping it a secret? Besides the Barnes excuse.”

Steve eyed her wearily. “You doubt me?”

“We’re literally having a conversation about how you’re lying to people who trust you. Shouldn’t I?”

Steve licked his lips, picking up another knife and flipping it around one finger. “What’s Black Widow’s kill count? Hulk’s, even?”

Hill leaned on one leg, crossing her arms. “You feel guilty,” she guessed.

“Hardly. But you think they’d believe me if I told them the blood I have to my name?”

It was rhetorical, but Hill answered anyway. “They’d believe you once they saw you fight.”

Steve launched the knife, twisting his whole body to throw it sideways from his chest. It thudded against the board, embedding itself halfway into the wall. “Maybe. Still easier to let them believe I can’t fight than trying to prove that I can.”

Hill was about to respond when there was a low beep. “Excuse me,” the accented voice of Jarvis said politely, “But Master Stark is requested Agent Rogers’ presence in lab 15 at your soonest convenience.”

Steve glanced at Hill. “I didn't think Jarvis had access to SHIELD.”

“He’s not supposed to.” Hill grimaced. “Have fun.”

“Oh, I'm sure I will.”

Steve had a few theories to what Tony might want, but none of them came close to the truth. As soon as Steve pushed open the door to the lab, Tony was talking, messing with a hologram of the tower.

“I think if we’re going to make the Avengers a thing, like an actual thing, then it doesn’t make sense for us to live spread out. Besides issues with travel time, there are major security risks. Stark Tower is the most secure building in the country, which is why you're moving in. I’m guessing you and Mr. Red White and Blue will want to share an apartment?”

Steve blinked at him. Then he closed the door. “Pardon?”

“Look, I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I'm offering a white flag. So do you want to share an apartment or no? There will be a communal kitchen and living area, but everyone will have their own rooms and kitchenettes and space for when we can’t stand to look at each other’s faces anymore. So whadda you think, share or separate?”

“I don’t want to move in.”
Tony rolled his eyes, not surprised in the slightest. “You’ll change your mind when you see it. Alright, I’ll have you share the apartment and put in an extra room. You guys are more physical with each other than I am with Pepp’s, which is saying something. Let me know when you change your mind.” He waved Steve off, like he was already done with him.

Steve hesitated. “Hey Tony?”

Tony looked up from the hologram. “Mm-huh?”

“I don’t think I said it before but thanks,” he said, maybe a bit dryly. “For the phone. And… hosting us. No one would expect it of you, but I appreciate it.”

Tony smiled in a way that Steve hadn’t seen him do before. “Thanks. It’s nice to finally get the appreciation I deserve.” His voice was cocky, yet it rang with some sort of sincerity. He walked over and put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “You're not bad, Rogers. Even if you don’t fight.”

Steve snorted, but smiled. “Well, thanks. You're not half bad either. Even if you're an ass.”

Tony gasped dramatically. “The language! Already you're picking up my bad habits, tsk tsk. Okay, now get out of here, I have a remodel to design.”

Chapter End Notes

In This Chapter...

... Steve and Bucky reunited after the fire
... The team had their trust talk
... Steve went to the press conference in his new pink combat boots
... Hill and Steve trained together
And
... Tony announced the initial plans of Stark Tower's remodel.

There’s been some interesting discussions going on in the comment sections lately. One of the fun things about reading a story as it’s published is that you can actually have an impact on what happens in the story by commenting ideas and noting things that you like. I also respond to all questions, so if you’re at all curious about something, you can actually find out the answer, straight from the source.

Okay, I'm done pitching it now. I hope you liked the chapter, and as per usual, the next one will be out on Tuesday!
“It’s Tuesday,” Steve said, arms crossed as he leaned against the doorway.

Bucky blinked at him. The sheets were wrapped around him sloppily, and Bucky’s cheek was pressed against the pillow.

“Come on, time to get off your ass. You have dog shit to clean.”

Bucky hid his face in his pillow. Steve walked over slowly, taking care to let his footsteps fall heavy. “Hey Buck? Why don’t you wanna get up?”

Bucky’s arm shifted, a quiet clicking in the otherwise silent room. “Not safe.”

“For who? For you?”

Bucky shook his head, just barely. “For the dogs. For you.”

Steve sat on the bed. “You don’t need to worry about hurting me.”

“I already have.”

“I let you hurt me. What can I say, there’s nothing kinkier than a broken wrist.”

Bucky huffed into the pillow. “Shuddup.”

“Why don’t you make me?”

Steve could see the muscles in Bucky’s back tensing, his fingers curling in. Then Steve’s body was slammed against the floor, he breath nearly knocked from his lungs. Bucky was on top of him, smirking despite his hollow gaze. “Maybe I should break your wrist again, since you wanna fight so ba--”

Steve slipped his leg out and kicked Bucky backwards, wriggling out of his grip and leaping forwards. Bucky caught him and slammed him against the closet doors. Steve recovered quickly, slamming his knee down and hitting something soft. He fell on top of Bucky and bit his shoulder, causing Bucky to let out a strangled noise and slam him against the closet again.

Steve scrambled back and Bucky let him. His steps were a little off balance but Steve grinned, raising his fists.

Bucky pulled himself to his feet. It took more effort than normal, but he still did it.

They’d been wrestling since long before the war. Steve had always fought dirty. Bucky usually fought to end the fight, but Steve liked it a bit too much for that, always drawing the fights on longer than they needed to be. Bucky’s time as the Winter Soldier made his fighting style more brutal and much more effective, but Steve hadn’t been idle during that time.

Bucky had his hands at the ready, but loosely, more as a backup. “Com’on, Steve, you don’t wanna fight me. I was an assassin for 60 years.”
“And I've been one for 6. What's your point?”

Bucky grinned lazily; clearly, there wasn't a single part of him that had actually expected Steve to back down.

Steve stepped forwards and jabbed experimentally. Bucky returned with a basic hook that Steve dodged easily, slamming his small fists into Bucky’s chest with enough strength to be annoying. “Com’on. Fight me Buck, punch me.”

Bucky stuck him in the side to make him squirm, and kicked at his legs futilely. Steve dodged the leg strike and kicked him back, a little harder than need. Bucky jabbed at him, still without any muscle behind it.

Steve skirted backwards, miming a few punches before jumping in and throwing a real punch at Bucky’s flesh shoulder. Bucky bent his knees, raising his arms a bit higher.

When Steve tried to him in the side Bucky blocked, knocking his leg down. Steve stepped in with a jab and Bucky ducked, responding with an uppercut. Steve dodged it too easily, spinning closer and letting out a series of punch punch kick punch, and Bucky managed to block almost all of it. He stopped smiling, focusing in more.

Steve let out another jab and ducked Bucky’s attempted hook again, grinning. “Come on, punch me. Punch me, Buck, punch me.”

He pushed Bucky, actually shoved him backwards. Bucky kicked at him and Steve dodged back. Bucky pressed forwards, trying for an uppercut which Steve blocked to the side, and before the move was even through Bucky’s other arm was coming up for a jab. Steve saw it a second too late, his arms already preoccupied, and Bucky’s fist slammed into his face. Steve’s head snapped back and he stumbled a little, his hand immediately coming up to his mouth.

Bucky froze, eyes widening at the sight of blood. Steve looked at the red painted on his fingers, reaching up and grazing over the split in his lip. “Huh. You punched me.”

Bucky huffed. “Does this mean you'll finally believe that I'm dangerous?”

Steve grinned-- a slightly more jarring sight now, what with the blood. “Nope.”

Bucky ended up going to the shelter at his normal time, still looking a bit unsure but when Steve reminded him that he could always call in sick, he just shook his head. “I need to go. Be around… nice people for a while.”

“You're literally surrounded by dogs there.”

“And they're way fuckin’ nicer than you. It’s a wonder I come home at all.”

“Yeah, well, I hope you get rabies.”

“How will I get rabies? You’ll be here.” Bucky let out a cocky grin and slammed the door behind him before Steve could stop spluttering and come up with an actual response.

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Later that day, they were all sitting around a boardroom table discussing *important Avenging things* when Clint noticed the split in Steve’s lip. Steve was pretty sure Natasha had already noticed it but didn't say anything. However, Clint wasn't so subtle.
“Dude, what happened to your lip?” He asked, interrupting an important discussion between Tony and Bruce about quantum something or other.

Steve touched the split. “I ran into a lamp,” he said automatically, at the same time Bucky said “he got in a fight.”

Steve glared at Bucky as the others reacted. “You got in a what?”

“Our literal jobs are fighting,” he defended. “It shouldn't be so surprising.”

“Yeah, but you're... you.”

“You're the I.T. guy,” Natasha said, quickly saving Bruce. “You don’t fight.”

*Like hell I don’t.*

Clint still looked shocked. “Who hit you? Do we have to go beat them up?”

Steve sent another glare Bucky’s way before refocusing his gaze on Clint. “It was this big brute. He came up to me and swore at me, calling me... some really rude names.” He looked to his lap, willing a blush to form.

Bucky put a hand on Steve’s shoulder, patting it. *Poor baby.* Steve considered decking him, right then, right there.

“And then he punched me,” he finished. “I was... I was so scared.” Looked up, wide eyes. “I’m just so lucky he left after that. I was so worried he would... well, I don’t want to think about what he could've done! He was real big and ugly too, really ugly--”

“It was horrible,” Bucky cut him off. “Poor Steve.”

Steve nodded, hoping they weren't laying it on too thick. The others seemed to believe it, except for Fury of course, who looked like he wanted God to strike him down. He looked so exasperated Steve wondered if he was actually ruining Fury’s life. Fury’s hands were shaking.

The others were appropriately sympathetic, like they didn't know what the ideal amount of sympathy was but they would do their best. It was nice to know that even when he acted weak, he could still make them uncomfortable.

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The next week passed with no official Avengers business, and the week after that, and the week after that. It was only once they were into the first week of August that they realized they'd missed Steve’s birthday.

“So that’s why there were fireworks. I’d thought I was just having another flashback.”

Steve nodded, choosing not to admit that he’d had the exact same thought.

To celebrate Steve’s belated birthday, Steve trimmed Bucky’s hair and they ate grocery store pie. Bucky asked Steve if he needed a new sketchbook; the answer was no. Steve asked Bucky if he’d model nude for him to sketch; Bucky answered with a flick to Steve’s ear.

There was no need to do anything more. Apparently, Steve had already missed at least 60 birthdays; what was one more?
With their newfound free time they continued with old hobbies (the shelter; reading; self-medicating; hacking into the FBI’s database) as well as new ones. Steve found out about reality TV and competition shows, and quickly formed opinions on many of them. He wasn’t a fan of the dating ones or the beauty ones, though he liked making Bucky look up from his book to tell him that every single male model looked like him. When he told Bucky he resembled the stunning Nigerian guy with the dreadlocks, Bucky threw a book at him.

Every once in a while Bucky would join him, or at least lower his book, to watch a few episodes. He liked British Bakeoff; Steve thought it was nice, but that everyone was too soft. He preferring the cooking shows where people yelled and threw flour and raw steaks at each other. Gordon Ramsay henceforth became his mentor.

Steve continued browsing on fansites and calling it research. It appeared that people between the ages of thirteen and thirty were big fans of the Avengers, especially Bucky. They thought his silence was dark and charming and mysterious.

Steve ended up creating a tumblr account just to respond to one of those comments.

I've met Captain America irl. Hes mean and rude and punched me in the face. 0 out of 5 stars, would not recommend.

His note was reblogged seventy times that night alone, and every single response to it was some variation of people saying how nice it would be to have Bucky punch them. Some people even said they would pay him money to beat them up.

And to think they'd spent all those years beating people up for free. Tsk tsk. Tsk tsk.

Tony requested their presences one day, and showed them around their partially renovated apartment in the tower. It was bigger than their actual apartment, and even though it wasn't done yet it was clearly going to be nicer. “Any requests?”

Bucky asked for a reading nook. Steve wanted to ask for a stripper pole, or a butler, or a weapons hall or something else obscene and inappropriate, but managed to rein himself in. He batted his eyes innocently and asked if the kitchen could be done in pastels. He didn't expect Tony to agree.

They saw some of the others from the team too, outside of mandatory training (horrible; Steve had to pretend to fail at weapons he was advanced at and then proceed to be taught how to use them by Clint, who pressed up against him and made him feel like an unwilling victim in a teen romance). Steve met up with Clint for coffee once, which was good, except Clint insisted he order something tall and pink and way, way too sweet to be coffee. Steve drank it-- of course he drank it -- but he insisted he didn't like it.

Bucky stayed in with Bruce one afternoon and they baked together, which was way, way too wholesome for Steve. The resulting lava cakes and strawberry flavored pastries were definitely worth it, though.

Natasha reached out too, but in a different manner than the others had; she announced they were going to a club that Friday, and that it was mandatory team building. That text was followed with two obnoxious ones (because Natasha), asking Steve if he was of age, and then telling him to wear something cute.

I'll be so cute, Steve threatened mentally. I will be so fucking cute--

He dug through his (small) closet and, after much deliberation, landed on simple, nice looking
clothes, including a black short sleeved button down. It wasn't what he’d wear if he was actually going to a club, but he suffered for his art.

Lying was an art, wasn’t it?

The walk to meet them, and the entire event in general, brought back a lot of memories. Steve saw girls in spiffy dressed that almost exposed the knee, saw people laughing loudly, minds addled by hooch, heard the flirtatious tones of doll-dizzy guys and red lipped girls. He remembered some more personal experiences: watching Bucky dance with girl after girl, taking notes as Bucky flirted easily but never using them himself until one night, when another guy was sitting next to him at the bar and they got to talking. His name was George, and he had dark hair and was probably going to grow up to take over the world or something of the caliber. They talked casually for a while, with Steve pulled out some of Bucky’s most subtle tricks, moves with his eyes, his lips. For research purposes, of course. At the end of their conversation, George shook Steve’s hand and said he was going to go home, except his eyes said something different. Steve waved goodbye, waited a few minutes, then followed after him, and sure enough George was waiting for him by a nearby alley. He gave Steve that crooked smile and walked them to the back of the alley, where the streetlights and the police lights and the church lights didn't hit, and they made out, all sloppy and uncoordinated. Steve was pretty sure he spent at least thirty seconds groping the man’s thigh instead of his crotch, but he didn't seem to mind. Finally, fumbling hands undid pants buttons and they rutted up against each other, all sweaty and panting with wet opened mouthed kisses, until they finished. They did their own pants back up and George gave him one last cocky smile before walking off, whistling oh so casually.

And Steve… well, Steve had gone back into the bar. Bucky was still there, so of course Steve went back into the bar. Bucky was dancing with a girl, but as soon as he saw Steve his features relaxed, and he sent Steve a big grin that Steve just couldn't help returning.

Later that night-- they were living together by that point-- Bucky leaned his elbow on the bed and asked Steve where he’d disappeared to, and Steve told him. He told him the truth, relaying the story all lazy smiles and half lidded eyes, like he was telling the story of his first kiss instead of his first alley-fuck. Bucky was shocked, but not upset. His response was more of a “you sly dog” and less of shame and guilt, though he did remind Steve of the dangers of his actions.

“You know what they do to queers, right? To… sodomites.”

Steve’s smile had lost some of its luster by that point, but it was still there. He smiled a lot easier before the war and everything that happened with it. “Yeah, I know Buck. Stop your mothering, no one saw me, otherwise I wouldn’t be here, would I? I’d probably be drowning in Holy water or having my brain cut open or something.”

That did not reassure Bucky. Steve promised that he’d be careful, saying that it’d probably never happen again anyways. He could still hardly believe that it had happened at all.

But it had; and it did. The next time they went to a bar, Steve’s eyes shifted from man to man, trying to guess who might be what. No one sat next to him though, so it wasn't of any use. The next time, however, Steve had worked up the courage to sit next to a man at the bar and start up a conversation himself. It had been difficult and he’d been awkward but apparently, something he did worked-- and it may have well been the fact that he was willing and nothing else-- and he ended up pressed against the wall of the alley while the guy tried to undo the button of his trousers with his fucking teeth.

It didn’t happen every time, and Steve certainly didn’t try every time, but over the course of a year or two, he’d had a handful of ‘encounters’. Bucky was always dancing when he left, and when he got back, Bucky always noticed and gave him a relieved smile. When they got back to their apartment,
Bucky would always ask about it, and Steve would always tell him. They’d lay on their bed, over the sheets— the apartment burned up at night in the summer— and Steve would lower his voice and tell the story of that night. Steve’s body was still as he told the story, the only parts that moved being his lips and eyes, flickering around, cataloging Bucky’s every movement even before he’d gotten the serum. Bucky was not still; he wiggled and squirmed and covered his eyes, as if that would block out the mental images. But he always asked Steve for the stories, and never once did he ask him to stop telling him one. And Steve; well Steve didn’t mind it one bit. He liked making Bucky squirm.

Bucky’s squirminess was one of the things lost as the Winter Soldier. In all honesty, it was possible he’d lost it even earlier, after the first round of torture before the Howlies came thundering to his rescue.

Steve sometimes wondered if Bucky would ever try it, wondered if George had gone up to Bucky on that first night and got to talking to him instead, if Bucky would have gone to the alley. If Bucky would have— Jesus.

But Steve knew that Bucky wouldn’t. Not because of his girlfriends, or his masculinity, or his fear, or any of that, but simply because George never would have gotten the chance to ask, because Bucky was never just sat at the bar watching. He wouldn’t go make out in an alley behind a club because he would be too busy dancing to care about a silly little thing like getting off.

Steve thought about those nights, those clubs, as he walked very different streets. Bucky was still with him— Bucky was always the constant. But everything else had changed. The girls’ dresses were shorter, the guys’ comments were cruder, the night was sharper. Bucky wore a long sleeve shirt and gloves— horrible for dancing. Yes, things were different.

Natasha gave them her pressed lips Peggy Carter smile upon seeing them. Steve said something rude about her dress, she responded with something rude about his height, and they continued walking. Clint was with her, and Steve appreciated his muscular arms simply for the artistic, aesthetic appeal— but that was it.

“Where’s Bruce and Tony?”

“They both said they were too busy,” Natasha said with a viper smile, as if she hadn't told Steve and Bucky the outing was mandatory. “A shame. We’ll just have to have a great time as revenge.”

That was harder said than done, because even though Steve and Bucky had seen the way people dressed and acted in the twenty-first century, besides the New Years Eve Hydra party, they’d never seen the way people danced in the twenty first century. There were no steps, no spins and sways. People danced like there was no such thing as rhythm, like they couldn’t wait to get their clothes off and get back to their apartments so they were trying to get each other off in the middle of the dance floor.

Natasha and Clint took pity on them and took them to the bar, focusing on drinks. Steve and Bucky were not allowed to order. Instead, Clint ordered some fruity colorful drinks for taste, and Natasha ordered hard liquor for intoxication purposes. Steve did his best, but couldn't down enough to even get fuzzy, though he did impress the bartender.

Natasha and Clint stayed and talked to them for a bit while Steve catalogued their increasing intoxication. Then the pair prowled out onto the dance floor, finding partners far too quickly. Natasha danced much more innocently than Steve had expected, with her hands on a taller man’s shoulders, the two of them swaying slightly sensually to the music. Clint on the other hand, was absolutely horrifying. He partnered up with a girl he apparently had never met before, and then ground with her, like some sort of monkey in heat. They kept on laughing and changing up
positions-- a few times the girl was the one grinding on Clint, which was somehow even more horrifying-- while Steve and Bucky did their best to watch and avert their eyes at the same time.

It was not a great experience. But at least they'd experienced more of the twenty first century in all of its glory, and knew better than to ever leave their apartment again.

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The fight was not going well.

They were at a base that wasn't supposed to be Hydra, but was definitely Hydra. Steve hadn't told the others yet because he was too busy fighting to figure out an explanation for how he knew. Hydra agents weren't nearly as fun to kill as the rag dolls were; for one, they took longer to die, especially since some of them had bulletproof armor to deal with, and for another, they also had weapons. With the rag dolls, Steve just had to do his best to keep moving and hope none of the creatures lived long enough to snap his neck. With the Hydra agents, he had to be much more defensive, which was never Steve’s strong suit.

The mission was originally to go in, download (apparently very important) information, and then destroy the servers and leave, but obviously nothing was that easy. They walked straight into an ambush, all too similar to the Zola incident.

It went downhill quickly. Natasha wasn't authorized to fight, but she’d gone anyway, announcing that she’d take care of the file download while Clint covered her. Tony and Bucky were supposed to shoot to injure anyone who tried to stop them, and Steve and Bruce were sent to cause general chaos. To clarify: it wasn't a stealth mission. But it still wasn't supposed to go downhill so quickly.

Natasha had only downloaded half of the data when the hoards of people coming in was too great and she prepared the bomb to go off early. “We’re leaving now, meet at intersection point!”

Steve pulled his knife out of the agent he’d just non-lethally stabbed in the leg, and wiped the blood off on the agents pants. “Hulk is already there, I'm on my way.”

“Use your codename!” Tony reminded him.

“Microchip is on his way,” Steve said through gritted teeth. “Captain, do you copy?” There was no response. “Captain?”

“He might have gone back into his soldier mindset,” Natasha said, clearly panting. Her voice echoed strangely, like she was in a pipe or vent of some kind. “Now you see how annoying it is when you don’t respond.”

“But the rest of us are good?” Tony confirmed. “Great. Widow, how long until they blow?”

“About thirty seconds. The blast should be controlled to that room, though.”

“What? You never said you wanted it controlled to the room.”

“Tony, how big of a bomb did you make?!”

An agent rounded the corner and Steve leapt and slammed them backwards with his knee. He turned and ran. Knowing Tony, the entire street was about to blow.
“It’s not that big, I just thought we were taking out the building!”

“Tony!”

“It’s only a two story building, okay? It’s small, this is not collateral damage.”

Outside, the hulk roared.

Steve inhaled. “Bucky, Sergeant Barnes, Asset, Winter Soldier, Soldat, serial number 3-2-5-5-7-0-3-8, the building you are in is about to explode, retreat immediately. Return to base.”

“God that's sad,” Clint muttered, apparently forgetting his comm was still on. There was no reply from Bucky.

“His mike is offline, but the audio is still there,” Tony said, sounding a bit more gentle than usual. “He probably hears you, just can't respond.”

_He fucking better hear me_, Steve thought as he took a running leap and slammed into a full sized window with his shield, falling in a shower of glass to the ground which was a lot further down than he’d remembered. He landed and rolled, the magic hippie metal of the shield taking the blunt of the impact. He ended up on his hands and knees, the shield sliding a few yards away.

Steve gave himself three seconds to recover, panting on his hands and knees. The building was supposed to blow approximately… now.

_Now._

It didn't blow.

Steve clicked off his comm, just so he could make a face and go “What the fuck?”

“Tony, care to explain?”

“I don’t know, maybe you didn't set it off right!”

Clint’s voice: “Is everyone out?”

“Hawk and Widow confirmed.”

“Stark and Hulk, confirmed.”

Steve switched on his comm. “Rogers confirmed.”

“What did I tell you about code--”

“Does anyone see Bucky?”

There was a loud noise in the comm, coming from a few of the comms at once. “There are more agents coming!” Tony yelled. “Natasha, get to the quinjet, Clint--”
“I’m fine,” Natasha groaned. “My arm’s almost healed anyway.”

There was the sound of bullets-- coming both from the comms and from the other side of the building-- and Steve scrambled to his feet, his clothing stained with grass. He reached out his arm and the shield flew to him, snapping on to the arm holster. It was a prototype courtesy of Tony Stark himself, but Steve didn't have time to review it.

He ran around to the other side of the building, pressing his body against the wall and looking around the corner. The entire fight was out in the open, and they were clearly outnumbered, even more so than normal.

He watched Natasha drop her weapon, stumbling backwards and gripping her arm. Clint immediately stepped forwards to protect her, letting loose arrow after arrow. “I told you not to fight!”

There was a loud humming noise and the building vibrated against Steve’s back. He leapt forwards and tucked himself into his shield as the building exploded-- not the whole thing, but part of it. It rumbled and crumbled, part of the roof collapsing in. Anyone inside would likely be trapped.

Steve stayed under the shield until rubble stopped falling, and even then he was already smeared with plaster and dirt.

“I told you the bomb worked!”

Steve army-crawled forwards, staying out of sight. He did a mental inventory of his remaining weapons, gritting his teeth and analyzing the fight. Natasha was still down, but she was still firing, though Steve knew her handgun was short range. Clint stood in front of her, but based on the amount of time he was allowing before loosing an arrow, he was running low. Iron Man was flying around, using his repulsors to try and incapacitate agents non-lethally, but even he was running out of options. The Hulk had been smashing, but was now staring at the partially collapsed building. His body shimmered and he roared.

“This is not the time!” Tony yelled. “Come on Hulk, smash! Look at the puny humans, doesn’t it just make you mad?”

The Hulk swayed a bit, then collapsed onto his bottom, shrinking and transforming back into Bruce, who groaned and grabbed his head like he had a wicked headache.

“The Hulk is down!”

“We need backup,” Clint said calmly. “Rogers, any information on Winter?”

Steve gritted his teeth.

“Great, now they're both down. Okay, it’s us three, we can do this--”

“I'm out of ammo,” Natasha said, sounding like she was gritting her teeth too.

“I have one arrow left.” Steve watched Clint let it loose. “Okay, I'm all out. I can use my bow in hand to hand combat. Should we retreat?”

“We can’t do that,” Bruce groaned. “Not without Rogers and Barnes.”

There were still too many agents. Clint did something to his bow so it snapped into a different
weapon with sharp edges. Tony was doing his best to hold off the agents, but it was too much, even for him.

Tony’s back was to Bruce when Steve saw the agents jog up behind him. Bruce was unarmed and not in the right shape for another transformation, and the agents had weapons, and Bruce was defenseless --

Steve was up and running before he’d fully given himself permission to. He ran at a full sprint, legs stretching as far as they would go and boots slamming against the ground.

“What the fu--"

Bruce’s eyes widened as Steve sped towards him, but Steve didn't slow down. Instead he pushed himself even harder, thundering forwards and leaping at the last moment, flipping over Bruce and releasing a knife mid-spin. He landed and whipped around 180 degrees, almost in slow motion, and stabbed another agent in the stomach. The one to his back raised a gun but before they had time to shoot Steve was whirling around, kicking the gun upwards and using his momentum to launch himself on his forwards foot, and he and the agent both went down, except the agent landed on the ground and Steve landed on the agent with all of his weight on his knee. They slammed into the ground and Steve felt the satisfying snap of ribs underneath his knee. He rolled forwards and threw the shield, hitting an agent over the head and called the shield back to his arm. There was a blur of black and silver and Steve threw the shield at another agent, angling it so it would fly to the blur on the rebound. Bucky caught the shield and angled it. Steve sprinted forwards, jumping onto the shield and springing backwards, back arching in the air. He grabbed two agents vests as he began to curve and landed on his feet, effectively flipping the agents and slamming them into the ground.

The rest of the agents fled or were picked off by Iron Man, the Winter Soldier, or Steve Rogers, formerly known as the Nomad.

As soon as they were in the clear, Steve flicked his comm back on. “Into the quinjet! Natasha, sit your ass down in a chair, I'm going to reset your arm and you're going to fucking like it.”

Chapter End Notes

!!!

In this chapter, we learned about Steve's personal experience with alleys, and Steve broke character for the first time around the Avengers. It'd be pretty hard going back to the non-lethal IT guy after /that/. Please comment and let me know what you thought!
The Freedom In A Smile (Or A Scowl)

Chapter Notes

Wow, the response to the last chapter was amazing! I think my favorite response so far has been this one:

"As soon as they were in the clear, Steve flicked his comm back on. “Into the quinjet! Natasha, sit your ass down in a chair, I'm going to reset your arm and you're going to fucking like it.” I bet you he had an orgasm after he said those words. -V

As the author, I can confirm that he 100% did.

Also, just fyi the chapter count says that this book is half over, but the chapter count is wrong. I don't know how many chapters it will end up being, but right now we are in 2013 and this story goes until at least 2017, so *shrugs*. Also, a very exciting new character is coming soon! I refuse to say anything else on the matter (but feel free to speculate).

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He did reset Natasha’s arm, and then check Bucky’s comm and scowl at him for letting it get damaged. He got Bruce a trauma blanket and, when he wasn't sure what to do about Tony and Clint, he fetched them water bottles and protein bars. No one talked, but not once during the entire ride did anyone look away from him. It was supposed to be uncomfortable, but the feeling of all eyes on him was still familiar.

Captain Rogers, Steve thought proudly, sticking his chin up a bit more.

Bucky caught his eye, whispering “Mrs. Rogers.”

They went straight from the quinjet to the briefing room on silent agreement. Steve tried to walk past to get back to the guest quarters but Natasha blocked his way, raising an eyebrow. Steve met Bucky’s eyes and Bucky patted his pants pockets: no ammo. Steve offered him the shield, but Bucky turned him down, tucking his head towards his left arm. If they had to fight their way out, people would be aiming for Steve so it was better that he had the shield, even if it was just over his back.

They filed into the conference room in the same seats they always sat in. Fury, for once, was also sitting. He watched them silently.

“So,” he started after a few more moments of silent staring. “I take it you found out.”

“We found out everything,” Natasha said, and Steve snorted before he could stop himself.

Fury managed to glare well with only one eye, first at Steve, and then at Natasha. “Agent Romanoff, that is one of the oldest tricks in the book. Tell me what you know, and we can go from there.”

“So there is more we’re missing.”
Silence. “Yes.”

“Goddamnit Fury.”

All eyes immediately turned to Steve. “Um, language?” Tony chided, looking a little confused.

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’ve been keeping my mouth in check for the past fucking year and then some, I’m allowed to say ‘damn’.”

Fury nodded a little dreamily. For all his regal frustration, Fury looked strangely relaxed, which pissed Steve off more than it should have.

Tony clapped his hands together. “So. You can fight, apparently, which would have been nice to know last July when Loki tried to--”

“I fought,” Steve interrupted. “I’ve already told you, I fought. I was the one to bring down the Evan’s building.”

This seemed to snap everyone back into attention, including Fury. “You what?”

“Oh thank God,” Bruce mumbled. “I’ve thought that was my fault for the past year.”

“I did it on purpose, it was a Chitauri base. What, did you seriously think I cowered the whole battle? Seriously?”

Bucky, who was leaning over Steve’s chair as usual, tried to put his hand on Steve’s shoulder, but Steve slapped him away, making a face.

Tony blinked. “Right. You… okay. So, you can fight. What other things have you been lying to us about?”

Steve looked around at their faces, letting himself deflate a little. “I… I’m actually 5’6”, not 5’6” and a half. I shouldn’t have, I know, but--”

Fury sighed, rubbing his temples. “I don’t know exactly how you found out about his abilities, but whatever it was that happened, it wasn’t a one time thing. I’m actually glad you found out. Agent Rogers has the highest kill count out of anyone at this table besides Barnes, and it’s about damn time he started acting like it.”

Steve scowled at Fury and immediately, a weight lifted from his shoulders. Who knew scowling could be so therapeutic?

Everyone else was staring at him in utter shock, mouths dropped open.

Steve sneakily slid a knife out from its holster, but Fury caught the movement and flinched backwards. “Don’t you fucking dare!”

“You’re scared of him,” Natasha realized, looking more confused that Steve had ever seen her.

“Of course I’m scared, I’m sane! You haven’t seen him in action, not really--”

“And you have?” There was doubt creeping up on the edges of Bruce’s voice, as if he still wasn’t ready to let his trust shatter on the floor.

Fury raised his hand in answer. His palm had a nasty scar, long since healed over, but definitely there to stay. “He found me in my apartment-- before he joined SHIELD-- and pinned me to my own
goddamn wall with knives: one in the hand, one on side, one in the stomach. Agent Romanoff, you might recall the week I spent in intensive care as they tried to stop the internal bleeding. Then, he almost decapitated me with his shield.” He waved at the shield on Steve’s back casually. “The only reason I'm not dead right now is that I convinced him I'm better off alive.”

“Debatable at best,” Steve muttered, because he could do that now! Long gone were the days of silent comebacks, and Steve really should have been more upset, but the relief.

Natasha was the first to realize what Fury had said. “With the shield… Steve’s the Nomad.”

In any other room of people, that name would mean very little. But in that room of Agents, the name seemed to shudder through them. Bruce looked around, waiting for an explanation. “What?”

“The Nomad is an assassin who had been revenge killing Hydra agents before he became inactive a few years back. I was told he was dead.” She sent a glare at Fury. “All of the deaths were bloody and violent, most done by knifings--”

“Yeah, about that,” Steve interrupted, brushing his hair out of his face. “Thanks for all the throwing lessons, Clint, but they really weren't necessary.”

Clint made a face. “No offense, but I’ve never met anyone worse-- oh. Oh.”

Steve grinned. “I could prove it, if you want? I can use Fury for target practice.”

Fury groaned. “Not again.”

Tony looked a little paler than he had before. “So… how long exactly has this lie been going on?”

“Since the Battle of Manhattan,” Fury said darkly. “As far as I'm concerned, you've never met the real Steve Rogers.”

“Hey, a little dramatic, don’t you think? I didn't even lie that much--”

Bucky flicked Steve in the ear, and for the first time in front of the others Steve was able to turn around, scowl, and go “I will fucking cut you, Barnes, don’t think that I won’t.”

“I was the one that punched him in the face that one time,” Bucky admitted, like it was confession hour. “When, ya know, he had the split lip. He fucking asked for it too.”

Steve grinned a little. “Yeah, that one’s on me. I got a few good hits in, though.”

It was Bruce’s turn to rub his forehead. “So, to clarify, Steve is not the nice, friendly IT guy we all thought he was, but instead is a ruthless killer whose kill count outnumbers the Hulk?” He looked at Fury a little pleadingly. “Are you sure?”

Steve huffed, sitting back in his chair. Of course the others wouldn't believe him, of course they'd trust their instincts over the truth. Steve was small-- and that would have a bigger impact on the others than seeing a few knife tricks ever would.

“I'm going to leave,” Fury decided, “And let you settle your differences.

“You’d better sleep with one eye open,” Steve threatened without much oomph behind it. “You were supposed to keep your trap shut.”
Fury managed a small smile-- a strange look on him. “Actually, Agent Rogers, I have a feeling I'll sleep like a baby tonight. And I've kept your secret for a year; it was time, don’t you think?”

Steve scowled at Fury, his real, unadulterated scowl, which did provide a bit of relief, if nothing else. Fury waggled his fingers in goodbye and sauntered out, still seeming way too happy. Steve would have to remedy that.

But first, he had other fish to fry. Steve sighed and leaned back against the chair, crossing his arms bitterly. Bucky reached down and started messing with his hair, and after another warning slap Steve gave in to the petting.

Silently, Tony got up and left, not looking at them again. After a moment, Bruce sighed and announced that he was going to go after him. He looked Steve up and down once, seeming slightly concerned, but not overly upset.

That left Steve alone with Bucky, Natasha, and Clint. Both of the spies were watching them unabashedly. “Clint and I are going out for dinner, so you guys can probably eat whenever. I don’t know what the other two are doing, but I’m guessing dinner’s not exactly on their radar.” Natasha moved her lips into something that was probably supposed to be a smile.

Steve nodded-- without a smile. He didn't have to fake one anymore. “Thanks.”

Clint sighed. “Well. Good job, today, with the… the fighting and everything. It was helpful. It will be helpful too, later. So… good job.”

There Clint was, being nice again. They both stood, like they intended to leave, but before they could Steve found himself saying “So is that? You don’t have any questions, or…”

Natasha looked at him again, and all of this staring was starting to get to him. “Was any of it real?”

It wasn't rhetorical, and it wasn't dramatic-- it was just a question, plain and simple. Steve took a moment to think about it, then shrugged, meeting her eyes. “I don’t know.”

She nodded, and they both left. Then the room was empty, and somehow, Steve felt worse than he had coming in. Much, much worse.

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Steve laid in bed for a long time without even feeling tired. He tossed and turned to the point where Bucky started mumbling threats into his pillow, only half joking.

“If you keep doin’ that, I'm going to choke you out for real, and you know none of my personalities will save you.”

Finally, Steve had had enough. He detangled himself from the sheets and pulled on his clothes from the day before, along with a dark hoodie. “I'm going to go get some meds. I'll be back soon.”

“Mmmmm,” Bucky hummed. “Don’t get AIDS without me.”

“You know I’d never.”

The guest quarters were too high up for Steve to climb down, even if the windows had been designed with foot and handholds in mind. Steve made a mental note to request a grappling hook in the next edition of his suit, and took the stairs.
Forty-five minutes and a reasonable amount of opium later, Steve was back in the tower, taking the elevator back up to the guest floor. When it opened Tony was standing there, waiting with his arms crossed.

Steve’s mouth felt dry. “Tony.”

“Rogers.”

Steve left the elevator and walked past Tony, thinking that that was it, when Tony hissed and called out “Steve, wait.”

Steve turned around, his hands itching for a knife, but he refused to draw one. “Yeah?”

“Your floor is almost done. You and Barnes can look at in and then move in whenever.”

Steve blinked. “Tony, that’s--”

“I’m not done.” Tony took a deep, shuddery breath, collecting himself before looking Steve in the eyes again. “I asked Fury to disassemble the Avengers.”

For a moment, it felt like Steve’s heart thumped into his shoes. He stared at Tony.

“Temporarily,” Tony said dismissively. “This wasn’t supposed to be a weekly, or even monthly gig. SHIELD has teams that are supposed to deal with things like this. Clint and Nattie have SHIELD things to do, I have SI things to do, Bruce has experiments to run, you and Barnes… well, I don’t actually know what you do. You’re supposedly SHIELD agents, but I’m sure you’ll excuse me if I don’t believe everything I hear anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Steve interrupted, crossing his arms. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Tony shook his head, looking at the wall, the ceiling, anywhere but Steve. “You can stay here. The tower’s safe, and hey, I already put in the work designing you two a suite, you might as well use it. But in the meantime, I’m going to head back to Cali. Peace and quiet, probably no one who will betray me, but hey, it’s a new day, who knows?” His eyes flickered over and landed on Steve’s. “I’ll see you around.”

He started walking in the opposite direction from where Steve was going. “Hey, Tony!” Steve called out after a few moments of processing, his mind running calculations so fast he was getting a headache. Stark stopped, but didn’t turn around. “Take care of yourself.”

Steve and Bucky went back to their real apartment the next day, but it became clear that things needed to change soon. The apartment no longer felt safe. It was time they switch out their routines anyway.

Before they could make a decision, Clint was inviting them out to another club via text. He promised them that they could go earlier this time, when the dancing wouldn’t be as sexual, and said that it’d make a good send off, like he and Natasha had figured out what Steve and Bucky were planning when they themselves had barely even said it outloud.

That day, they walked to the shelter and Bucky quit his volunteer position while Steve stood at his side, keeping quiet. Nancy seemed genuinely upset when she found out.

“Aww, but James, you just started walking the dogs! Did something happen? You can always go
back to laundry if you're more comfortable with that."

Steve stayed silent at his side-- the opposite of what it usually was. He watched Bucky’s expression as he explained “No ma’am, the dogs are fine, but we’re moving.”

After that, they went to Stark Tower. As soon as they stepped into the elevator, Jarvis announced he was taking them to their suite, without them having to press a single button.

The suite was extraordinary. It had two bedrooms, and as expected one was clearly bigger, with double closet space and two nightstands. The entire apartment had large windows that let in the sun, and was an open floor plan, besides the bed and bathrooms. The floor was covered in a soft enough carpet to sleep on, and as promised, the kitchen was painted in pastels.

In the living room there was a large TV mounted to the wall, and a note on the table describing the TV’s amenities, including Netflix. In the corner of the room, out of sight of the front door, was a cozy looking reading nook, complete with bean bag chairs, pillows, blankets, a few subtle bookshelves, and potted plants. Steve slumped onto one of the chairs and immediately noticed the mirror placed subtly in the corner of the room, angled perfectly so that Steve could see the front door from it.

The apartment was perfect. But it wasn’t theirs.

That night they met up with Natasha and Clint at a new club. Steve grinned when they walked over. “I’ve been pre-gaming,” he admitted. “I’m feeling a little fuzzy. Natasha, get me drunk.”

She did the closed lip sly little Peggy Carter smile, and Steve realized that he wasn't the only one who'd recently dropped an act. “Gladly.”

The others drank and then danced, and Steve drank and then watched. Steve knew that for most people, alcohol could be used to forget, but for him, it helped him remember. He drifted in between keeping an eye on the others and reminiscing.

Bucky came over at one point and announced that Clint was going to help him practice flirting again. “It’s different now, with these modern women,” he said, his tone slightly bashful, slightly teasing. “He’s going to show me the ropes.”

Steve grinned and encouraged him, then once Bucky had gone back to Clint, reached for his glass.

“So you really aren’t together, are you?” Natasha asked, directly behind Steve. He didn't even blink; living with Bucky made it much more difficult to make him jump.

Steve made a face, turning on the barstool to look at her. “What do you mean? Of course we’re not together.”

She smiled again-- closed lips. “It’s the twenty first century, Stevie. It’s okay to be gay.”

There were more important things to respond to in that sentence, but Steve still found himself stuck on the fact that she’d called him ‘Stevie’. He was about to respond and tell her that no one but Bucky called him that, when he caught her eye and realized that’s what she wanted him to say. “I know,” he said, instead, defensively. “But we’re not like that.”

Natasha glanced up and Steve followed her gaze, his eyes immediately catching on Bucky. He was bright red and looked about ready to curl up in a ball, but was still managing to smile and laugh with Clint. They were flirting with a table of girls. One of them touched Bucky’s hand.
“What about you and Clint?” Steve asked, not out of genuine curiosity but just to turn it back on her. “What are you like?”

She shrugged, not shaken in the least. “We’re partners.”

“But not together?”

“Things have changed since the 40’s,” she reminded him, sounding a little dreamy. “I have more options than just settling down with a man and raising kids.”

“But you and Clint are close,” Steve pressed.

She shrugged noncommittally. “You could say that.”

Steve looked back over to Bucky, just in time to see one of the girls stand up and kiss Bucky on the mouth. He looked a bit taken aback, but kissed back as the others jeered and hollered excitedly. The girl wrapped her arms around his neck, and Steve watched as he twitched when she touched his metal shoulder plating and he pulled away, smiling unauthentically.

Bucky made his way back to Steve as soon as he could, eyeing the bartender before squeezing in between the stools and putting his back to the bar, brushing up against Steve. Natasha took that as her cue to go back to Clint.

“Way to go, Tiger,” Steve said with a sloppy smile.

“I didn't think she'd kiss me,” he admitted, eyes flickering around the room. His breathing was shaky. “Do people just do that? Have people always done that?”

“I think so. Why? Was it bad?”

“It was… fine.” Bucky made a face. “I think. I don’t know if I did it right, but it wasn't… bad.”

Steve took Bucky’s hands, steering him a little closer until he could lean on him.

Bucky continued looking around, biting his lip. “Could you… could you do the thing. Distract me, I'm on edge, but we're out and having fun so I don’t want to have a panic--”

“You remember the rumors about Navy guys being queer?” Steve said, before Bucky could even finish. He pulled Bucky a little closer, so he didn't have to be too loud. “And we thought, hey, I wonder if there’s a lot of queers in the army too. And there wasn't. No one was gay in the army.”

Bucky’s head ticked to the side. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. No one was gay in the army. Everyone just missed their girls back home. And we were men— you remember that, right? We were men, all of us were men, we were in the army and waking up early and shining our shoes and shit, so we were men. And there were no girls around, but we were men with needs, so if we had to do what we had to do… well, it was war. People made sacrifices. And, if you needed something, that only a girl could give you, well, sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do.”

By that point, Steve had wrapped his arms around Bucky’s waist and pulled him to stand in between his legs, with Steve’s chest to Bucky’s back. The stools were taller than normal, so if anything, the height difference was comfortable.

Bucky let out a breathy chuckle. He was still looking around, but his eyes weren't quite so focused,
his body not as tense. He licked his lips. “I remember.”

“Remember that one night? We were with the Howlies, but they were all asleep and we wanted to go on a walk anyways.”

Bucky shook his head. “Neither of us even had sweethearts back home.”

“Well, all that meant was that we needed it all the more, ain't that right? You remember?”

Bucky flushed. His lips curled up lightly. “Yeah, I remember. You think I'd ever forget your--” he faltered, breaking off the sentence.


Bucky pressed back against him, like he was trying to smush him against the chair. It didn't work. “No, idiot. Your… hands.”

“My hands?”

“They're little,” Bucky agreed. He took one of Steve’s hands from around his waist, turning it over to prove his point. “See? You've got long fingers I guess, but your hands are still little.”

Steve laughed lightly, resting his chin on his friend’s shoulder. “We snuck into the woods one night, putting… everyone in danger, honestly, and touched each other’s dicks and jacked each other off… and all you remember are my hands?”

It was hard to tell in the dim light of the club, but it looked like Bucky was… blushing? “They're mighty fine hands, Stevie.”

Steve pressed his head to Bucky’s arm, looking down so he couldn't see him smiling. After a few seconds of peaceful silence, he let the conversation go back to what it was, before Bucky asked Steve to distract him. “You feel any better?”

“A bit.” Bucky licked his lips, shifting out if his Brooklyn persona and back into modern Bucky. “But I think I’m going to call it a night. Clint can give me more flirting lessons later.”

Steve hummed against him, then, on a whim, pressed a kiss to his sleeve. Bucky made a face. “What was that for?”

“Hey, it’s the twenty first century. If a fella can’t kiss his friend on the arm, then what’s the point?”

They both cracked up, pressed close enough together to feel each others laugh.

Natasha walked over, a glint in her eyes. “Hey Steve, why don’t you come over and I’ll teach you how to dance?”

Steve smiled back at her-- no teeth. He’d regained the freedom of his actual smile. “No thanks, Nat, I think I'll just stay here with Bucky for now.”

“Suit yourself.”

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They left the next day.

Two duffle bags were left in the suite at the tower with their new clothes. Steve and Bucky each
carried a simple backpack with a few changes of clothes, provisions, and their StarkPhones. The Avengers would assemble again, and when it happened, they would need to be ready.

The train thundered to the station, and Steve handed Bucky the specially shaped bag with the shield in it, and then clutched his hands and stared down at the floor. They climbed onto the train and as soon as he could, Steve squeezed his eyes shut, fisting Bucky’s jacket in his hands.

And just like that, they were back on the road.

END OF PART ONE

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: the scene with Steve revealing himself to the Avengers has undergone a few drafts, one of which included Steve throwing a knife at Tony and cutting his cheek. I considered adding that scene in here, but they had all already seen him in action, so it wasn't like they needed proof. Altogether, I'm really happy with how this chapter turned out.

In other news, I think I am going to change my uploading schedule back to twice a week, probably every Tuesday and Saturday. I really wanted to get the ball rolling with the 3x a week updates, but now I think toning it down is the best decision.

In this chapter:
-- Steve fessed up to his lie
-- Tony was upset
-- They went clubbing again and we found out about Steve and Bucky's army 'experience' (cough cough SEX)

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and the next one will be out Saturday!
It’s hot as balls and Bucky hasn’t smiled in a week.

They are two separate observations, at least, Steve thinks. Bucky never minded the heat, just like he never minded the cold, and Steve thinks that even now in their post-Winter Soldier world, Bucky treats heat like he treats sleep: he just needs enough to stay alive.

It is still possible that the heat bothers him. Bucky wears a jacket all day, every day, as well as jeans and a glove on his left hand, so the heat can’t be fun, but thus far Bucky hasn’t said a word about it, not even to complain. Steve makes jokes and tries to prod Bucky back into existence, but all he receives is a grunt or other non-committal gesture.

After a few days, Steve gets fed up and snaps “You know, it’d be fun if you actually talking to me or something, instead of just making noises and zoning out all the time.”

Bucky’s head ticked to the side, his expression staying the same for a few seconds before bunching up. “I don’t have anything to say.”

“Like hell you don’t. Come’on Buck, what's on your mind? What have you been thinking about the past few days when you've been not-talking and not-sleeping?”

Bucky made another face, this one more annoyed. It didn't quite reach his eyes. “I’ve been getting more. Memories. Trying to put them in order. From… the beginning. They tried other stuff before electricity. To… make me forget. Hypnosis. Sleep deprivation.” His shoulder ticked this time, a jerky, aggressive movement. “Cramped confinement.”

Steve waited for him to go on, but he didn't. “Cramped confinement?”

“The box. I don’t know. How long. They said… if I forgot everything, they’d let me out. You were dead anyway. They had pictures. You were. Killed. Hypothermia. Told me I should just give up. Otherwise… they wouldn’t let me out of the box.” Suddenly, his expression relaxed and he blinked, his hands reaching up to mess with the zipper of his hoodie, and Bucky’s voice went a bit smoother, less monotone. “It was fine. I survived it, didn't I, Stevie? You didn't die. Neither of us did. They did their best, but ya know they ain't got nothin’ on us, not a damn thing.”

Steve tried to smile. “Yeah. We’re like… cockroaches.”

“You were supposed to be dead sixty-three years ago. Before thirty, that’s what they always told ya, right? And here we are now.”

“Here we are now,” Steve repeated, and this time the smile came easier. “You're one hell of a guy, Buck. We’re going to keep goin’, you hear me, keep goin’ until we run Hydra right to the ground and then deeper still until they burn at the Earth’s core. Everyone who ever was a part of Hydra, whether they were a secretary or fucking Zola himself, we’re gonna find and run into the fuckin’ ground. Then we’ll be free.”

Bucky snorted, shaking his head lightly. “Come’on Stevie, it’s too late for this. You should go to bed.”
“You need to sleep too.”

“I will,” Bucky promised. “Come’on, just go to sleep. I just have a little more… organizing to do. I'll be right behind you.”

The abandoned apartment they were staying in didn't have a bed, but it did have a couch. Steve yanked off his shirt, muttering about the heat, then laid down and closed his eyes. Immediately a hand found his back and began petting him, cool fingers trailing over a straight spine. It used to be two cold hands gliding over a curved spine. Somehow, this was okay too.

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“Mississippi is not supposed to be so fuckin’ hot,” Steve complained without much malice in his tone. “It’s going to be October before long, only a few weeks--”

“19 days.”

“--so why am I sweating?”

Bucky cocked his head to the side. Steve wasn't sure if it was a tick or just a new gesture he was trying out. Sergeant Barnes was always tilting his head to the side, but it was always smoother, and paired with his classic smirk. Since finding each other again, Steve had seen the smirk a few times, but it was different. His eyes were too wild; before the war, they were half lidded, lazy, casual. Bucky wasn’t very good at casual anymore. “Maybe you're sweating because you’re upset the Hydra base was a bust, Slugger.” Bucky’s words were his own, but his tone remained devoid of emotions, his face blank besides the flickering eyes.

“Yeah, I'm sweating out of anger. No, dickwad, I'm pretty sure it's because of 150 degree sun melting us alive.”

“Incorrect. Approximate temperature: 90 to 100 degrees Fahrenheit.” He ticked. “32 to 37 degrees Celsius.”

“And how the fuck do you know that?”

“They taught me math. When I was,” tick “the Soldier.”

Steve tried to imagine Bucky in his black leather uniform, arm on display, hair down, wearing the muzzle Bucky had told him about. He imagined him sitting at a desk like the type they had in school.

“I'm kidding,” Bucky said plainly after a few moments. He paused. “I think.”

They reached their building and did a perimeter sweep: nothing out of the norm. There was a bit of grass and some weeds growing around the building that were beginning to yellow and wilt from the heat. Steve had sympathy for them.

The side of the building didn't have very good footholds and Steve was hot, so he announced that he was going to take the stairs. “You can still climb if you wanna be a chump.”

Bucky climbed.

Steve went around front and stepped into the building, immediately sighing in relief. The air
conditioning was nothing to brag about, but even the luxury of being out of direct sunlight was a relief. Steve lingered as long as he thought he could get away with—about five seconds—before making his way up the stairs.

The building they were squatting in was still in use, for once. It wasn’t very impressive, but it had cold running water and air conditioning, so it was invaluable. Steve and Bucky had made camp in the empty apartment on the topmost floor, which had been abandoned due to a mold problem.

Steve reached their apartment and was about to shoulder his way in when the serum froze in his bloodstream. Steve strained his ears, waiting for the notice of danger, already grasping a knife.

There was a loud slamming noise and Steve yanked the door open, stepping just inside and raising the knife across his chest. Bucky was pressed against the wall, something sticky holding his flesh arm in place as someone wearing red and blue pajamas jumped around him, dodging his swings with his metal arm with the ease of a gymnast. Bucky grunted loudly through his teeth and bit down on his glove, ripping it off and swinging another punch. The person didn't dodge it, instead catching the punch easily. “Woah, you have a metal hand? That's so cool!”

The person’s voice was high pitched and excitable, like its subject was still considering its stance on puberty.

Steve’s arms flinched on its own volition and the knife hurtled towards the person. They hadn’t even noticed Steve yet but still managed to duck it, letting out a yelp of surprise when it embedded itself hilt deep in the drywall.

Who was this kid?

Bucky used the surprise to free his metal hand and grab at the kid, but they dodged him, jumping back. Steve pulled out another knife but before he could lose it, the kid pointed his hand at him and something shot out of it, slamming into Steve with enough force to shove him backwards into the door. It wasn’t a gun—the range of force was too wide.

Steve looked up and found his hand, still holding the knife, trapped against the door. It was covered in white webbing. He wriggled against it, but its hold was absolute, which only made Steve panic more.

The spider-creature raised his hands to his head. “Hey, I don’t want any trouble, okay? I don’t know who sent you, but I promise you you’ve got the wrong guy. I don’t even know a Peter Parker!”

Steve and Bucky were both in the process of getting out other weapons, but were quickly stopped when the Spiderling shot more webs out of his hands. There was considerable force behind each web, enough to slam Steve against the door again. He pulled against them, but they didn't budge.

“Come on guys, I don’t want to ask again, who sent you? I have more webs, and mister sir with the metal arm, I really don’t think your friend likes webs that much.”

He glanced at Steve, who bared his teeth and snarled at him. He wasn't afraid of the boy, just annoyed. All Steve wanted was a bottle of fucking water and to not have to fight anyone for fifteen goddamn minutes. Was that too much to ask?

Bucky rasped, like he was losing his voice. “We work for…” he mumbled something, too quiet to hear.
Spider-boy stepped forwards. “What?”

“We work for…” Bucky grumbled something unintelligible.

“Huh?”

Bucky gestured him closer, swallowing so Steve could see his Adam’s apple bob. Sure enough, the kid moved closer to Bucky to hear, and Bucky dropped like a stone, his arms still stuck to the wall holding him up. He kicked up, hooking a foot over the kid’s shoulder and yanking him forwards with serum-enhanced force. The kid made an “Ahh!” noise as he was snatched forwards and fell headfirst against Bucky’s stomach. Bucky got him in an impressive leg lock, slamming him against the ground and holding fast.

“Hey! Stop it! You tricked me, that was real mean you know, I thought you had a sore throat and I was just trying to be helpful—”

Bucky picked his legs up again-- spider-boy and all-- and slammed them against the floor again. “Why are you here?”

“Spike shot and killed my Uncle Ben! I tracked him here to confront him, I know he knows I’m here, you have to let me at least talk to him, he has to know what he-- Ow!”

Bucky slammed him against the floor again, except this time the kid was able to slip out. He scrambled away, barely evading Bucky’s thrashing legs.

“Who’s Spike?” Steve commanded.

“A guy I talked to in Virginia told me that was his name! He’s your boss, right? No way you're cops.”

“He’s not our fucking boss, and we’re not here for you. You’re the one who ambushed us, not the other way around,” Steve snapped.

The Spider-guy looked at Steve, then Bucky, then back at Steve. He wore a pair of big black goggles over his ill-fitting red mask that made it impossible to see his eyes. It only took a few seconds for him to jolt, backing up with his hands up. “Holy-- oh my God, you’re Captain America and Steve Rogers! You guys are Avengers, oh my--” he backed all the way to the window, glancing out of it like he was considering throwing himself out of it. “Oh my God, I am so sorry sirs! I thought you were someone else!”

He yanked off his mask, and Steve wasn't surprised in the least to find that he was, in fact, a kid. He was a teenager, technically, with big eyes, a round face and curly light brown hair, messy from the mask.

Steve forced himself to snap back into focus instead of continuing to stare at the boy. “Clearly. Now, will you get these off?”

“Oh, yes, of course! I'm so sorry, I'm so so sorry, I'm a big fan--”

“Shut up and focus,” Steve snapped, making the boy’s eyes go incredibly bigger. He stopped talking instantly, like he’d just been yelled at by a teacher.

He pulled out something from one of his baggy pockets-- were those safety scissors?-- and quickly began cutting away.
As soon as Steve was free Peter was standing right in front of him, blocking his way. He was about the same height as Steve, which pissed Steve off to no end. “I really am sorry, mister Steve Rogers sir. I’m Peter, Peter Parker.”

He reached out his hand to shake and Steve grabbed it, using it as leverage to yank Peter forwards and grab the scissors from his other hand. He shoved past him, making a beeline for Bucky. As soon as Bucky was freed, Steve ripped his knife from where it was embedded in the drywall and launched it at Peter, knowing full well the boy would duck out of it’s way. Steve stormed forwards and slammed Peter against the wall, his elbow to the boy’s neck. Peter raised his hands, looking panicked but not fighting back.


Peter didn't hold back. Apparently, he was Peter Parker, A.K.A. Spiderman, which was what the whole pajama situation was about. According to him, no one knew that he was Spiderman “except for my Aunt May, because she found out when… things happened, and my best friend Ned, because I told him, and also this girl MJ, who guessed and got it right!”

He was from Queens, but was in Mississippi tracking down the man who killed his Uncle Ben. “It was my fault,” Peter blubbered, “I should've gotten home in time, I should've been there to protect him, I was supposed to be back by then anyways but I found this old computer in the trash and I wanted to take it home and when I got there…” Real tears welled up in his eyes. Steve huffed and stepped back, giving him the space to hide his face in his hands.

“How old are you?” Bucky asked behind Steve.

“16,” Peter said in a strained voice. He rubbed his eyes, forcing himself to look at the others. He looked like a puppy that someone had kicked, who didn't even care that he'd been kicked; he just wanted to keep playing fetch and chase his tail and cuddle.

“Jesus,” Bucky muttered.

“And your powers?” Steve glowered. He didn't have time for this emotional bullshit. He was still hot and tired and he did not allot time in his schedule for super-powered runaways.

“I got bit by a radioactive spider, so I can climb up walls and sense things and stuff,” Peter said glumly, rubbing his eyes again. “And I made the webbing myself. I really am sorry--”

“Steve, catch,” Bucky said before Steve could tell the kid to shut up again. Steve turned in time to see the water bottle hurtling towards him, which he caught with two hands. He was capable of catching with one, but with Bucky’s enhanced strength, sometimes that wasn't the best idea. “Spiderboy,” Bucky warned.

Peter caught the water bottle one handed without looking. He sniffled. “It's Spiderman, actually. It’s just… nevermind. I'm sorry Mister Captain America sir, I didn't mean to get in your guys’ way. I was just looking around for somewhere to stay the night and this place was supposed to be abandoned, so when you came in I thought it was because of me. I didn't mean--”

“Drink your water,” Steve ordered, trying not to sound too mean. The kid was practically crying, for God’s sake. Steve could stand to at least try to be gentle.

Peter listened, gulping down half the bottle. Steve sipped at his own water, wanting to chug it too but refusing on morals.

He wandered into the kitchen where Bucky was standing against the counter, looking at Peter and
pretending he wasn't analyzing his every move.

“<Hey kid, I think your suit looks stupid>,” Bucky intoned in German. Peter just looked at him sadly.

“<What should we do?>” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged, the gesture so small Steve hardly caught it. “<Offer him a protein bar?>”

“<You can’t be serious.>”

Bucky shrugged again, and took a sip from his own water bottle. “<You may have given up on your character, but I haven’t on mine. The kid thinks I’m Captain America, I don’t want to let him down.>” He grabbed a protein bar from the drawer he’d stashed them in and tossed it to Peter. “Here, kid. You look like you could use it.”

Peter caught it one handed again, looking at the wrapper and then at Bucky. He did look like he could use a snack or two. If his story was true, he’d somehow managed to sneak from New York to Mississippi, while potentially being chased.

Peter’s eyes slipped from Bucky to lock on Steve. “Is it poisoned?”

Steve crossed his arms. “Why don’t you eat it and find out?”

“It’s not poisoned,” Bucky said, ignoring Steve as easily as second nature. “Here, Stevie’s going to have one too to prove it. I’m going to get something else.”

He gave Steve another bar, and Steve switched between scowling at Peter to scowl at Bucky, then scowl at that bar. He made eye contact with Peter. “They’re both poisoned. He’s just trying to off us both at the same time.”

“Mm,” Bucky hummed happily, on his hands and knees digging in one of the cupboards. “Finally. Some peace and quiet.”

Steve unwrapped his protein bar, but mostly so he could throw the wrapper at Bucky. The plates in his arm shuddered, but beside that he showed no signs of noticing.

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Peter became friendly quickly, adjusting to Steve’s scowling and ignoring it. “I was a part of your fan club, back home. The Avengers one, I mean, which includes you guys, I guess, which is really weird to say out loud. I mean, obviously I know you’re Avengers, but--”

“Mm-hmm?” Steve hummed casually, rubbing his temples.

“Anyways, there were about six or seven of us, just like you guys! We all had our favorites too--Flash would freak out if he met you, mister Captain America sir, he chose you as his favorite. He wanted to choose Iron Man, but he’d already been taken, but I think he likes you better anyways.”

Bucky sat on the armrest of the couch casually, like he wasn’t purposely sitting as far away as possible from Peter. Not because of Peter, of course, but because Bucky wasn’t having a good touch day. Or a good touch decade.
Bucky smiled, trying to make it look natural. It didn't. “Call me Bucky.”

Peter visibly lit up. “Okay! Thank you, Mister Bucky Captain America sir, that's really generous of you. I really liked your comic book by the way--"

“Shoot me,” Steve grumbled.

“--I read it when I was eight, and then reread it when I was ten, and then reread it when--"

“Right,” Steve interrupted.

“And I never thought that you could still be alive! I have to tell you, mister Bucky Captain America sir, I was so excited after the Battle of Manhattan. I mean, it was horrible, obviously, really bad that it happened, but obviously something good came out of it because you came back and you formed the Avengers!”

Steve leaned back against the couch, smiling lazily. “<I'm going to tell him.>”

“<Do it and I'll tell the kid about the time you tried to play baseball and-- >”

Steve sighed dramatically, waving Bucky off before he could finish. He fixed his eyes on Peter again. “So, you're trying to track down the guy that killed your uncle?”

Peter’s smile dipped before dropping completely. “Yeah. I--”

“What are you planning to do when you find him? Did you say earlier that you just wanted to talk to him?”

Peter shifted uncomfortably. “I… want to talk to him. He needs to know… what he’s done. To my Aunt May. And… but…”

“But?”

“But… I’m not just tracking him so I can talk to him. I… want justice. The whole situation just feels so unfair, you know? I just want… to make things right again.”

“By shooting him in the head?” Bucky suggested carefully.

“No! No, I mean-- I just-- no, I…” Peter looked to Bucky, and then to Steve, silently pleading for help. Neither of them spoke up. Neither of them were sure if they even could anymore. They’d both left a trail of bodies behind them, and it had started with one.

Peter looked desperate enough to do it, too.

Chapter End Notes

!!!!!

It's happening!!!
Creepy Crawlies (And Other Fun Roommates)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“<He’s been traveling on his own for weeks,>” Bucky commented in German. “<We’ll leave here soon enough anyway. It’s the nice thing to do, isn’t it?>”

Steve scowled deeply. He shook his head and turned around, fully planning to snap at Peter that he could stay, when there was a hand on his shoulder pulling him back.

“<Hey, we don’t have to do this. If it’s bothering you-->”

“<I’m fine, I was just planning on going on a drug run.>”

“<He can go with you! Aww, family bonding!>”

Steve slapped his arm lightly, but could feel a smile start to form. He immediately tried to force it away. “Okay Parker, you can crash with us.”

“What, really? Oh my God, this is so exciting, thank--”

Steve made a face. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you to tone it down a bit? I just told you you can sleep on the floor and spend the night trying not to get poisoned by whatever toxic stuff grows here. Learn to react appropriately.”

“But I think this is an appropriate reaction, Mister Rogers sir. If it weren’t for you two, I’d probably be sleeping on a roof tonight, all alone--”

Bucky cooed happily, which threw Peter off guard.

Steve crossed his arms. “Do you wanna make yourself useful?”

“Sure!”

Steve pulled out a wad of cash and pulled off a few bills, shoving them at Peter maybe a bit more forcefully than needed. “Go get us dinner. No Mexican food, and nothing too light. By my calculations, Buck needs around three thousand more calories and I need at least another thousand, and you’ll need somewhere in that range. Sound good?”

“It sounds great Mister Rogers sir, thank you. I’m just going to change out of my uniform and then I’ll do that.”

Steve gave him a plain nod then walked over to the counter Bucky was standing at. “The base was a bust,” he recounted in English, because he felt a little bad about talking so much in German just to exclude the kid. “Any ideas about our next move?”

“The guy said Zola might be at a place in Salt Lake City.” Bucky stopped for a moment when he realized Peter was literally changing his clothes in the living room, right in front of them. He pulled down with costume pants and jumped around for a few moments to get them off, almost tripping and falling on his face. “Cross reference?”

“Okay.” Steve had trouble pulling his gaze away from Peter. Where did a boy with a baby face like his get off having abs? “God, I hope he’s there. Let’s wrap this shit up and go straight into
Steve opened up his posture a little bit, and Bucky moved his arms away from his chest in permission. Steve immediately stepped forwards into the hug, sighing into Bucky’s shirt.

“Okay, I'm-- oh, okay then. I'm going to… go. Grab dinner. I'll, I'll be back soon!”

Steve gave him a thumbs up but besides that didn't move.

Peter came back a while later with takeout Italian food, and even Steve had to admit, it was nice having a personal errand boy. It was already getting late by the time they ate, so after they'd cleaned up Steve went to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

“I'm taking the couch,” he proclaimed when he got back. “Buck, at my nine, Peter, the corner’s all yours.”

Peter was already in the corner. He glanced up at Steve, his face bathed in electronic light.

“What’re you doing?”

The boy seemed to flush. “I uh, I'm texting my Aunt May. I sorta, kinda ran away against her wishes after Uncle Ben died, so I try to text her every night so she won’t get worried.”

“Oh my God,” Steve grumbled, flopping on the couch. “Bucky, come 'ere. I think I just realized what an asshole I am.”

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Steve woke up to the familiar feeling of a hand brushing through his hair. He snuggled a bit closer to Bucky’s chest, ignoring the fact that he was basically laying on top of him.

Bucky tapped his cheek and Steve opened his eyes, staying silent. Bucky was looking at him expectantly.

There was a quiet thump followed by a high pitched “Shiiiiii--”

Steve put his hands together, miming a spider, and Bucky nodded. They waited, listening for more sounds.

A few seconds later, there was the sound of pouring cereal, though it sounded much slower than normal.

Steve rolled his eyes and sat up, looking over his shoulder. “Peter, what are you doing?”

Peter jumped. “Mister Rogers! I'm sorry, did I wake you up, I was trying to be quiet.”

“No, but you woke Bucky up,” Steve said honestly, then let out an “Ow!” when Bucky jabbed him in the ribs. “Cut it out!”

Bucky poked him again and Steve all but fell on top of him. He twisted around and started tickling Bucky, going for the spots he knew he was most ticklish and not stopping until the plates in Bucky’s arm whirred loudly. Bucky shoved him off but Steve just climbed back on top of him, trying to give him a wet willie.
Bucky made a very Soldier-ly grunt and shoved him again. “Next time,” Steve promised, grinning as he made his way to the kitchen.

Peter was staring at him with wide eyes, which may or may not have been his default. He stood as still as a statue, arms crossed defensively. Steve let his smile drop and walked up to him, making Peter lean away. Steve jerked towards him and Peter flinched back.

“Stevie,” Bucky warned from the living room. “Stop being mean.”

“You can’t even see what I’m doing,” Steve said without breaking eye contact with the Spider-ling.

“I don’t have to. You’re scaring him.”

Steve narrowed his eyes and Peter stepped back.

“I-I, I made breakfast,” he managed.

Steve glanced at the counter, where three bowls of dry cereal sat with spoons in them. “Buck, did you buy cereal?”

“No.”

“It’s mine,” Peter said, raising his hand then lowering it when he apparently realized he wasn't in class. “Since, you know, you guys bought dinner. It’s only fair.”

“Fuck fairness,” Steve grumbled, dropping the intimidation act and sliding onto the counter, grabbing a bowl. “If you get a hand out, take it.”

“What Stevie means is, we’re happy to share,” Bucky translated. “Don’t worry about it.”

Steve narrowed his eyes at him. “Fuck you.”

Bucky walked past him and gave him a little kiss on the cheek. Steve ignored him and went back to his cereal, though he dropped the scowl.

Peter didn't seem to know what to do. “Oh. Oh, wow, that's... I kinda thought, you know, since you slept together-- I, I mean on the couch together, not like, together together--”

Steve made a go on gesture, which on him looked more like what's your point?

Peter flushed. “Just... congrats. Congrats— congratulations guys, that's, great.”

“What is?”

Somehow, Peter managed to turn even redder. “That you're... you know.”

“Queer?” Steve offered, raising an eyebrow. “Buck, do you remember Danny Olvio? I wonder if his nose ever healed right.”

“He didn't mean it as an insult,” Bucky said quietly. “At least... you didn't, right Peter?”

“What?” At this point, Peter’s ears turned red. “No, no! Of course not, there’s nothing wrong with being gay, of course--”

“Good,” Steve snapped. “Because we ain't.”
“Oh. Oh. Mister Rogers sir, I am so sorry, I just--"

“Shuddup and eat your cereal,” Bucky said simply. “Stevie’s real sensitive, that’s all.”

“How would you know? Like you just told him, we ain’t doin’ each other, how would you know if I'm sensitive?”

Peter looked mortified, but Bucky just grinned and threw some of his cereal at Steve. “Shuddup. You’d make a horrible wifey, you can never keep your trap shut.”

“I think that’d make me an excellent wifey,” Steve leered, grinning from ear to ear. “I’m always open.”

Bucky hurled the box of cereal at him, which Steve deflected, cackling loudly. Peter crumpled to the floor, looking absolutely horrified.

*Good*, Steve thought smugly.

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Later that morning Peter had tried to sneak out, which worked great for him. The two super soldiers were looking at him before he’d even gotten the window all the way open.

“I… have a doctor’s appointment,” Peter lied, one leg dangling out the window. “Um, I have the flu. In my… back. So I really gotta go, but I’ll be back for dinner, should I, I mean, I could pick something up, if you wanted.”

Steve leaned against the couch, still standing. “You’re going to a doctor’s appointment in your spider costume?”

“It’s a suit, you know like… like… it’s a special doctor.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“So I’m just going to… yeah.”

“Is this about your whole revenge not-murder thing?” Steve asked casually, fiddling with a loose thread. “You know where the guy is?”

Peter shifted uncomfortably. “I… I have an idea. A lead.”

“Cool. Give me one minute. Just need to get shoes.”

Peter continued to stare at him as Steve slid on his shoes, rolling his shoulders. “Great. Sweetie, I'm taking Peter to school, we’ll be back before too long.” He leaned over and kissed Bucky on the forehead. Bucky had laid back down on the couch, and though he didn’t say it, Steve knew he was still having a rough time with the memories.

“You need me to come with?” Bucky grumbled.

“Nah, we got this. Ready?”

Peter’s mouth was open like he wanted to say something, but didn’t *really* want to say it. “Mister
Rogers sir, I just… you don't even fight, do you? Like, aren't you the, you know, I.T. guy? No offense, I just--"

Steve pulled out a knife and threw it underhand at Peter. “Catch.”

And Peter caught it. His hand wrapped around the handle first, and his eyes widened second, processing. “Um--"

“Are you taking the shield?” Bucky mumbled from the couch.

“It’s too light out.”

“But your six--"

“Peter can watch my six, ain't that right Parker? Let's go.”

Bucky, ever the loving friend, completely ignored his wishes and tossed the shield Steve’s way. Steve caught it and slung it on his back holster, which admittedly, he was already wearing, possibly for tactical reasons, possibly for aesthetic.

He took the knife back and all but shoved Peter out of the window. Peter caught the side of the wall and scrambled down, not even using handholds. He just… stuck.

Steve followed behind him, though it admitted took him more time. The super-serum did a lot of random things, but it definitely did not make him sticky.

Peter took them through a few backstreets and allies, and Steve could feel his heartbeat even out, his eyes flicking around in a subtle, natural way, analyzing and calculating easily.

After exploring for a while, Peter directed them to the top of a small building, only three stories high. “It’s an apartment building, I think. I don’t know where the guy is, but…”

Steve made a non-committal noise, looking up at the building.

“I usually start at the top and work my way down,” Peter admitted shyly, sounding a little embarrassed. “But if you wanted, we could--"

Steve ignored him and began climbing up the side of the building, forcing himself to go a bit faster than normal. Peter followed behind him, kindly going at Steve’s pace. At least he wasn't actively trying to embarrass him.

They got in through a window on the third floor, which Peter pushed open instead of breaking. Steve allowed himself to follow Peter silently, reminding himself that Peter’s enemies, to his knowledge, weren’t Hydra. If he had to fight, he needed to at least try to be non-lethal.

The building seemed strangely quiet. Peter looked at each door but didn’t stop walking. Meanwhile, Steve tried to put his enhanced hearing to use and listen for anything abnormal, but the only abnormal thing was that there was nothing to listen to.

Peter lead them to apartment 6B and knocked on the door.

Steve blinked. “Are you serious?”

“What? They said this is where he was staying!”

A older woman poked her head out the door. “Yes?”
“Hi, uh, I was wondering if you know a guy named Spike. I heard he lived here.”

She made a face. “What kind of name is Spike? I’m sorry, I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“Miss, could I just ask--”

“Goodbye now,” she said and slammed the door in his face.

Steve pulled out a knife, using it to get out the dirt from under his fingernails. “That went well, slugger. You showed her.”

“I’m not here to show her anything,” Peter grumbled, then louder “Ma’am? I just had a question, I’d really appreciate it if--”

Peter jolted forwards and collapsed, dragging Steve down with him a millisecond before the **BANG** of the gun echoed through the hallway. Steve knew how guns worked, knew that the bullet was released first and the sound came after, but he had never felt it so vividly.

Steve jumped in front of Peter and put his back to the shooter, knowing the shield would buy them at least a few more seconds. “Peter, where’s the bullet? Where were you hit?”

Peter was breathing heavily, eyes wide again. “The bullet,” he repeated. “Wait, were you hit?”

Two more bullets echoed through the hallway, deflecting back off of the shield in a way that made Steve jerk forwards from the force. “I’m fine, but weren’t you hit?”

“I-I-I don’t think so. Mister Rogers sir, why are they shooting at us?”

Steve grunted and pulled Peter up to a crouch. It would have been easier if he was wearing a shield harness too. “I think your lead was right. Otherwise, we just got involved in something we don’t want to be involved in. Can you run?”

“Yes, I think, I just--”

“Then run.” Steve leapt to his feet and yanked Peter up with him, shoving him ahead so the shield could still protect them. No more bullets rang out, and when Steve looked behind him, no one was there. He pulled the shield onto his arm.

They sprinted to the end of the hallway and turned down another. Someone stepped out from a doorway with a gun pointed at them, and Steve just had time to hide his torso behind the shield, but Peter was still in front of him. The person pulled the trigger and Peter launched himself against the wall, jumping from wall to wall and them climbing across the ceiling, dodging the bullets easily. Steve managed to shoved him out of the way in time to retrieve a knife and throw it. It didn’t hit the man’s forehead like he’d aimed; instead it hit low on their shoulder. They yelled and grabbed at the knife, yanking it out. Steve was on them in three seconds flat, ripping the knife out of their hand and slamming his foot against their chest. They went down and groaned in pain, curling into a ball.

Steve grabbed Peter’s arm and kept running. “Let’s go. There’s probably more of them.”

Peter stared at Steve with his horrible goggle eyes. “You just stabbed a guy! Is he okay? Is he dead?”

“Fingers crossed,” Steve grumbled, then shoved Peter out the window.
He hurdled the window and clung the shield to his chest, bracing for impact. It was only three stories, and the vibranium shield would absorb the worst of the kinetic energy.

Instead of the pressure going into his arms, Steve was yanked up from the small of his back. His limbs flailed outwards, his spine aching in pain.

“Mister Steve Rogers sir! Don’t worry, I’ve got you!”

Steve swung wildly as Peter tried to lower him. Just as he was starting to slow down, the line went slack and Steve fell to the ground, his entire body buzzing from the impact on the shield. Peter fell beside him, though notably more graceful.

“We have to work on that,” Steve decided, scrambling to his feet. Together they took off, sprinting at a super-soldier pace as someone shot at them again: one two three. Then the bullets stopped, either because they were out of range or (more likely) because their assailant was using something dumb like a revolver.

They took the long way back until they could both be sure they weren’t being trailed. Only then did they slow to a walk, still on the lookout.

As soon as they climbed back into the apartment, Steve groaned and flopped on the couch. Bucky moved over quickly, ready for action. His eyes were wide—granted, no one’s eyes could ever get as big as Peter’s, but Bucky’s eyes weren’t quite as shadowed as they normally were. “What happened?”

“We got shot at,” Steve whined.

“And?” Bucky asked seriously.

Steve rolled his eyes. *Fuck my life.*

“Mister Rogers stabbed someone,” Peter said, his voice no longer quite so muffled, meaning he’d taken off his mask. “I think he killed them.”

“They killed themself,” Steve grumbled. “Not a super deadly wound. I might have even let them keep the knife.” Steve’s stomach rolled, twisting itself up painfully. “But there’s still a chance. There were other people in the building to call for help; I’m sure they’re fine.”

“The serum?” Bucky guessed.

“Goddamn righteousness. Why can’t I just be violent and cheery like you?”

Bucky ‘violently and cheerily’ prowled over to where Peter was, and Steve sat up just enough to watch curiously. Peter froze, stepped back a bit when Bucky came up to him like he was in his way.

Bucky grunted.

“Stay still,” Steve advised. “Just let him do his thing.”

Peter nervously obeyed, staying in place as Bucky looked him up and down. Bucky circled him, at one point prodding at his back and making Peter flinch, but from surprise more than hurt. Bucky pinched the costume-y hoodie, pulling the fabric a bit before letting go. “Your costume is stupid,” he grumbled, stating it as if it were an undeniable fact. Which, well, he wasn’t wrong. “Heavy fabric. Probably gets hot easily. A tighter costume would be better, like a… diving suit. Constant pressure, ideal for holding in organs and managing blood loss. A second skin.” He considered. “Also, the
hood could get caught on something.”

He yanked Peter back by his hood to prove his point and Peter stumbled, glancing at Steve like he might be chastised for moving off of his spot.

Then Bucky was right up in Peter’s face, except Bucky was taller than Peter, so he was looming a bit. “Tactical purposes?”

Peter blinked. “Uh, what?”

“Does the hood have tactical purposes?”

“I don’t… no, it doesn't, or at least I haven't come up with any yet. It was just kind of… there.”

“Then remove it.” Bucky’s eyes flickered lower, then back up. “Injuries?”

“Besides being freaked the frick out? I'm fine.”

The Soldier grinned, with teeth, which was extremely unnerving. “You're not as nervous anymore. You didn’t s-t-t-t-t-utter.”

Steve snorted, trying to cover it with a cough.

“Oh, I guess I didn't, did--"

“Don’t ruin it.”

Bucky hesitated, then opened his arms, like he wanted a hug but couldn't remember exactly how it went. Peter cooed “Yeah, I'll hug you big guy.”

Peter hugged him and Bucky tactically wrapped his arms around Peter, catching him in a hold. He craned his head over Peter’s shoulder, sniffing obnoxiously while Peter did his best not to freak out.

Then, just like that, Peter was released and Bucky was prowling back over to the couch, that horrifying smile gone. “Data concludes: report accurate. Target smells of gunpowder, cement, and mold.”

“Target?” Steve chided carefully.


“Aww, Peter, isn’t that so sweet?”

Peter had his arms crossed and appeared to be a little unsure how to feel. He was definitely blushing. “What? What did he call me?”

“A friend. Aww, Buck. You softie.”

Bucky seemed to be doing his best to hold back a smile. “Analyze you next?”

“As long as I can stay laying down,” Steve said, smiling lazily. “You already saw me walk in,” he defended.

“And then you promptly c collapses,” Bucky agreed. He made a face at the stutter.

Steve scrunched up his nose. “A new tick?”
For a millisecond, the Soldier retreated and Bucky stood in his place. “It better not fucking be.” He blinked, and went back to the Soldier.

Steve gestured him forwards. “Whatever. Come ‘ere, do your thing, you’ll feel better when you do.”

The Soldier happily trotted over, using his hands—both of them—to pat Steve down like he was doing a weapons search. Steve stayed still, smiling contentedly and waiting for Bucky to confirm that he was injury free. Once he did, he nuzzled up to Steve obnoxiously, making him laugh as Bucky sniffed him.

“Gunpowder. Cement. Mold.” *Sniff.* “You fucker, where are you bleeding?”

“Side of the shield dug into my ear when I threw myself out of the building,” Steve said casually, tilting his head to the other side and pointing at it. “Routine.”

Bucky made a face, then proceeded to sniff the other side of Steve’s neck, longer than strictly necessary.

“You find anything interesting?”


Peter’s jaw dropped open. “How did he--”

“It was a revolver, six rounds, though nice try.”

Bucky whined like the world’s biggest and deadliest puppy and clambered up on the couch, on top of Steve, who was still half-sitting. He nuzzled his ear into Steve’s chest and didn’t settle down until Steve started stroking his hair.

Steve couldn’t help grinning as he caught Peter’s eye. “He’s like a bloodhound. Or at least, he pretends to be. Though he’s usually a lot more subtle about the analyzing.”


“Yeah, yeah. You did great Buck.”

Bucky preened at the praise and hid his face in Steve’s shirt. Steve kept petting his hair, perfectly content.

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Peter fell into their routine almost unsettlingly quickly.

Steve was always the last one to wake up in the morning, though he wasn’t sure whether Bucky or Peter was the first to get up. Judging from the glares Bucky sent Peter sometimes when it was still early, they were having a silent competition, which Steve was more than happy to not be a part of. On the nights that Bucky slept, they shared the couch, which would have been a horrible idea if either of them had any sort of personal space issues remaining. On the nights that Bucky didn’t sleep, he sat on the couch and Steve could use his legs as a pillow while Bucky used his StarkPhone.

Peter, true to his word, appeared to text his Aunt May every night, though never for long. Steve got the sneaking suspicion that he never replied to her texts, just sent out messages of his own to let her know he was okay.

Peter, surprisingly, actually was decently funny. He had a sassy streak, and once Steve realized that
the boy muttered comebacks under his breath they began having much more fun. He was also sarcastic, like the people on the internet, and Steve actually missed his first few jokes because of the deadpan Peter said them in.

They were talking about Peter’s powers on one of the first days when Steve asked if he was poisonous like some real spiders. “I don’t know,” Peter admitted, and then his expression flicked to default. “I’ll get back to you though, as soon as I figure out how to self-cannibalize.”

They were quiet for a few moments before Bucky let out an obnoxious snort. Peter’s eyes flickered over to him, grinning proudly.

Peter adjusted to Bucky rather well, all things considered. He was expecting Captain America, like from the comic book and the movies. As soon as he dropped his expectations, things started going a lot smoother. He still gave Steve weird looks sometimes, especially when Bucky switched between personas and started acting very un-Bucky-like. But after a few times of seeing him shift, Peter managed to keep up with the changes, taking his cues from Steve on how to act.

Unlike the Avengers, Peter figured out how Bucky actually worked. He never made the same mistake twice. On the fourth day, he put his hand on Bucky’s metal arm casually and when Bucky tensed up, removed his hand immediately. It didn’t happen again.

Peter became the designated errand boy, practically swan diving out of the window at even the smallest request. At first, Steve thought it was because he was trying to earn his keep, but after a while he began to notice how antsy Peter got when he was trapped in the apartment for too long. One night, about a week in, a hailstorm hit and confined Peter to waiting until the next day to swing around the city like the urban Tarzan. He pouted, pushing his lips inwards and puffing out his cheeks, then proceeded to climb up the wall, hang onto the ceiling upside down, and attempt to weave himself a nest out of his synthetic webbing.

Peter’s powers were intriguing, if not creepy. Steve was just holding out hope he didn't start laying eggs.

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Steve was doing his weekly scroll through the Avengers tag on Tumblr when Peter said “Why is Thor naked in that drawing?”

Steve flinched so hard he almost choked on his own tongue. He looked up at the ceiling, narrowing his eyes. “What the fuck are you doing up there, Parker?”

“Oh, you know.” Peter ran a hand through his hair casually, like hanging off the ceiling by only three limbs was a normal thing for him. “Just… hanging out.”

“You got him to twitch,” Bucky observed. “I can never get him to twitch.”

“What do you mean, I twitch every time I see your face,” Steve said affectionately. He took a moment to consider his words. “Because you’re ugly. It’s a frightened twitch, just to clarify.”

“Aww, Stevie. You're gonna make me blush.”
Peter dropped down behind Steve and looked over his shoulder at the phone. Steve quickly scrolled past the nude fanart-- and Thor wasn’t even an Avenger, so that was just rude-- and glared up at him. “Do you need something?”

Peter shrugged. “No, just. I just wonder what it would be like, like, what is it like--”

“You’re doing it again.”

“I just wanna know what it’s like to be an Avenger.”

Steve hesitated, then patted the couch next to him. Peter’s face lit up and he scrambled onto the couch, almost crushing Steve’s legs in the process.

“Well,” Steve said quietly, like it was gossip. “First of all, I use the term ‘Avenger’ very lightly, because for the past year everyone in my team thought that I was a fucking computer tech who ran off during every fight.”

“Okay,” Peter said in his I’m-just-happy-to-be-included voice. “Is that not what you actually did?”

“No, what I actually did was stab a bunch of aliens to death and destroy a building.”

“Wait, were you the one who did the Evans Building? That was amazing!”

“Yeah, well, everyone thought it was the Hulk, but the Hulk was actually pounding away at the building across the street.”

“No.”

“Yes!”

“Wait, do the other Avengers know?”

Steve grinned. “They do now. They found out because-- well, the details aren’t important. But as soon as they found out, we disbanded, temporarily, or so they say. Tony claimed that everyone is really busy with their own things, but he was really upset because he realized I’d been lying.”

“Have you heard from any of the others?”

“I haven’t, but I think Bucky still texts them.”

Peter leaned closer, full invested in the conversation. “What are you two doing now then?”

“Fighting Hydra,” Steve said casually. They’d mentioned Hydra in a conversation the day before, so he’d already explained the situation with Hydra and Bucky to him. “The past week I’ve been decrypting these files Fury sent us from them.”

“Who’s Fury?”

“He’s irrelevant.” Steve waved the question aside. “But in a few days, when we figure some stuff out, we’re going to go and take someone down. Then we’ll keep going until we find another job to do, and then we’ll do that too.”
“So, if you’re not Avengers anymore, what are you?”

“I feel like we’re assholes above everything else,” Bucky commented dryly.

Steve ignored him. “We’re assassins.”

“Oh.” Peter’s stomach didn’t seem to like that, and Steve wondered vaguely whether he had righteousness issues too. “I’ve never… well, I’ve never killed someone before.”

“What crimes have you committed?”

Peter had to think about it. “I’ve jaywalked. Downloaded music illegally online. Ooh, I’ve trespassed! Sometimes I don’t realize I’m trespassing when I’m being Spiderman, but I haven’t gotten in trouble yet. What about you?”

“Well, the first time I killed a man was in 1940 and it’s all been downhill since then.”

“Oh!”

“Just the bad people,” Steve promised. “We’re not serial killers. It’s… justice.”

“Justice,” Peter repeated slowly. “You sound like Captain America.”

“Fuck Captain America.”

Bucky walked past, snacking on something. “You wish.”

“Yes, fuck Captain America!” Peter said with a bit too much enthusiasm. He immediately paled. “I am so sorry, I don’t know where they came from and it didn’t sound as sexual in my mind—”

“Fuck Captain America!” Steve said instead, pumping his fist in the air.

“Fuck Captain America!”

“Fuck Captain America!”

Bucky continued eating. “I feel attacked.” He ticked his head to the side. “How about we fuck Nomad instead?”

“Who’s Nomad?”

Steve raised his hand, which meant that he had definitely been spending way too much time around Peter. “Technically, it was my superhero-slash-justice-seeking-vigilante name from when I was on my sabbatical.”

“What’d you do on your sabbatical?”

“Wandered around America and killed Nazis.”

“Oh!”

“He also took up a few hobbies,” Bucky said casually. “Like doing drugs and hallucinating.”

“Oh!”
“Oh!” Steve mocked.

“Oh!” Bucky joined in.

Peter pouted. “You guys are teaming up against me, two against one. Captain America, this situation is unjust.”

“Your mom’s unjust.”

“My mom’s dead.”

Steve rolled his eyes.

“Kid, everyone we fuckin’ knew is dead or in a fuckin’ retirement home. My little sister died of old age six years ago.”

“Don’t try to throw a pity party with us,” Steve suggested. “It won’t work. Between the two of us, we’ve got almost two centuries of fuckery.”

Peter’s shoulders hunched in and Steve tried to analyze Peter’s body posture. He looked… well, he looked upset. Was it because of his mom? Or was it because of Steve and Bucky? It couldn't have been that; Peter had only known them for a week.

“Stevie,” Bucky said, interrupting Steve’s train of thoughts. He was looking at his phone. “We have our next hit. Woman in Oregon, doctor working with Hydra. Well.

She’s not working. Anymore. She retired early. Is living in a fancy condo.”

He tossed Steve the phone to see. “Marieanne Rilke. You remember her?”

Bucky glanced at Peter. “If you want. I can say. Answer. In German.”

“No, it’s fine, I can handle--”

“Surgeon. No anesthesia. It took too long to put me in c-c-cryo.” He scowled. “Fuck. St-teve, you can stand guard, I call dibs on int-t-terrogating her.”

“No arguments here.” Steve looked at the phone, verifying the time. “Let’s leave tomorrow night. We’ll take the bus.”

“Train’ll be faster.”

“That’s a whole lot of time to have my eyes closed.”

“It’ll be hot,” Bucky promised. “Nothing at all to remind you of the cliffs.”

Steve groaned, leaning back against the armrest. “Pete, how strong are your webs? Strong enough to garrote someone?”

“Um, I uh, don’t know Mister Rogers sir, who do you want to garrote?”

“Myself.”

“Oh!” Bucky mocked before Peter could say it.
The sun had almost set that night when Peter came crashing in through the window, still wearing the ridiculous costume. “I got a lead! I got a lead! I got a--” he ripped his mask off, his hair disheveled and staticy.

Steve and Bucky were sitting at the couch with their feet laced together, neither surprised by Peter’s dramatic entrance. Bucky looked back at Steve and sniffled. “And then I said Mama, where’s Jack? And she said, Sweetie, Jack got hit by the milktruck. Jack is dead. I think most of my issues stem from that dog.”

Steve patted his knee in a *there there* manner.

Peter made a face like he wasn’t sure how he was supposed to react. “Is this a bad time?”

Bucky sniffled again and hid his face in his hands, shaking his head. Steve turned to Peter. “What’s up?”

“I went back to the apartment,” Peter said, pulling something out of his pocket. “You know, the one… um… wherewegotshotat and I went to the front desk and asked about their guests and said that I was looking for my dad, Spike, in apartment 6B, and the receptionist got this weird look on her face and asked for a last name and I told her I didn’t know because he ran off before the shotgun wedding and so she checked her record books and said there was no Spike, but the last guy’s name was Dennis Carradine and so I asked about him and she said that he left about a month ago and said he was headed to his condo in Vegas and she had a forwarding address for his mail--” Peter stopped to inhale sharply; he didn’t stop for air throughout his entire rant. “So now I have a real name and an address!”

“Hmm,” Bucky considered. “<I still think my dog story was better.>”

Steve kicked him.

Peter looked in between the two of them. “Isn’t that great?!?”

“Yeah, we’re really happy for you Peter. It’s always a good day when you get a lead on your subject of revenge-murder.”

Peter flushed, ringing his hands. “I was actually wondering… I mean, if you wouldn’t mind… if you’d give me some advice? Like, help me get set up on a bus or train or something, like, I know that this was really temporary, and you didn’t really want to let me stay with you guys for this long, but… a little advice would be nice. Until a few months ago, I’d never really left New York.”

Steve gripped on to the outsides of Bucky’s calves subconsciously, rubbing them softly. He and Bucky muttered back and forth to each other in quiet German before Steve announced “No, we won’t do that.”

Peter went bright red. “Oh. Oh! Well, that’s--”

“You’re coming with us,” Bucky interrupted, cutting him off. “The wifey wants to adopt.”

Peter looked like he might start to hyperventilate.

“In and out, kid, in and out.”
Peter’s eyes snapped up to Steve’s, and he opened his mouth to respond.

“We’ll swing through Vegas on our way to Oregon,” Steve said, waving off his concerns. “You can do your thing, and then you’ll come with us to go Hydra stomping. You’ll stay at the squat, or be backup, something like that.”

Peter blinked rapidly. “I-- I can fight. I could help--”

“We don’t want your help,” Bucky said aggressively. “Not your fight.”

Peter chewed on his lower lip, apparently trying to process the change in plans. “Do I have a choice in the matter?”

Steve half shrugged. “You’re asking two master assassins. I guess you could say no--”

“Ignore him, Stevie’s full of shit. We’d at least give you a head start.”

Peter crossed his arms defensively, like he was trying to intimidate them. It was cute. “You’re two kinda homeless guys traveling across the country killing people. The Avengers don’t like you.”

Bucky’s calves flexed automatically. “You forgot the fact that I'm crazy.”

“Also, I do drugs,” Steve added casually, like it wasn’t a big deal. “And we cuss. And fight. And aren’t very nice.”

“Speaking for yourself, I'm a fuckin’ saint.”

“I’m not very nice,” Steve corrected. “Bucky’s just mean.”

Bucky tried to kick him, but Steve was already holding his calves so it was simply to block.

They both looked back at Peter. The boy exhaled, rubbing his neck. “That’s not good. Aunt May would be so mad…”

“But we’re also Captain America and Nomad, and we may just be the foreleading experts in the world on revenge killing, which could be pretty helpful for you, an amateur in revenge murder. So, there’s that.”

Peter sighed. “I guess it’s settled then.”

Steve grinned.

Fun.

Chapter End Notes

Out of curiosity, what is everyone's opinions on Wanda and some of the other Ultron characters? For future reference ;)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve, for all intents and purposes, was blind. He’d gripped tightly onto Bucky’s shirt and allowed himself to be lead into the train car, and as soon as they’d found seats, had hid his face in the sleeve of Bucky’s (right) shoulder.

Peter talked quietly to Bucky, though his tone didn’t lack his normal excitement. Bucky responded lowly every few moments, just enough to encourage the boy to keep going. Steve tried to listen but everytime he did he felt himself drifting and had to shake himself awake. Falling asleep on a train would not be a good idea.

After Steve had forced himself awake a few times Bucky wrapped an arm around his shoulder, tucking his head to talk to Steve in relaxed German. “<You can sleep if you want.>”

Steve burrowed closer against Bucky’s shirt, mumbling out an “<I don’t wanna.>”

“Why doesn’t he like trains?” Peter asked, whispering as if that would keep Steve from hearing him.

“Don’t ask questions that you don’t want answers to, kid.”

The train swayed lightly as it thundered down the tracks. Steve squeezed his eyes tighter.

Steve forced himself to think about anything but trains. He tried to imagine Peter, sitting to Bucky’s left, probably doing that thing where he sat with his leg crossed over his knee, lounging back in the seat with one arm draped over the seat. Bucky would be sitting upright, but with a phony casual posture, his actual casual posture electrocuted out of him and then re-trained systematically. He’d be looking forwards, but also looking from side to side, but his head wouldn’t move. He would look tired, he was tired, but behind the eye bags he was very, very awake.

Then there was Steve, made smaller by circumstances, wheat blond hair messy and clothes rumpled, eyes closed and body tucked into his friend’s side. Steve tried not to linger on himself too long.

On him, Steve had all of his knifes and his two handguns. Bucky had his own stash of similar weapons, though they rotated so often Steve didn’t bother trying to keep track of how Bucky was armed, just was aware of the fact that Bucky was always armed. The machine guns, Bucky’s beloved Paratroopers, had regretfully been left behind in the tower. The shield was in it’s duffle, shared in between Steve and Bucky’s feet, and Peter was unarmed. Steve supposed the boy had his web shooters, except he only put them on when he put on the rest of his ridiculous pajama costume. They would have to fix that.

Peter let out a quiet “Ow!” and Steve’s head shot up, eyes opening on instinct. Before he could process anything Bucky was shoving his face back into his shirt.

“<It’s nothing>,” he muttered pointedly. “Sorry ‘bout that Peter. Arm spasm.”

Steve could imagine Peter’s red face eerily well. “I’m sorry, sir, did I say something?”

The pause almost said more than the words did. “It actually was an arm spasm. And I actually am sorry. <Fuck, Steve, we need to teach the kid German. Too crowded. English isn’t safe.>”
“Your mom’s not safe.”

Bucky started saying something but quickly cut himself off. Knowing Bucky, he was probably going to say something completely offensive and not okay, like ‘So help me Rogers, I will push you off of this train’, and fuck--

“Peter. Tell Stevie about your school.”

“Oh! Okay, well…”

Steve allowed his body to slowly relax again as he listened to Peter’s stories of food on the cafeteria floor and decathlon geeks and texting without removing his phone from his pocket. Bucky started rubbing Steve’s back too, slowly, like he didn’t even realize he was doing it except of course he knew he was doing it because Bucky could not not know exactly what he was doing all times, every move purposeful, every shift intentional, a wolf on the hunt--

Peter fell into an anecdote about an accidental microwave fire he may or may not have caused, and Steve let himself drift, imagining the scene like he was there.

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Bucky’s arm spasmed again when he was climbing up the side of what was potentially their newest squat, and he fell. It was not like the train because he caught himself. Steve was still not ready for it. He didn't actually remember the ice, but sometimes Steve got glimpses of what could have been memories. A freezer door would open and his body would go OH, or he’d lay too still too long and his muscles would tense up, as if remembering something he didn't. He could close his eyes and almost feel the racing of various hormones spreading throughout his body, trying to do whatever possible to protect him through the winter, no matter how long it was.

They continued heading to Nevada. Peter continued to text his aunt every night, without failure. Steve liked to watch his expression when he did, the way he pulled in his lips and puffed out his cheeks, tugging his eyebrows together like he was trying to scowl but had never been properly taught. He typed and backspaced for less than thirty seconds, then powered down his phone to preserve battery. Steve didn't bring it up.

At one point they hit the gold mine and managed to get a ride on the back of some old guy’s pickup truck through part of New Mexico. Steve was well aware of laws forbidding passengers from riding in the backs of pickup trucks on public roads, but they spent most of the time driving in the country, so there was no fear of being pulled over. There was a cloud cover and it wasn’t even too hot, making the ride almost pleasant.

After subtly watching the driver through the back window for half an hour, Bucky gave up and laid down on the other side of the truck and pretended to nap. While he did that, Steve and Peter pulled out whatever tools and loose fabric they had to try and rig up a system so that Peter could keep his webbing devices on him at all times. Eventually, they managed to get a special strap built so that when Peter flicked his wrists with enough force, the devices twisted into place in his palms.

During their little project, Peter revealed the contents of his bag to Steve, which Steve was pretty sure was some sort of homeless kid version of a trust fall. Peter did not have any notable weapons, though he did have a pocket tool kit for fixing his web slingers. “I made them myself,” Peter admitted. “I bet that if I was given the chance, I could fix Bucky’s arm.”

At that exact moment Bucky’s arm spasmed again, though Steve got the feeling it was more
voluntary than usual. “Maybe. But you’d have to get your hands on it first, which isn’t going to happen.”

“I bet I could convince him. It can’t be nice losing control of your arm like that. What if he’s fighting and it twitches? Someone could get really hurt.”

“And if someone tries to get close enough to his arm to mess with him, that someone is going to get hurt even worse. It’s not your fault Peter, just muscle memory. It’s a safety thing.”

“With all due respect sir, you don’t have to worry about my safety—”

“It’s not about your safety, it’s about Bucky’s. It’s self defense.”

Peter was quiet for a while after that. After too many minutes, Steve grew guilty (ew-- was that a new emotion?) and started up another conversation with him.

The truck dropped them off in a medium-small town somewhere by who-gives-a-fuck and they gathered reserves and searched for a decent squat. There weren’t any close enough, so they climbed onto the roof of a local store and settled in for the night. Peter mixed up more web-juice and offered to take first watch, and Bucky told him to shut up and go to sleep. Steve told Bucky in German that he was an ass, then curled up on his lap. When Peter tried to lay down on the other side of the already small roof, Bucky barked at him in Russian, switched to French, scowled like it was all Peter’s fault, and then ordered him (in accented English) to move his ass closer otherwise he will bite.

“You're a pitbull,” Steve said without much enthusiasm.

“Fuck you. There was a pitbull at the shelter, and she was the sweetest thing I've ever met. A hell of a lot sweeter than you.”

Peter moved his stuff closer and didn't make eye contact with them as he laid down less than two meters away with his back to them.

The next morning, Bucky tried to open a can of fruit when his arm spasmed and he crushed the entire can on accident. For the rest of the day, he didn't let anyone touch him. He also smelled faintly of peaches.

They stopped in a diner so Peter could get a cinnamon roll and Steve could leach some free wifi to check in with Fury when Peter disappeared for a few minutes. Steve noticed a bit too late and muttered “You're watchin’ the kid?”

“Well.”

“Good.” Steve didn't even look up from his phone.

Peter came back a little later with two… people… in tow. One was definitely (probably) a girl, and the other was more ambiguous, but still feminine. They had their arms around each other and wore matching ‘Love Is Love’ shirts.

“Your son told us all about your situation,” the more feminine of the two explained. “And we’d love to help. We’re actually from Nevada, but we came down here last week to get hitched. There’s not much room in the cab, but there’s still plenty in the truck bed if you don’t mind getting close, which I’d bet you don’t.” She (she?) winked at them.
As soon as they'd left, Bucky’s gaze latched onto Peter with an almost audible clicking sound.
“What. Did you tell them.”

Peter blushed and smiled awkwardly. “I just stretched the truth a little. But hey, now we've got a ride! And don’t worry about acting any different. Just do what you normally do, and they won’t have any doubts!”

Unfortunately, they could not do what they normally did because Bucky was convinced he was going to crush Steve’s skull like a can of peaches, and refused to touch him. He ended up sitting in the truck bed with the couch, rug, and suitcases the women (again--?) were for some reason hauling, while Steve and Peter squeezed together in the cab with ‘Margo’ and ‘Reese’. The (couple? Pair?) gave Steve weird looks when he said Bucky wanted space, but as soon as he told them he was a dramatic bitch who smelled they smiled and got far off looks in their eyes.

“Just think, butter-blossom,” Reese said lovingly, taking Margo’s hand. “One day that’ll be us.”

Margo and Peter ‘aww’ed and Steve made a mental note to thoroughly interrogate Peter later. Not interrogate, unless, well-- was waterboarding an extreme method? Was it situationally appropriate? What if Steve gave Peter a thicker cloth, so it wasn’t as bad? Would it be an okay thing to do then, or was waterboarding rude regardless of fabric width?

Steve pondered this as Peter talked to the women (HELP), only speaking when spoken to. At one point, Margo started biting her lip and eyeing the two of them up, before coming out and asking “I hope I’m not intruding, but you’re adopted, right? Or…”

She was looking at Peter, who managed to smile and look mildly panicked at the same time. Steve frowned. “We didn't adopt him.” He wanted to add ‘not technically’, but giving more information than necessary was inadvisable.

“Oh, so you're…”

“His,” Peter said, jerking his head to gesture at Bucky, still sulking at the end of the truck bed.
“And… mom’s. They divorced when… you know… but I was five when it happened,so it never really bothered me. And you know,Steve’s great.”

The couple ( ???) ‘oohed’ and ‘aww’ed and held hands. Steve gave Peter A Look.

“Sometime, I'd like to teach you how to speak German. I think it’d be fun.”

Peter stared back at him like Steve had just said ‘sometime I'd like to bend you backwards over a hotel bathtub and pour water over your face’ which Steve had only thought, not said.

They drove until dark and then some, stopping for gas twice and swinging through a drive through for dinner. They only stopped for real when they reached a cheap motel, and let their freeloading passengers get off. “We live in Ely, Nevada, which is closer to the Utah border so we're going up that way tomorrow and doing a bit more sightseeing. I'm sorry we can't take you farther, but it’s been a pleasure meeting you! Good luck!”

Peter was sincere enough for both him and two bitter assassins, so Steve and Bucky managed to thank them and not-scowl, and it was adequate. They turned around to walk to the front of the motel when Bucky’s arm jerked outwards and hit a metal bench, flipping it over and sending it airborne. They watched as it flipped another time mid air before landing in an adjacent parking lot and setting off a car alarm.
“You know, I think you might wanna get that checked out,” Steve said after a moment of the three of them staring at the minor destruction of property. Not even Peter looked surprised, which really said something about how quickly he’d integrated himself.

Bucky sighed. “What are you suggesting?”

“You know who I’m suggesting.”

“So what, you want me to call ahead? Ask him to get ready, maybe edit his will, just in case?”

“Nah.” Steve licked his lips. “We know where he is. I think we should just show up.”

“You know where he lives?”

“No, but you do. Just… sniff him out or something. Use that fucking obelisk of a nose of yours and lead the fuckin’ way.”

“I think you’ve got a great nose,” Peter added helpfully.

“A great national monument, maybe. It’s like the National Monument, except less discreet.”

“We’ll just show up, then,” Bucky decided, ignoring them. “How’ll we get there?”

“Elbow grease and maybe a few quick blowies. I don’t know, how we always get there? Peter, whaddo you think, could you catch us another ride tomorrow?”

Peter did a weird blinking thing with his eyes, like those animals that could relax and contract their eyelids. “What? No, I don’t think so. Maybe if I can spot more lesbians. Wait, are we not going to Vegas?”

“We’ll go to Vegas,” Steve promised. “We just have to make a little stop first.”

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It took another full day of travel to get to Malibu. They probably could have continued forwards until they got to the house if it weren’t for Peter. Steve and Bucky had left to retrieve lunch while Peter slid on his costume and did his regular patrol. Steve and Bucky had just retrieved sandwiches and were looking for the boy when a car barreled down the street and Peter threw himself in front of it and Steve almost self euthanized, right there, right then. Peter managed to stop the car from running full speed into a crowded bus by throwing himself in between them, and he only appeared to be a Peter pancake for about .5 seconds, or 20 minutes, in subjective time.

As soon as Peter swung off to safety, Bucky and Steve climbed up a fire escape on silent agreement and waited at the top of a building for Peter to swing by. It wasn’t even thirty seconds later that Peter skidded onto the roof, tearing off his mask as he jogged towards them. “Did you see that?! Oh my God, that was the coolest thing I have ever done and that car was like VROOM and the bus was like ‘fuck!’-- I, I’m sorry, it was like frick! And then I was there and it was like ‘Haha, you thought you were going to run into this bus? Not today my friend, not today.’”

Steve crossed his arms.

Peter’s smile immediately dropped. “Oh shit.”

He looked like he was about to run, but before he could Bucky grabbed his arm, holding him in
place while he gave him a thorough visual look over.

Steve began to tap his foot.

“I uh,” Peter started, his glorious stutter making a reappearance. “I know you're, you're going to give me the whole Aunt May talk about my safety and self care and risk versus reward but if I could just, uh, m-make my case I think--”

“I'm not going to lecture you,” Steve said simply. “Are you in pain anywhere?”

Peter blinked. Bucky manhandled his arm up and sniffed under his armpit, immediately recoiling backwards. “Uh, no, not really. It was-- I’ve got a strength factor, you know, like super strength except…”

“Yeah, well you’ll be in pain tomorrow. Come on, let’s get out of this city. Buck?”

“He smells like cinnamon,” Bucky grunted.

“Peter, why do you smell like cinnamon?”

“It’s uh, it’s my natural fragrance. I think my sweat smells like it, which is why--”

“Peter. Why do you smell like cinnamon?”

Peter hung his head. “Because I almost took out a churro cart. But, in my defense, I saved a car from crashing, so that evens it out--”

Steve couldn't help the grin from escaping then. “Okay. Nice. Let’s get going, we’ll get to Malibu then find a squat for Peter to spend the rest of the week at until his muscles stop trying to kill him.” Steve patted Peter on the back. “Nice work kid.”

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Sure enough, the next day Peter was still asleep when Steve woke up. He and Bucky got dressed and ate breakfast in silence, and Steve crawled next to Peter and nudged him gently awake only when they were about to leave.

“Hey Slugger, we’re going to go get Bucky’s arm fixed now. There’s breakfast for when you wake up. And I swear to God, if we get back and you have so much as folded your weird pajama costume, we will be have roasted Peter for dinner. Am I clear?”

Peter groaned into his pillow. “Crystal.”

Poor boy didn't realize how much it’d hurt to throw himself in front of a runaway car. There was a little part of Steve that was proud of him, and a big part that thought Peter deserved all the painful muscular strain he was going through, because again, he’d thrown himself in front of a runaway car.

Steve and Bucky left and managed to take a bus to get within a mile or so of the mansion, and then walked the rest of the way. It was strange, walking with Bucky while also pointedly trying to give him his space.

They arrived at the mansion and knocked on the door. Steve ignored the urge to jump into one of the manicured bushes to hide.
The door opened about three minutes later. Tony was wearing work clothes, his clothes, skin, and hair all smeared with oil. But as soon as he saw them, his back straightened, adopting a businesslike stance almost naturally. “Hmm. And here I was thinking I was going to have a good day.”

“Bucky’s arm is malfunctioning,” Steve said blandly.

Bucky’s arm twitched outwards and he punched the nice potted tree that was standing next to them. It fell, and the ceramic pot broke.

Tony frowned. “I see.”

“We want you to fix it.”

“And why should I help you?”

“Because you want to fix it.”

Tony shrugged. “Fine. Come on in. I was doing a highly reactive experiment that, left unchecked will probably blow up California, but I suppose I can ignore it to help you.”

“Great.”

As Tony lead them to his basement, he commented “Hey shrimpy, did you get a new cologne? You smell like cinnamon sugar.”

“Nah, I’ve just been rolling around in the stuff with the hope that someone will lick it off of me, but so far, no luck. The day’s still young, though.”

Tony shot him a look. “I will never get used to your new personality. You were so much nicer when you were pretending.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s kinda the point.”

Tony tapped a code into the glass wall of his workshop and hip checked the door open. “Same sitch’ as normal. Robocop, to the bench, Napoleon, get us snacks. The kitchen’s not hard to find; I’m craving barbeque chips and a tomato.”

Steve rolled his eyes and retrieved the food, along with some snacks for him and Bucky. When he got back downstairs Tony was already messing with holographs. Steve tossed him the tomato without thinking and Tony fumbled for it, barely saving it from falling. “Hey, I haven't even started with the jokes yet. Wait until the main act to throw fruit at me.”

“My bad,” Steve said, passing some of the snacks to Bucky. “I saw your face and thought a bear got into the lab.”

“And you calmly tossed a tomato at it?”

“It was a courtship offering.” Bucky mumbled.

Steve shoved him, climbing over the bench to sit next to him.

Tony bit into his tomato like it was an apple. “So. What have you boys been up to since the divorce?”

“Hmm, hmm, good. I've been designing new technology for one of the most profitable companies of all time, attending horrible social events and charity nights with Pepper, and creating new Iron Man suits, so I've been pretty relaxed, despite the whole ‘not-sleeping’ thing.”

“We should be friends,” Bucky deadpanned. “We could hang out at night while healthy people sleep.”

Tony beamed. “Let’s do it. You can have a sleepover tonight, if your keeper will let you.”

Despite the rest of Bucky remaining impassive, his entire arm shuddered, the plates opening and shifting. Steve wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen such an intense reaction before.

He was about to tell Tony to knock it off, but Tony beat him to the draw. “Okay, I won’t say that again. Noted.”

Bucky looked a little embarrassed, which probably meant more than usual considering how little emotion he was showing that day. The panels on his arm fluttered back to their original position.

“Before I start, is there anything else I'm supposed to remember? Don’t call Steve your keeper, avoid unnecessary touching… what else?”

“Don’t touch the arm,” Bucky grunted. “Though I guess this is the one exception to that.” He looked up at Tony a bit too sincerely. “I'll try my best not to break your neck.”

“Noted, and appreciated. Wait, so does that mean no one touches your arm? I'm honored.”

“I’m letting you only because your suits or Jarvis will probably be able to restrain me before I can kill you,” Bucky admitted glumly. “Don’t get too big of a head.”

“Too late! And to think, it’s only been a few minutes and we’re already taking new steps in our relationship. What should we try next? Prolonged eye contact? Anal?”

Steve blinked, a chip halfway to his mouth. “How about no?”

“Shut up pleb, you're not valid.”

Bucky grinned. “Pleb.”

“I will fight you.”

Tony popped the last bit of the tomato into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “You know, you say that a lot but you never seem to follow through.”

“That’s just because I was pretending to be non-lethal. I can’t very well do that if I pull out a knife and stab him with it.”

“Try to stab me,” Bucky corrected.

“Oh please. If I wanted to stab you you would have been dead and buried yesterday.”

Tony took a seat, making sure Bucky was watching before pressing a release hatch in the arm and opening it up. “I ship it. Only, not as much as I ship us two. What do you think Barnes, I'm torn in between Barney and Tarnes. I'm kidding, kidding, I've already decided on our ship name. Steve, you might want to sit down for this: Iron Buck. Good, right? I think we should fall in love just for the aesthetic.”
“F-fall in love?” Bucky asked. His voice was deeper and more Brooklyn than before, but not true
Brooklyn; more like Brooklyn with a hint of Russian or German at the end. “Dollface, we’re already
there.”

Tony stopped tinkering when Bucky reached for his hand with his flesh one, trying for a smile. It
came out a little lopsided, but was a smile nonetheless.

Tony looked from Bucky to Steve, raising his eyebrows as Steve smiled back at him. “You
surprised, Stark? Buck’s the most charming guy I know.”

“Yeah, well I guess you and I need to talk more. Pass me that screwdriver, will you?”

Steve opened the door to the motel room quietly, just in case Peter had already gone to sleep.
However, when he peeked inside Peter glanced up and caught his gaze from where he was sitting on
top of the bed, thoroughly wrapped in the comforter. “Hey. Where’s Bucky?”

“He’s staying the night with our friend, something something sleepover, I don’t really care, I’ve still
been abandoned. How are you?”

“Everything hurts. I’ve gotten out of bed twice today.” Peter grinned. “I’m watching vine
compilations.”

“What are those?”

Steve ditched his shoes and crawled onto the bed over to the boy, resting his head on his shoulder.
Peter played the video, and they watched for a while, both smiling at some of the funnier ones.

Eventually they ended up scooting back to lean against the headboard and Peter switched to
YouTube. The natural light coming from the window faded, and when the video they were watching
ended Peter didn’t click to the next one. His head was on Steve’s chest, eyes closed, breathing
relaxed.

Touching was a weird thing for Steve. It wasn't something he was really allowed, it seemed. With
Bucky, it was okay, but besides that, touching was reserved for fighting, and that was just how it
was. Steve was trigger happy; Bucky may have flipped whenever someone touched his left arm, but
for Steve it was that way with his entire body. He could shut down the impulses before he did
anything, which made his issues less important, but they were still there.

So when Peter fell asleep on Steve’s chest, his arm flopping over the covers lazily, Steve really
didn't know what to do, besides maybe lecture the boy when he woke up. He trusted too easily. He’d
only known them a few hours before he’d fallen asleep back in the first squat, without even worrying
about his own safety. And, while Steve and Bucky would never do anything… that didn't mean
Peter should have let his guard down so quickly. They were armed and dangerous, and he knew that.
For all he knew, they could have been searching for him in specific, and as soon as he went down,
boom. He could be in a tote bag to sell to whatever super villain he’d pissed off recently, and Steve
was sure that there was someone, and they would pay for the right to kill him themself.

Steve wanted to pull out a knife. He wanted to open it up, twirl it in his hands, set it on Peter’s back,
anything to remind them and whatever primordial force was watching that Steve was not safe, nor
trustworthy. He was an assassin.

His knives remained stowed away. Instead, Steve let out a long sigh, and dug his fingers into Peter’s
messy hair, rubbing and scratching like he was curled up with a dog. Peter was like a dog, in too
many ways: too loyal, too friendly, too stupid. Peter was intelligent, that was very clear, even Steve who ignored most of his ramblings knew that the kid was almost a genius-- but you couldn't trust people like him and Bucky without being an idiot. Well. People like him.

Steve looked down at Peter’s face, a little less relaxed than it needed to be. He squinted. Peter’s eyelids moved a little.

“You little fucker,” Steve muttered. “You're still awake!”

He wanted to shove Peter, but the boy was so relaxed, it wouldn't be nice. Instead, Steve just ruffled his hair, shaking his head longer than necessary.

Peter smiled a little, his shifty eyes opening. “I'm in pain. Let me sleep.”

“Oh, you’re in pain? And who’s fault is that? Oh, it’s mine, isn’t it? Because I pushed you in front of the bus, didn't I? Huh? Didn't I?” He poked Peter in the ribs, making him squirm and try to block the hits. “Oh wait, no, I didn't, you jumped in front of the moving bus! You know Peter, your father and I are worried about you. Is something going on?”

He got in a particularly good hit at the base of Peter’s ribcage making Peter squawk and shove himself away. “No, nothing’s going on and it was a moving car, thank you very much. It just so happens that it was a bus that I crashed into.”

“Hmm, yeah, I believe you. Okay Parker, go to bed already, I can’t stand to look at you.”

“Goodnight Mister Rogers!”

“I will shove you off of this bed--”

Peter scrambled under the covers, rolling so his back was to Steve.

Steve waited for a few moments, not sure what else to say. “Hey, kid. Did you text May?”

“Earlier,” he said, his voice a bit too casual. “She said she’s excited to meet you.”

“Earlier,” he said, his voice a bit too casual. “She said she’s excited to meet you.”

“Peter.” Steve’s voice sounded pandering even to him. “I know you don’t actually talk to her.”

Peter shifted under the covers. “Well, that’s what she would say. If I told her.”

Steve clasped his hands together, toying with a hangnail. “Yeah? And what does she actually say, when she responds to your single sentence messages?”

Peter shrugged. Steve couldn't see his expression, but he could imagine. “She loves me. She misses me. If I come home we can work it out.”

“But you can’t.”

“That guy-- Spike, or Dennis Carradine or whoever he was-- he’s still out there. He could be hurting people, he could be killing people-- more people-- and if I just let him go…” he let his sentence trail off, then shrugged. “My Uncle Ben’s death will have been completely pointless.”

Steve’s mouth felt like it was filled with sawdust. “Kid,” he tried, the words getting stuck up in his throat. “His death was already pointless.”
Peter sat up and fixed Steve with a look he’d never seen on him before: anger. It quickly disintegrated into panic.

“His death was stupid,” Steve said, quickly trying to amend the statement. “There is nothing you can do to make it not stupid. There wasn't logic behind it, he wasn’t a threat, he was just an old man--”

“He wasn’t even very old. He wasn't even fully gray yet, and now… and now…” Peter wiped at his eyes, refusing to look at him. “I can’t go home. I have to avenge him, otherwise… what's the point? He’ll be dead and I'll still be here and I, and, and, a-and--”

He was full on stuttering now, and Steve grabbed him and pulled him into a hug before he could start crying too. Peter fell into his embrace without a single hesitation. He was too trusting. He was too good.

Steve rubbed his back and let him cry it out. Eventually Peter pulled back, rubbed his eyes, and lay down with his back to Steve.

Steve sighed, still sitting. Finally he dragged himself out of bed and dug through his bag, retrieving a lighter and a joint from a pocket Bucky was not allowed to know about, and snuck out the front door. He stayed directly outside the door in case any trouble came, but none did. Steve stayed outside until he’d burnt through the weed, then a little longer, just watching the sky and remember a night eons before, when he stood on a roof and stared up at the giant billboard of Captain America, and Steve felt the uncanny urge to confess.

Chapter End Notes

In case you missed it-
-Peter found a recently married lesbian couple (one more fem, one butch) and told them that he and his two dads were trying to get to Vegas, so they offered them a ride

Thanks for all the comments, I love reading them! The next update will be released Tuesday!
Peter must have been in a lot of pain, because for once Steve woke up first. Peter was lying diagonally across the bed when he woke up, his arms extended limply. Steve checked his pulse before getting up and starting the day.

Peter was, as it turned out, in pain, as he happily pointed out at every occasion. They got ready, packed their things and walked down to a cafe for breakfast, and Peter said ‘ow’ every step, until Steve eventually stared into the horizon and muttered an extremely stupid yet semi-violent threat under his breath (‘I will shank you with your own toothbrush until your innards smell minty fresh’) and Peter stopped.

After breakfast Steve told Peter to find out information about transportation to Vegas while he went to see Bucky. “But Steeeeeeve, I’m injured.”

“Maybe, but you're still breathing, aren’t you? Chop to it.”

Peter slumped in his chair. “Who is this weird mechanic of yours anyways? And why did Bucky spend the night? Do you think they… you know…” he raised his eyebrows, trying to get a rise out of him.

Steve leaned over the table. “I hope so. I hope they had their cute little slumber party and beaned each other over the heads with feather pillows, braided each other’s hair, and then fucked each others asses off. Do you like that Parker? Do you like that mental image? Yeah, I thought so, you're welcome. I'll see you later, keep your phone on you.”

Peter’s eyes had gone wide again, and Steve stood, brushed off his pants, and left without another word, the bell above the door jingling behind him.

However, it did not appear as if they'd fucked when Steve got to the mansion, partially because of the way Tony smiled like a grimace and Bucky’s flesh hand shook so badly he almost appeared to be shivering.

“I fixed the arm,” Tony said, like it was nothing. “But Bucky didn’t sleep well last night.”

“You don’t say.”

Steve strolled over to where Bucky was sitting, noting that he’d apparently showered. His hair was still wet and tied back in a bun, which usually were two signs that he was interacting with the Sergeant. But this? This was clearly different.

“Hey Buck. What’s up?”

Bucky tensed and leaned away. Great. Steve could take a hint.

“Do you wanna head out now?”

Bucky hesitated, then nodded curtly. He eyed one of the impressive floor to ceiling windows.

“Let’s go out a door this time? For variety's sake.”
They left, thanking Tony on the way out. They walked in silence until they were out of range of the house, then Bucky turned to Steve, eyes wide and intense. The super serum stung in Steve’s veins, goosebumps rising on his skin and yelling threat!

“Marieanne Rilke, Doctor Rilke, the witch is still out there and she’s living in Oregon and she’s fine. I can’t detour to Vegas, I have to go and find her now, otherwise I may be too late. She could leave, Rogers, she could leave and then-- Steve, sorry, fuck, сладкий пирог-- and then we’d have to hunt her all over again. She can’t just be out there, it’s not safe, it’s not fair, I have to go --”

Bucky was rambling, eyes wide as if in physical pain. He reached out and grabbed onto Steve’s arm and a shudder went through his entire body, though it barely showed on the surface.

“Oh,” Steve said, careful to keep his tone even. “We’ll talk to Peter. We can go to Vegas after--”

Bucky shook his head, first at nothing, then at the sky, then at Steve. “No. Can’t. He can’t go with us, not something I want him to see. Me. Not something he should see, I'm, I'm, I'm a disaster zone, I'm manic, it’s inad-- fuck! He can’t go with us.”

Steve felt his heart best a little lower in his chest, like it had been held up by a rope that had just been given more slack with no warning. His heart had fallen a few inches before the rope tightened around it again and squeezed, and now it was beating louder and more forcefully because it had to.

“Peter… I don’t think he shouldn't be left alone,” Steve admitted. “He’s too… good. We can't let him have his first kill without backup. It wouldn't take long--”

“Good. Neither will mine. You go with Peter, I've got it.”

The entirety of the rope was shoved over to fall all the way to Steve’s stomach, and suddenly his heart was being suspended by nothing but it's own fear to fall. “What?”

“We’ll divide and conquer. I'm going to… it won’t be pretty. You shouldn't have to see it either. No person should.”

“You’re a person, Buck.”

He smiled. It twitched upwards, than twitched away. “I’m not. I'm not. It will be short. We can meet up again outside of Vegas. You take care of the kid, I'll go and squash this one last termite, then we’ll leave. We’ll buy a car or something, so you don’t have to ride in a train. But. I need to go.”

Now his lungs were swaying, everything in Steve’s chest aching and straining. Steve stared up at Steve, lips drying and cracking in real time. “You… I…” he looked away, licking his lips. “You shouldn’t go alone.”

“I’m never alone,” Bucky grumbled, more annoyed than he had been in a while. “There’s too many people shoved in my head to be alone. You know it, I know it, fuck, even Peter’s noticed, and right now James is telling me to stop and hug you and promise to never leave your side and the creature is hissing, he wants out, and this, this, this, I don't know who it is but I want them dead’. Fuck, Steve. Is Peter in the room? I'll get my stuff and go now, but only if he’s not there, he doesn’t deserve to see this, oh God, I’ve messed up, haven’t I?”

Steve looked him up and down. It was Bucky, definitely, but it just wasn’t. All of his mannerisms had been wiped away, leaving a different character that Steve possibly hated with his lungs and stomach and heart. He swallowed. “You’re not going to say goodbye to him?”

“He doesn’t deserve this. But he deserves you, okay, so stay with him and I'll go and we’ll meet up
outside Vegas. Just one last termite. James wants me to tell you ‘to the end of the line’ or some shit, but he’s fucking crazy, he’s the craziest of us all, he’s fucking rabid. Okay. Okay. Okay, see you Rogers-- Steve, Steve, Stevie. Okay. Bye.”

He pushed off of Steve like he was a launch pad and marched away, slouching too much for the Sergeant or the creature, and leaving Steve alone.

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“I don’t know Mister Rogers,” Peter said, slouching against the window. “I still feel like stealing a car isn’t the type of things heroes are supposed to do.”

Steve tapped his fingers along the steering wheel. “It depends. Which one of us is the hero in this situation?”

“Um, the one of us that’s an Avenger.”

Steve side eyed him before returning his gaze to the road. “You know Peter, I feel like I’m supposed to give you some sort of big life lesson or something right now, but nothing’s coming to mind and I’m tired. We’re already here. The car’s still stolen if we ditch it here, so we might as well take it to our actual stop.”

Peter fidgeted for a few minutes, messing with his jacket, his hair, his jeans. He flicked his wrists, watching the web shooters snap into position and then flicking them back in to hiding.

“Peter,” Steve said, and immediately chastised himself for his firm tone. “Recite the German alphabet again for me, will ya?”

Peter fiddled with the device on his palm. “Ah, beh, tsch, deh, eh, eff, geh, hah…”

He continued until he reached the end, pronounced all ot the letters correctly. His accent was still a bit off, but he wasn’t doing badly.

“<What is your name?>” Steve asked in German.

“Peter Parker.”

“<Nice to meet you.>”

“<Likewise.>”

“<You’re doing well.>” Steve complimented.

Peter blinked. “What does that mean?”

“You’re doing well. <You’re doing well.>”

Peter repeated the words a few times, then Steve taught him how it would be different for ‘I’m doing well’ or ‘we’re doing well’. German didn't have conjugations in the same way that Spanish did, but the fact that Peter was already semi-fluent in Spanish helped with the language learning a bit. Steve had a feeling the improved senses and enhanced abilities didn't exactly hurt either, though he didn't know if any of them were related to memory.

“You know, you could've just gone with him,” Peter said after a few minutes passes, back in English. “I can handle myself.”
“How many weeks were you on your own for?”

“Four.”

Steve gritted his teeth together painfully. “Bucky didn't want me to come with him. We’ll divide and conquer, and then meet up again, simple as that.”

“If it’s so simple why are you so stressed?”

Peter was still slouching against the car door casually, his expression too genuine. There was something prying in the look on his face, but not manipulative. He wasn't asking for leverage, he was asking out of curiosity and some soft gooey emotion, and he wasn't working too hard to hide it. Spending even a few seconds trying to analyze Peter gave Steve a headache.

Steve did his best to relax his posture. His best was not worth much. “I'm an addict. I haven’t had a hit yet today.”

Peter snorted. “I’m shocked. So that's why the motel reeked of weed, wow, I'm shooketh. Is that what this is then?” He lifted up a baggie of cocaine, waving it proudly.

Steve nearly drove them off the road in his mad snatch for the drugs. He grabbed them and shoved them in his jacket pocket, half-heartedly smacking Peter. “That is not weed.”

“Well obviously.”

“How do you know what weed smells like anyways?”

Peter snorted. “I go to public-- I went to public high school. What, did you think you were being sneaky? You’d come back into the room and I'd think ‘oh, what a nice new cologne he’s wearing’? Dude, I can still smell it on you. Speaking of which, do you have any more?”

“Peter Itsy-Bitsy Parker, if you are implying, in any way, that you want to smoke weed--”

“You’d be happy to mentor me and teach me how to in a controlled environment?”

“I’d be happy to dump you in the ocean with a cement block tied to your legs.”

Peter crossed his arms. “You know, for someone who's trying so hard to protect me, you threaten my life a lot.”

“It comes with the territory.”

“If you don’t have any weed left, you could always show me how to snort that baggie of what I'm sure is all natural, plant based--”

“Baby aspirin. Which means that if I snort it, I'll get a high, and if you snort it you’ll cure your headache.”

Peter paused. “That was a low blow, Mister Nomad sir.”

Steve pulled in his eyebrows. “‘Mister Nomad Sir?’”

“Yeah, I'm trying it out. I really don’t like saying Mister Rogers, you're too mean. Is this okay?”

“You know, you can just call me Steve.”
“Wow. It only took you five years to tell the poor, homeless orphan your first name. Does this mean you're adopting me?”

It occurred to Steve at that moment, that it was slightly possible that Peter had been playing him. Maybe not in the full blown lying-and-manipulating way Steve had played the Avengers, but in a more subtle, already-underestimated-teenager way.

Steve shook his head. “As far as I'm concerned, we've already adopted you. And you're not homeless. You're a runaway, and now you have two murderous foster daddies who also own an apartment, so--"

“Wait wait wait, foster daddies?”

“--So it’s unfair for you to say that you're homeless. Because technically, if you wanted, you can have two homes.”

“Foster daddies?”

“And furthermore--"

“Mister Nomad sir, would you please give me back that baggie you took off me? It’s either filled with coke or with baby aspirin, but either way if I snort the entire thing I can probably get high enough to forget you ever said that and then if I'm lucky I'll become one of those junkies who hallucinates and throws themselves off of a bridge--"

Steve made a face, stopping at a red light and sending Peter a worried look. “That’s a little dark for a kid like you.”

“Excuse me, I don’t mean to be rude, but have you ever met a teenager before? Like-- ever?”

“I used to be--"

“Yeah, but you also used to live in the 1940’s. Come on, have you ever met a teenager in this century?”

Steve chewed on the inside of his cheek. “Does Tony Stark count?”

The conversation ended there because after Stark was mentioned, Peter lost the ability to have a rational conversation because

OhmyGodohmyGodyouknowTonyStarkyouvetalkedtohimhadconversationswithhimcouldyouintroduceus? Please? IwilldoanythingIwillgetyoumorebabyaspirincocaineIwillbethebestfosterbabyeverpleasejustintroduceusandI'll-

“Jesus, kid.”

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The place they were looking for wasn't on the main Vegas strip, or even in that area, but they were there anyways so they decided to drive through.

That was a mistake. Steve had a hard time driving and averting Peter’s eyes so he wasn't permanently traumatized, while trying not to traumatize himself in the process. In all honesty, Peter
probably dealt with everything in much better than Steve did, which was horrible, because Peter was 16 and Steve was a few years off from 100.

Once they got through the strip and into the more casual area that looked like just about any main street in the country, they found a nice roof to settle on and Steve sent Peter out to do reconnaissance. “No fighting, no confronting anyone, keep on the down low. And go buy yourself something to eat.”

He shoved a wad of a few small bills at Peter and gave him a light shove. Peter didn't let himself be shoved off of the roof, instead ducking under his arm and snapping up his bag, yanking out his Spider-boy gear. “Sure. What do you want to eat?”

“Nothing, I'm not going to have an appetite in approximately three to five minutes, depending how quickly you leave me alone.”

Peter zipped up the suit. “Oh, is that because you're about to take this?” He pulled the baggie of cocaine from his jacket.

Steve grabbed at it, but Peter didn't want him to have it, so he didn't have a shot. Peter’s super-stupid-spider instincts let him dodge way too easily, until eventually Steve just shoved him backwards and he toppled off of the building-- with the cocaine.

Steve huffed, hands on his hips. The building was… three stories, he recalled. That was good. He was pretty sure spider-children were like cats, where they were more likely to land on their feet the higher up they were.

Sure enough, a few moments later Steve caught a flash of red and blue swinging away. He watched the kid, sixteen years old, swinging from building to building with about thirty grams of cocaine in his pockets, off to go spy on a murderer.

Steve really was a horrible mentor.

But Peter had taken his damn cocaine, so his plans for the evening had to shift. Steve grabbed a hoodie and his debit card, making his way over to an atm and getting more cash. It was a little strange actually having money, but he was a highly trained Shield agent after all, and his paycheck wasn't bad.

It took another hour or so to find someone offering what he wanted, but as the sun was beginning to set the shadier people made an appearance. Steve finished the deal, paid his fee, and then the dealer pulled a gun on him and got greedy.

Steve rolled his eyes. “You're fucking kidding me.”

“T’m not,” the man said, grinning a toothy-- with a few gaps-- smile. “Pay up, or I’ll finish you off and take what I want from your fucking corpse. Your choice. You’d be surprised how many accidents happen in Vegas.”

Steve made a face. “Seriously?”

The man’s eyes flickered a little, but he managed not to show any other signs of surprise. He cocked the gun.

“Fine, fine, fine,” Steve said, fumbling for his pockets. He pretended to be flustered. “Let me get my cash, I put it in my pockets, please don’t shoot me, I’ve got a fucking kid, and a baby on the way, and--” he yanked out a knife and spun into the guys space, doing a strong swipe with his arms to push the gun out of the way and headbutting backwards, directly into the man’s face. Steve slammed
him back against the wall, knife at his throat, disarmed. “You wanna pass that by me one more time?”

The dealer, to his credit, didn’t respond.

“This has officially become a reverse stick up. Give me your cash.”

Soon, Steve has a huge wad of hundreds in his hand, and he finished off the deal by slamming the guys own gun down on his head. The dealer collapsed.

Steve grumbled, put away his knife, tossed the gun in the trash, and shoved the wad of money down the guys jacket, grumbling about dirty cash. Then he stood, stuck his hands in his pockets, and whistled as he walked off.

He went to a store to get the remaining necessary ingredients and climbed back onto the roof, doing a basic perimeter search before plopping down. He made the mixture, tied the tourniquet, cleaned the site, shot up, and was just removing the evidence when Peter jumped onto the roof, yanking off his mask. “He’s here! He’s still here, it’s the man who did it, he’s here and he hasn’t left yet and he didn’t notice me and I found him and that means that now I can-- I can get justice and Uncle Ben can, and, and, a-a-and then I can f-finish the job and I can stop s-searching and--"

Steve sighed, set down the plastic grocery bag he’d been carrying, and gave Peter a hug. Peter melted into the embrace, like a puppy who’d been jumping around and yipping but stopped as soon as it was given head scratches. Steve reached up and experimentally gave Peter head scratches, and the boy just melted further.

“Good job,” he said quietly. “Tomorrow, okay? Tomorrow evening. That’ll give you time to plan it.”

Peter nodded, and Steve couldn't see his eyes but had a feeling they might be red and puffy. He sighed and reached into Peter’s sweatshirt pocket, pulling out his cocaine. “Thanks for taking this by the way. Thanks to you a junkie is going to wake up soon really damn confused.”

Peter looked pretty confused himself, but Steve wasn't about to explain.

Apparently in his angsty breakdown, Peter forgot to get food, which was more than a bit out of character for the teenager. Steve sent him off to get food for himself, and once he came back they spent a little while on their phones before Steve told Peter to go to bed. “I'll keep an eye out.”

“Okay. Yeah, okay, but wake me up after a while, okay?”

“Just go to bed, kid.”

“Okay. Okay, goodnight Mister Rogers Sir!” Peter smiled genuinely and caught the shoe Steve threw at him, setting it beside him.

Steve settled against the small ledge of the roof, stretching out his legs and getting comfortable. As he stared into the night, listening to the sounds of the nearby city, he let his mind stray.

There were other nights like this. Sitting on a rooftop, eventually giving in to sleep. If someone found him, they found him. He was past arguing too much.

Then there were other nights on rooftops, nights with a firm pair of thighs beneath his head and a hand on his back. Bucky stayed relaxed and alert, and if he didn't want to sleep, there was no way sleep could coerce him.
Steve thought of Bucky and he thought of rooftops and missions and ratty couches, reheated Thanksgiving and darning socks and dancing, reading under the lamplight and the sweet stale smell that sometimes clinged to him, and it wasn't a good smell, but it was him. Sweet staleness and leather and slightly greasy hair under his fingers.

Steve's feet were cold, he realized. It wasn't the type of thing he could fix.

Peter snored lightly on the other side of the roof, and once again Steve was reminded of just how innocent the boy was. It was a wonder he'd made it so long on his own, when he hadn't even mastered such a simple thing as sleeping silently.

Steve pulled up his sleeve, checking for the track mark from earlier. The heroin had calmed the buzzing under his skin, but not for long enough. He needed to up his dosage.

The track mark had faded, however, which was good. Steve pulled down his sleeve and since he was alone, allowed himself a long, drawn out sigh.

_**I'm never alone,**_ Bucky had grumbled. _**There's too many people shoved in my head to be alone. You know it, I know it, fuck, even Peter's noticed, and right now James is telling me to stop and hug you and promise to never leave your side and the creature is hissing --**_

Steve caught his breath, forcing himself to skip ahead in the memory.

_James wants me to tell you 'to the end of the line' or some shit, but he's fucking crazy, he's the craziest of us all, he's fucking rabid--_

Steve squeezed his eyes together, then forced them open again. He had to be aware; it wasn't just him.

The night drawled on longer than the nights ever did before, and Steve lulled. His mouth had gone dry and his skin itched like a cheap suit, but he couldn't very well peel it off and return it, so he ignored it. He watched Peter sleep for a long while, then fixed his gaze on the sky.

When morning finally came, Peter got breakfast and Steve lightened up the bag of coke, appreciating the numbing sensation even if it wasn't enough. He and Peter went through drills and he leapt off the roof again and again, letting Peter practice catching him with his webs. He threw the shield and Peter caught that too, trying to retrieve it and return it in one smooth move.

Peter ate again, and Steve grumbled tiredly. Peter suggested Steve take a nap and he be on watch, and Steve suggested he sit down and shut up. They practiced their German.

When evening was a few hours away, Steve sighed, sitting down and popping the question. “So, how are you going to do it?”

Peter’s expression fell a bit, and he looked away. “Um, my Uncle Ben was shot with a gun, so I think I’ll use that. Um, do you think, I could-- well, it's stupid, but do you think you’d mind if--"

“You can borrow my gun,” Steve said, voice relaxed. “Come ‘ere. I'll show you how to use it.”

When it was time, they packed their things and moved to a roof closer to Spike’s, or whatever the guy’s name was, home. Steve checked his weapons and put on his harness, and Peter put on the stupid pajamas, which now also hid a p30 Heckler and Koch.
Steve patted Peter on the back, reminded him he was there for backup, and dropped to one of the alleyways to wait while Peter scaled a nearby building, sliding in through an open window easily.

Steve tapped his foot as he waited. There’d been no word from Bucky, no telling what had happened or if he’d even made it to Oregon. No knowing who was in control; the Winter Soldier, Sergeant Barnes, or maybe the newest character, the one that called Steve ‘Rogers’ and talked openly about the other personalities. Steve hated him, more than he probably should have.

Minutes dragged on. Ten minutes passed, then twenty.

Steve heard some shuffling, and then “That's him!” He moved just in time to feel the bullet whish past his ear, all of his senses going into high alert as another bullet fired, ricocheting off of the building and tearing through his lower calf. He gritted his teeth through a scream, right as one of the men piped up “Dude, that's the guy who’s friends with the Hulk! Let’s get out of here!”

Steve didn't even have the time to think of any response before the drug dealer and his lackeys ran off, their escape based on fear and not morals. Steve leaned up against the wall, gritting his teeth as thick blood stained his calf, though he couldn't bring himself to do anything about it besides lean on the other leg. He realized, after a few moments of gritting his teeth, that he hadn't even had the self-preservation to grab a weapon.

Thirty minutes passed, and Steve was considering going up for himself when there was a blur of red and blue scrambling out of the window. Peter’s mask was clutched in his hand and he met Steve’s eyes just enough to shake his head and release a web, swinging away urgently.

Steve stayed leaned up against the wall, just waiting. Finally he huffed and forced himself to limp forwards, trying to keep pressure off of the leg with the wound. It would be hell to climb on.

When he saw the figure storming towards him, at first Steve thought it was a hallucination. He hadn't lost enough blood yet to hallucinate, and though he’d been doing a steady stream of smack he seldom had actual hallucinations.

The figure—shaped like Bucky, walking like Bucky—marched over to Steve and shoved him back against the wall. “You got shot, you fucking idiot,” he grumbled, sounding genuinely pissed. He sounded like Bucky too.

Steve was too tired for this shit. He leaned against the wall, letting the guy shove a hand in one of his pockets and retrieve a black ace bandage, before kneeling and beginning to tightly wrap it around his ankle. Steve whined, not because it made it hurt worse necessarily—and in the back of his mind, he was sure it hurt, even if he didn't really notice—but because it felt like something. He’d prefer to bleed out numb.

The figure pinned it into place and stood, shoving Steve again, for good measure. He let himself thunk back against the wall, rolling his eyes.

Bucky checked for wounds, then pulled Steve into a simple hug. “You don’t smell like weed,” he noted, one hand slipping into the loops of the harness to hold on tightly.

Steve smiled dazedly. “That's because I went straight for the heroin.”

Bucky cuffed him in the back of the head, but before Steve could react he was being pulled into his body, Bucky’s lips pressing against his own in what was supposed to be a kiss, if Steve remembered how that worked. Bucky’s lips weren't soft, like Steve had imagined, but they definitely weren't dry,
and Steve let himself melt just a little into the kiss.

Then Bucky pulled away and started walking.

Steve blinked, having to remind himself to close his mouth. *Well. That was… fun?*

“Buck?” He questioned.

“Come on, Stevie. Have to get the kid, and then get that bullet out of you.”

Steve didn't really have reason to object. He fell into line with Bucky, limping heavily but refusing to ask for any form of help. He didn't say anything about the kiss. You came back quickly,” he noted. “Interrogation ran short?”

“Extremely short. It didn't happen. Got to the house, she’d found out somehow and ran, wasn't there. There were pictures in the house. She’s a grandma.”

Steve hummed. “So we’re going to have to keep looking?”

“So we’re going to have to give up.” For a moment, Steve could see his posture change, his face becoming more expressive. “I'm tired, Stevie. Don’t want to run anymore.”

“Okay then. We can stop.”

His head was still reeling when they found the kid. Bucky spotted him on top of a building and told Steve to stay put as he scaled the side, talking to Peter for a few moments before the two of them climbed down. Peter wouldn't meet Steve’s eyes. “I couldn't do it. If I killed him… I'd be no worse than him.” He handed Steve his gun without meeting his eyes.

Steve grunted. He tried to put all of his weight on his good leg without losing his balance. “You're both pussies. Come on, let's get out of here. I hate Vegas.”

Chapter End Notes

A lot happened in this chapter. In case you missed it:

- Steve met a new personality of Bucky's (he was not a fan)
- They kissed!!!!1!1!!
- Bucky found the Hydra agent who decided they didn't need to give him anesthesia when operating on him. He spared her.
- Peter found the man who killed his Uncle Ben. He spared him.
- Steve got shot (oops)

Thoughts? I wont claim that the writing style of this chapter is exactly as I want it, but I do like some of the things that happened. I hope you liked it, and the next chapter will be up on Saturday!
They stole another car and Bucky climbed into the driver’s seat. When they got close to the strip he ordered both of them to close their eyes.

“It’s not even that bad,” Peter complained. “I’ve seen worse scrolling through Pinterest.”

“Then Pinterest is a dirty site,” Bucky grunted. “Close ’em.”

Once they got back into ‘appropriate territory’, Steve propped his leg up on the seat beside him and had Peter dig through the car’s console for a first aid kit. When Peter passed it back, Steve carefully pulled up his pant leg and cut off the bandage, easing off pressure. He started prodding at the bullet wound with a pair of tweezers.

“You sure you don’t want me to pull over?” Bucky asked the rearview mirror.

“Nah, I got it.” He poked it again and hissed, some of the pain starting to leak through. “Fucking hell. Don’t look.”

He dug through his bag, pulling out his supplies and loading up a fresh needle while grabbing the strip of rubber. He glanced up, and upon seeing the two pairs of eyes watching him, snapped “Hey, the fuck did I say?” Neither stopped watching him. “Fine. Buck, focus on the road, the kid can watch and make sure I don’t inject the stuff in my fucking neck.”

Bucky seemed to accept this and refocused on the road. Peter leaned around the seat to watch better.

Steve stuck a piece of gum in his mouth as he tied off his arm, tapping the needle a few times before methodically sticking in in his arm, injecting it easily and pulling the needle back out. “Use a fresh needle every time,” he advised Peter as he pulled off the tourniquet. “Otherwise it could get infected and shit.”

“And then you'll end up like me,” Bucky said blandly.

Steve grinned, still chewing the gum. “Yeah. They say he lost his arm in the war, but really, he just used a dirty fuckin’ needle for his smack, ain't that right Buck?”

“Sure is. It’s also how I got the herps.”

Steve cackled, putting his gear away and picking up the tweezers again, clicking them together happily.

Peter looked slightly-very concerned. “Mister Bucky sir, herpes isn’t transmitted through blood.”

“It is if you get real creative.”

Steve laughed out loud at the face Peter made. “Oh God, we’re horrible influences.”

He leaned over again, wiping away some of the blood and prodding the injury with the tweezers again, letting his smile drop as he focused. He gritted his teeth as the tweezers went in, the wound oozing out blood, and Steve carefully felt around for about a minute before getting ahold of the bullet. He carefully tugged it out, and cussed loudly. “Motherfucker, Buck, we’re going to have to
make a pit stop at a hospital. It fragmented.”

Bucky grunted and turned on his blinker, merging to the right.

“Okay, look, so I understand why you’d want the shrapnel out,” Peter started, still looking a little pale in the face. “But what if you just left it in? Don’t you have enhanced healing, wouldn’t your body just, I don’t know, adjust to it?”

“Yeah, well maybe I don’t want my body to adjust to a dirty drug dealer’s bullet in my leg. Besides, if it fragmented it probably hit the bone, which means there might be more damage.”

It didn’t take long to get to a hospital, and as soon as they were parked by the emergency room doors Bucky was slamming the door and running around to the other side of the car. Steve grabbed Peter’s shoulder and forced him to look him in the eyes. “Listen closely. When we go inside, you will not call either of us by name. You will not talk about the car, or about Avengers, or about super healing or any of that shit. You will not contradict me. And, most importantly, you will not freak out. I’ve been alive since 1920, I fought in World War 2, this is nothing, but we can’t let the doctors know that, ‘kay? I just need you to play along.”

Then the doors were slamming open and Bucky was pulling Steve out of the car, supporting him way more than necessary. “Camping story?”

“Camping story,” Steve agreed, gesturing for Peter to support him under the other arm. He shoved the door closed and let his face scrunch up in pain, letting out a cry. “Ah! Hurry-- hurry!”

“Wait, aren’t there metal detectors when you enter an ER?”

“Shit!” Steve hissed. He and Bucky threw open the car doors, quickly disarming themselves until the floor of the shotgun seat was covered in a fine layer of knives and handguns. Once everything was out, Steve all but swooned into Bucky’s arms, putting the pained expression back on. “Let’s go!”

They hobbled into the ER with Steve making a racket as soon as they entered. “I’ve been-- I’ve been shot! I need a doctor, please, there's blood and I, I, I think I’m going to faint!”

Everyone looked up in alarm as they sped-hobbled to the metal detector. Peter and Steve went through first, followed by Bucky, who set off the machine. “Prosthetic. From the war.”

Two doctors ran over and took over supporting Steve, bringing him straight to one of the rooms. “Sir, can you please tell us what happened?”

“There was an accident!” Bucky said, wildeyed. “We were camping, in the woods--"

“In the woods,” Steve agreed.

“And someone’s gun went off, hitting him in the leg! It took us almost two hours to get back to our car, and then at least another to get down here--"

“Three hours!” Steve moaned in agony. “I-I-I-I took h-heroin to make the pain better, but it still hurts, oh it hurts! Please help me, please--"
“Everything will be fine,” the doctor said, snapping on a pair of rubber gloves. “You two, please step away.”

Peter and Bucky backed up immediately. “The bleeding’s already under control,” Bucky insisted. “I think he’s just panicking because of the pain.”

“The pain!” Steve agreed. He clutched onto one of the doctors arms, looking up at her through teary eyes. “Miss, I don’t wanna die!”

She patted his arm gently. “Don’t worry; you should heal up just fine. But I do need you to calm down. What’s your name?”

“Nick, I-I mean Nicholas, Fury, F-U-R-Y. You don’t think they’ll have to amputate, do you?”

The doctor calmed him down while the other one assessed the damage. It took longer than Steve would have liked for them to decide, why yes, he had been shot, and the bullet was still in there, hmm, okay, they should probably take it out. A few hours later Steve was laying on the hospital bed all nice and sterilized, with his wound freshly wrapped. Bucky clasped his hand, rubbing the back of it with his thumb. “What did you tell them?” Steve asked quietly. It was just the three of them in the room.

“I told them about the ‘camping’ incident. And shared your billing address, Nick.” His mouth twitched, a smile that would be easy to wipe away if needed. “Oh, I’m just so glad. I was really worried something would go wrong, I would just hate if something happened--”

Steve punched him with a little “Shuddup.” He let his eyes drift over to Peter. “And how are you holding up? Ever been in an ER before?”

Peter was looking around like he was trying to memorize the room. “Yeah, a couple of times. I broke my arm when I was a kid, and I once scraped my knee really bad and May was worried that we hadn’t cleaned it well enough.”

Steve nodded. “You ever get hurt while on patrol?”

Peter half shrugged. “Sometimes. Ever since I got bitten though, I heal really fast, so I just deal with it myself.”

Bucky nodded a little in understanding. A strange feeling washed over Steve: solidarity. There were two people in the room with him at that moment, and both of them knew exactly who and what he was, and they remained. No secrets necessary.

Steve sighed and squeezed Bucky’s hand. “Let’s get out of here. I don’t want them seeing how fast I’m healing.”

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When Aunt May opened the door, she sobbed and grabbed Peter, pulling him to her chest. They stayed there for a few minutes, with May stroking his hair and telling him about how worried she was, how much she missed him, etc etc. Peter curled into the touch without shame.
After they'd gotten that out of the way, May asked who the two weird guys awkwardly hanging out behind them were, and before Peter could decide what to say, Steve stepped forwards, introducing himself with his real name and shaking her hand. Bucky followed suit, and once he’d pulled back Peter explained how they'd taken him in, keeping an eye on him and making sure he stayed safe. May was won over instantly.

The apartment was more lived in than their old one was, with papers and books and magazines strewn about, knick knacks and potted ferns crowding any empty spaces. When Peter asked if Steve and Bucky could stay for Christmas, May agreed enthusiastically, announcing that there wasn't much room, but they could take the pull out couch if they wanted.

Some time had passed since Vegas, where they'd continued to wander for a little while, following leads sent via Fury. They’d killed approximately three people since Vegas, and all three hadn't been exactly intentional, but muscle memory was a son of a bitch. Everyone else, they’d managed to non-lethally detain. There hadn't been any bases to find anyways; all of the leads had been for individual people who’d been a part of Hydra. They’d managed to lock a half dozen people up and get a little more information about Zola-- just that he was still very, very active, and still miraculously alive-- but besides that, it had been an uneventful few months. They’d gone on some missions. Visited the Grand Canyon with the kid. Locked up some Nazis. Ate at a diner for Thanksgiving. Nothing too strange.

Steve and Bucky also hadn't kissed again. Steve eventually decided the one time was due to Bucky’s confusion, not that he was complaining. It was a good kiss.

At Aunt May’s house, Steve and Bucky curled up on the pull out couch, Bucky’s forehead to Steve’s chest and Steve’s feet in between Bucky’s legs.

The next day, they helped put up Christmas decorations and talked movies. Peter asked them watch *The Empire Strikes Back*, but Steve denied it after looking it up on an online parenting forum. Apparently, it not only included a scene with a character’s hand being cut off, but also one with a creature’s entire arm being cut off, plus suggestions at torture, and permanent disfigurement, so no, they were not going to watch that movie.

May asked them about the Battle of Manhattan, a glimmer in her eyes for figuring out who they were when they were out of costume. Steve answered her questions good naturedly, ignoring the way Peter clung to every word.

The day after that, they baked Christmas cookies and May made them watch her favorite movie. Steve looked it up-- it was some survival movie, where the main character was stranded on an desert island-- and deemed it educational, so they watched it. Peter spent half of the afternoon begging Aunt May for a puppy for Christmas, and Bucky joined in, giving some very good points about responsibility and companionship.

May smiled without teeth, which meant a different thing than it did for Steve. “Bucky, maybe you should get a dog.”

He scoffed. “What do you mean? I already have one.” He scruffed up Steve’s hair and Steve tried to bite him.

The third day, Steve and Bucky left early and wandered around the city. Steve had acquired some weed earlier that week and he smoked it with the knowledge that the smell would have time to fade before getting back to May’s. Bucky told him that he preferred the smell of weed to the smell of Steve, and Steve did his best to look menacing with his eyes glazed over and muscles relaxed.
That night, they arrived back just in time to watch a man execute someone on live television. He was called the Mandarin, and he was a sign that Steve and Bucky might have to go back to work sooner rather than later.

“It’s been going on for a while,” May explained when the program ended. “I’m surprised you didn't hear about it already.”

The next day Tony Stark’s mansion was bombed, and he was reported dead. Steve had about sixty seconds to process it before getting a text from Natasha, telling him she was pretty sure it was a fake out. Steve told the others, and Peter began pacing in the way he always did when he was getting antsy to go on patrol. Finally, he climbed up the wall and crawled across the ceiling, muttering to himself and doing weird gymnastics. He hung by just his fingertips, mumbling about iron man suits and palladium as he tucked his legs and rolled into an upside hang.

May looked a little less than comfortable.

Tony was confirmed alive on Christmas Eve, and Steve muttered something about Tony’s annual Christmas party being canceled.

Christmas morning was spent on the living room floor, opening presents and drinking hot chocolate. Steve sat in Bucky’s lap and didn't make a big deal about the metal arm wrapped around his waist, or the way Bucky kept nuzzling his neck, pretending he wasn't smelling him. At one point, when Peter and May were preoccupied, Steve whispered “do I smell safe?”

Bucky rubbed against the soft skin of his neck, sighing quietly. “Yuh smell like home.”

Steve smiled and let the Brooklyn boy snuggle him.

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Steve and Bucky bought a tiny apartment in the basement of Peter’s building and settled in. They bought Peter a panic button to wear with his suit and went over to May’s house once a week for family dinner.

Bucky found another animal shelter to volunteer at. He went through the ranks of training effortlessly, reaching the highest level within the span of a few weeks, and before long he was the go-to person for walking the most aggressive dogs.

“I like them a lot more than I like people,” Bucky confided one night as Steve chopped vegetables. “They're straight forwards. You don’t have to interpret them.”

“Well that’s stupid.”

Bucky moved closer, leaning against the counter. “See, if you were actually a dog, you'd just say ‘that's sweet’ and I wouldn't have to decipher it.”

Steve smirked. “If I were ‘actually’ a dog?”

“Yeah. Cause you're already a bitch.”

Steve threw some broccoli stems at him and told Bucky to decipher his dick, then Bucky was shoving him and Steve was shoving him back and soon they were wrestling and dinner wasn't fucking done yet, but somehow it was okay. It was better than okay.

They had really only kissed that one time. Steve supposed what happened in Vegas would just have
Steve woke up one night to find Bucky on the floor of the other room, cleaning his weapons. Steve sighed, wrapped himself up in a blanket, and sat with Bucky to watch.

Steve made a chart of the drugs he liked and didn't like. Weed was good, cocaine and heroin were good, and oxy and most other painkillers were good. He didn't care for tobacco. Molly was a pain in the ass. PCP and shrooms were almost as bad as LSD.

Steve watched his reality shows. Bucky read. They wandered the city, and found a few restaurants they especially liked. Fury sent them upstate for the day to do reconnaissance, and no one died.

One day, Bucky waited until the commercial break to walk over, mute the TV, and drop the laptop into Steve’s lap. Steve read the report quickly, which detailed the weird terrorist thing Tony had been involved in that Christmas. It involved extremis, which involved the thing from the year before with the rag dolls and exploding people. Tony had handled it. Nice.

“No one thought to tell us,” Bucky grumbled. “No one even considered that we might want to know.”

Bucky was especially clingy that night. As soon as he put the laptop away, he crawled onto the couch and laid his head on Steve’s lap, crossing his arms with an annoyed Hmpt. Steve was more than happy to stroke his hair and unmute the show.

Peter started coming over every once in a while for sleepovers. When Aunt May wasn’t around he would joking call them his Foster Daddies, and Steve would whap him on the back of the head; that's how he knew he was officially family.

Peter wanted to get his GED, but apparently he didn’t have many credits left to go anyways, so he could just go back for a summer semester and his senior year to finish it up.

They made it all the way through to March when Steve and Bucky’s phones buzzed at the exact same time, the same message appearing on both screens: Hi! This is a message from Peter Parker’s panic button. Maybe I’ve fallen, or maybe I just can’t get to a phone right now, but either way it is very important that you go to my last known location right away, and if you feel the need to, call 911. Location information below.

Wordlessly, Steve and Bucky jumped to their feet. Steve pulled on his harness and Bucky grabbed the shield, and they ran through the streets of Queens, only splitting apart when getting close to the location sent in the text.

It wasn't hard to guess what had happened. The location just happened to be a bank/all night atm, which, coincidentally, had its doors blown open and its alarms blaring.

Steve sprinted into the bank while Bucky kept watch, but whatever threat had been there was gone.
Peter lay collapsed on the floor in a puddle of blood, his entire body trembling. His spiderman mask was strewn to the side, his mouth open like he couldn’t get enough air.

Steve knelt by him, pulling the mask the rest of the way off. “Peter, can you hear me?”

“I was. There were. Robbers.” He gasped out, eyes trained on Steve’s forehead. “I was. Stopping. And. Shot.” He clawed at his side weakly, but it was almost impossible to see the actual wound-- the blood stained too far.

“Bucky, call 9-1-1,” Steve ordered, not looking away from the boy bleeding out at his feet. “Okay, here’s the deal Pete, I’m going to put pressure on the wound to try to slow the bleeding, okay? It’s going to hurt, but it’s going to help.”

He pulled out a fresh ace bandage and loosened it a bit before pressing the entire clump against where he guessed the bullet was. As soon as he touched Peter, the boy crying out in pain, curling inwards even more. “No, no, you can’t! You can’t do that!”

“I need to,” Steve said calmly, not letting up. “Otherwise, you’ll bleed out.”

“No. Not-- the phone! You can’t call the police, I, I-- I'm already healing, look!”

Steve scowled at the wound for a moment, knowing better than to release pressure, but if Peter was right…

He gritted his teeth and removed the bandage. He used it to wipe away some of the blood until he could see the actual wound. It was… smaller than it should've been.

“I'm already… already healing,” Peter promised. “Look.”

Steve craned his neck to see closer. Sure enough, the tissue was beginning to repair itself, closing up before his very eyes.

“Bucky, get in here.”

Steve moved aside so Bucky could see. Bucky frowned at it for a few seconds, then reached around to touch Peter’s back, causing the boy to cry out in pain. Bucky pulled his hand back bloody.

“There’s an exit hole. And his body’s just closing up on it’s own? Kid, is it always this way?”

Peter yowled when Bucky touched him again, but nodded weakly. “It’s not… the first time. I've been. Shot. I heal fast, too fast for my body to keep up with. I can keep fighting for a while too, but as soon as my spidey senses tell me there's no immediate threat, I-I, collapse. Seizure, sometimes, um… adrenaline rush. Too, too, t-too much a-adrenaline.”

Bucky and Steve made eye contact. “We can’t bring him to a hospital.”

“Pete, can you walk?”

Peter claimed that he could, but as soon as any pressure was put on his legs they collapsed. Steve and Bucky managed to catch him and began to drag him out of the bank.


“A-a little.”
Bucky felt around for Peter’s pulse and cussed when he found it. He maneuvered Peter’s fingers to press against the pulse point on Steve’s neck, which judging by the fact that Bucky compared Steve’s heart rate to that of a hummingbird’s, was not a good sign.

“He’s also showing symptoms of going into shock, we need to hurry.”

It took less time than expected to get back to their apartment. Once they were there, they laid Peter on the ground and Bucky ran to get the first aid kit while Steve brushed Peter’s sticky hair off of his forehead. “We’re here, in our apartment now. It’s going to be fine.”

The first aid kit was set beside him, and Steve immediately pulled out the pair of scissors, using it to cut the stupid spiderman hoodie off of him. Peter made various noises of complaint and pain, but Steve effectively ignored him, pulling the sticky fabric away. He’d always wanted to shred the stupid costume anyways, though the fact that Peter had to get shot for it made the experience bittersweet.

Steve cleaned off the wound with soapy water (also provided by Nurse Barnes) and tried to get a better look at it. It had already closed up. The top layer of skin hadn’t closed yet, but the rest was already put back together.

Peter’s pants were still bloody, and his skin was stained with dirt, sweat, and more dried blood.

Steve made him drink some water and Bucky stood by with a protein bar.

It took about another half an hour for the wound to close completely, but Peter passed out about twenty minutes before that. Once Steve had checked and double checked Peter’s pulse, he called Aunt May.

“Yeah, I just wanted to let you know that Peter’s spending the night. He came back from his patrol early to watch that Star Wars movie with us, but ten minutes in he passed out.”

“Oh,” Aunt May said, sounding slightly worried but altogether not too concerned. “Well, that’s fine, thanks for letting me know. Do you think he’s been overworking himself? Should I tell him to cut it out with the long patrols?”

“Honestly, I think this is an isolated event,” Steve said sincerely. He kept an eye on Peter on the floor, Bucky still pressing his fingers to his pulse. “It wouldn't hurt to have him eat a bit more though. He probably has the metabolism of a professional athlete.”

Bucky set Steve with a look like hypocrite. Steve made a face at him.

“Okay. Sometimes I just worry, you know? But I don’t want to be too strict and push him away or something, it’s just… well, I worry. Peter’s a very special boy.”

Bucky pointed to the bulletwound from less than an hour ago, mouthing it healed. “He definitely is,” Steve agreed lightly. “But I wouldn’t worry. He adores you, and I know he’s really making an effort. I know you are too.”

“Thank you Steve. I'm really glad Peter has you two, I feel like you have been such good influences on him. And I'm glad he has friends he can talk to. Okay, well thanks for the call. Bye.”

Steve hung up the phone, tossing it on the couch. He pushed Bucky away, checking Peter’s pulse for himself. It was slowing down a bit, which was good.

“Come on,” Steve grumbled, dragging Bucky over to the couch. “You can sleep, I'll take first watch.”
“Like hell you will.” Bucky manhandled Steve until he was laying down on the couch with his head on Bucky’s lap. Steve squirmed around, and Bucky placed one hand on his chin, and the metal one on the back of his neck. “Just one snap. That’s all it’d take,” he threatened.

Steve stopped moving, and Bucky paused, apparently realizing the threat was a bit more morbid than usual. He moved his metal hand away and leaned down, pecking Steve with a little kiss to the ear instead.

Steve snuggled a little closer, letting his thoughts trail to Peter and the gunshot wound as he dozed off.

Steve awoke to a light tapping on his cheek. He opened his eyes, scanning his surroundings for danger before looking up at Bucky silently.

“He’s sick,” Bucky said quietly, ticking his head towards Peter.

Steve dragged himself up and over to the boy, who was still unconscious. He felt his forehead--burning-- and Peter groaned at the contact, moving his head away.


Steve felt the boy’s forehead again, eyebrows scrunched in concentration. “Run a bath for him. Lukewarm.”

Bucky rolled his eyes at the command but got up and did it anyways. Steve tried to wake Peter up, but when that didn’t work he grabbed under the boy’s armpits and dragged him. He took off his shoes and socks first (both bright red, with the socks going halfway up his calves, oh God they were dorky) and then pulling down his pants. Peter still had the web shooters in position over his palms, which Steve unclipped and removed. His boxers were also bloodstained, so Steve took those as well, then braced himself to lift Peter into the tub.

It took about five seconds before Peter started shivering. The water was on the warmer side of lukewarm, but apparently it registered differently when Peter was practically steaming.

Peter woke up at one point, confused and in pain, and Bucky just sat himself at the head of the tub and pet his hair until Peter fell back asleep. Steve schooled his expression into what he hoped was a poker face.

“Brings back memories, doesn’t it,” he grumbled.

Bucky nodded barely, continued to pet Peter’s hair. “I don’t know why anyone ever thought baths could cure pneumonia. Just doesn’t make sense.”

Steve shrugged, grabbing a washcloth. “But it helped though, didn't it? I remember feeling better afterwards.”

They stayed in silence as Steve pumped soap onto the washcloth and started scrubbing Peter down, focusing especially on the smears of dried blood. When he was done, Bucky washed the dirt and sweat from Peter’s hair, carefully propping him up to rinse the soap out.

Peter woke up again when they tried to get him out of the bath, but he was so disoriented that he couldn't actively help. Finally, Steve gave up and let Bucky scoop Peter up, setting him on the floor and wrapping him in a fluffy towel. Peter’s hair was extra curly when wet.
“Mister… Rogers? What happened, why am I…” the sentence drifted off, like Peter wasn't even sure how to ask it. Steve didn't make any suggestions, just shifted the towel so he could pull a clean pair of boxers onto the boy, who was too busy leaning against Bucky and letting his hair get pet to notice. Steve tried not to get jealous. Bucky gave out the best pets.

Peter’s forehead wasn't nearly as hot, so they coerced him into taking some medicine and then dumped him onto the couch.

“I think I’ll go back to bed now,” Steve mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck.

Bucky made a discontent noise. “No. Bad for sentry duty. Two rooms. Will have to pace.”

Steve made a face. He was too tired for this. “You don’t have to watch me. If you think he might choke on his own vomit or something, just stay in here.”

Bucky’s head twitched to the side. “No. Not safe.” He dipped his head a little, Brooklyn accent growing stronger. ‘I’ve killed too many sleeping people; it’s vulnerable.” He ticced again. “You twitch in your sleep. Violently. Come’on, the bed’s big enough.”

Steve made a face but didn’t object as Bucky scooped Peter up and carried him into the bedroom. Steve climbed under the covers and to his surprise, once Bucky had positioned Peter he climbed under the covers himself, though he remained sitting. He pulled out his phone, the brightness lighting up the room. “Go on. Sleep.”

Steve wanted to object, but then Bucky’s hand was in his hair, and shit, he was really good at petting. Steve breathed in, and out, and then there was nothing.

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When Steve woke up, he was cuddling his pillow and his feet were stuck under Bucky’s legs. Bucky was still awake and scrolling through his phone, his easy expression only meaning one thing.

“Morning Sergeant,” Steve said gruffly, “How’s the recruit?”

Bucky smiled smally when he saw that Steve was awake. “Morning slugger. Why don’t you see for yourself?”

Steve sat up groggily and peered over at Peter. He was still bare chested, and had one arm flung over Bucky’s legs, the other out to the side, half hanging off of the bed. He snored quietly, and the spot on the bed next to his mouth was wet with drool.

“Cute,” Steve said, scrunching up his nose.

When Peter eventually woke up, he was confused, but I-just-woke-up-in-a-random-bed-in-just-my-boxers-and-also-my-hair’s-wet confused, not I’m-actually-so-sick-I’m-high confused. Steve explained the situation to him plainly, his tone ringing with a bit of Captain Roger’s authority. He’d been a Captain of a specialty unit in World War 2, he’d patched up his soldiers plenty of times before, sometimes dealing with more personal wounds or infections. Giving Peter a fever bath? That was nothing.

Once the situation was explained to Peter, the first thing out of his mouth was “Oh no, Aunt May is going to kill me.”

“Nah,” Bucky said easily. They’d migrated to the kitchen and Bucky was making some eggs, his posture loose and casual. “Stevie called her, told her you were spending the night. She’s not
worried.”

Steve came back into the room with an armful of clothes. “Yeah, once again, I saved the day. Here’s some fresh clothes, but first, I wanna see how the bullet wound is healing up, come’ere.”

Peter stood so Steve could inspect it. The skin that had been obliterated in the shot was now completely healed over; it was softer and pinker than normal, on both the entry and exit points, but it was still most definitely healed.

“You should tell May you’re side hurts,” Steve decided after poking and prodding the wound a bit. “She can make a doctor’s appointment, and then they can do some x-rays and stuff, just to make sure you have no bigger damage or anything. Just to be safe.”

Peter sighed and slumped forwards, but conceded. He slid on his clothes, and Bucky passed over a plate of eggs.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa, so much happened in this chapter. To review:

- Steve handled his own bullet wound, using heroin and some first class acting skills
- They met Aunt May and spent a very cheery Christmas together (while Tony dealt with the Mandarin on his own, smh)
- Steve and Bucky got their own apartment, complete with family dinners and a nearby dog shelter to volunteer at

And

- Peter getting shot, and nurses Rogers and Barnes coming to his rescue

I would also like to take a moment to appreciate two of my favorite jokes from this book:

Peter: “Mister Bucky sir, herpes isn’t transmitted through blood.”
Bucky: "It is if you get real creative.”

And

Bucky: “See, if you were actually a dog, you’d just say ‘that's sweet’ and I wouldn't have to decipher it.”
Steve: “If I were ‘actually’ a dog?”
Bucky: “Yeah. Cause you're already a bitch.”

Say what you want about Bucky, but his clapbacks are on point.

Thanks for reading, I hope you liked it! Let me know if you have any questions or comments, and the next chapter will be out on Tuesday!
The Spiderling

Chapter Notes

This chapter was HELL to publish. Everytime I tried in the past two weeks, it just shut down, and I think I finally figured out that it was because Peter used an emoji in his text. Goddamnit Parker.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't help but grin.

He had absolutely no reason to, of course. For starters, the kid was jabbering away, far more excited than the situation called for. He jumped back and forth between talking about the Avengers fanclub at his old school and different theories and headcanons he’d heard, all of which Steve refused to confirm, even if Tony totally did talk to himself and Clint was 100% perfect at darts. Which lead to another reason Steve wasn’t supposed to be happy; he’d been kicked out of the Avengers. He’d almost, sorta lied to them about his personality and gained their trust just to smash it like a bug, which, oops. Sure, Clint and Natasha didn’t seem to hold a grudge, and Tony had been friendly enough at his workshop, but the former were spies and the latter only put up with Steve so he could fix Bucky’s arm. As for Bruce… well, Steve didn't know about Bruce, though he could guess. None of his guesses were very positive.

They were riding in the backseat of a sleek black car, with a permanently miserable driver sitting in the front. Steve had had a scowling contest with the man-- whose name was reportedly ‘Happy’-- but after thirty minutes, the man gave up and stopped making eye contact with Steve in the rearview mirror.

The instructions had came from Fury directly, telling them it was time to relocate. Peter had been understandably upset when he heard the news, but had immediately stopped all grieving when he was invited along for the week.

Steve was proud to be able to make Peter so excited. He was also proud that he and Bucky had elected to avoid letting anyone know about their guest-- including Fury-- so they could see their faces when they introduced the kid to them.

Peter had apparently run out of words-- a temporary condition, Steve was sure-- and instead was beaming, practically bouncing up and down in his seat. Steve reached over for the headphones that had been dangling out of the collar of Peter’s shirt since that Christmas and plugged them in for Peter, who smiled in thanks. It was supposed to be a subtle way of telling the boy to listen to music and leave him alone, but instead Peter adjusted the volume and leaned against Steve’s shoulder, sighing happily.

“<He’s insufferable,>” Steve said in German, stroking the boy’s hair. “<I hate him.>”

Bucky let out a little smile. “<Bullshit.>”

Happy gave them a concerned look in the rearview mirror. Steve caught his gaze and said “<Let’s keep speaking in German and say his name Happy a few times over so he thinks we’re plotting against him Happy.>”
Bucky’s smile grew a little wider. “<Where should we dispose of the…> how do you say body?”

“<Body>.”

“<Thank you.>”

“I say we throw him into the river,” Steve suggested, making hand gestures to show Happy what they were saying. “<Do you think Happy would sink?>”

“He would if we poked enough holes in him.”

They both looked at Happy and snickered. The driver looked paler than he had a moment ago.

Bucky relaxed a bit against the seat. “<What will we do when the kid learns enough German to understand us?>”

“We could switch to Gaelic.”

“Do you remember your Gaelic?”

“No, but how hard could it be?”

“We could switch to French.”

Steve considered that for a moment, then in French: “<What river would we dump the driver’s body into?>”

Bucky made a growling noise at the back of his throat. “<It sounds much more romantic in French.>”

Steve smiled, leaning closer. “<We could tie blocks of cement to his feet and push him off the Brooklyn Bridge.>”

“The Brooklyn Bridge is too far,” Bucky said softly, like he was murmuring sweet nothings. “<We’ll have to push Happy off the Queensboro Bridge.>”

The name of the bridge was in English, obviously, meaning that Happy recognized them, and paired them with his name.

Peter glanced up at Steve with his puppy-dog eyes, headphones still in. Steve resumed his petting.

It didn’t take much longer for them to get to the Avengers tower. Once they were there, Steve spent a solid thirty seconds just staring up at the familiar building.

Bucky slung his arm around Steve’s shoulders. “<It’ll be fine.>”

“Your mom’ll be fine.”

Steve dodged the clip to his ear and gestured Peter to get a move on. They picked up their bags and Bucky slid the shield onto Steve’s harness, and together, they marched.

Peter thanked Happy at the elevator, and Steve and Bucky glared at him. Right as the elevator doors closed, Steve smirked and winked, reveling in the way Happy’s eyes widened comically before the doors closed.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Peter muttered. They hadn’t pressed any buttons, but the elevator
moved on it’s own, bringing them up the the highest floors.

Bucky patted his shoulder, but didn't comment.

The elevator opened into the lounge, a headache of familiar space and seating but completely renovated and done up in lighter colors. The bedrooms had been removed for more space, and there was a spiral staircase in the corner. The ceiling had been changed too, and for some reason now had an array of dark wooden support beams that crossed over and weaved together at random. Steve already knew that Peter was going to have a field day.

They stepped out of the elevator and everyone in the room turned to look at them. Steve did a quick analysis: Natasha on the couch talking with Bruce, Clint in the kitchen on his phone, Tony on one of the chairs with a laptop in his lap, and Fury leaning against a wall. They were all silent as they observed their little group, and Steve felt a pang of sympathy as the eyes caught on Peter, who’s excitement had apparently completely changed into anxiety.

Clint was the first to react, standing up and smiling in his natural friendly way. “Hey guys, long time no see.”

Steve shook his hand, trying for a cocky smile. “<Long time no see, Katniss.>”

Clint’s raised his eyebrows. “<Yeah, no kidding. Why are we talking in German?>”

Were they? Steve bit his tongue, realizing, yeah, okay, they were. “<It’s annoying Fury,>” he decided finally.

“<Nice,>” Natasha said from the couch. Fury glared at Steve.

The others got up and walked over to them in a way that suggested that they really didn't want to. Natasha crossed her arms, looking them up and down. “Steve, did you get shorter?”

“Yeah, I've been wearing high tops this whole time. Some of us just need a boost sometimes, but of course you'd know about that.” He cupped his hands over his chest, making a gesture like he was pushing up his imaginary boobs.

Natasha smiled like a snake. “Yes, I’m sure you're used to trying to make up for a lack in certain areas. I saw your dick pic, by the way, but I didn't have a magnifying glass on me at the time so it wasn't very exciting.”

Steve blinked. “Maybe we should stick to above the belt insults. I have a feeling you were waiting for this.”

“Maybe.”

Natasha glanced over at Peter, and Steve did too. Bucky was standing behind him with his hands over the boy’s ears. “We’re done,” Steve announced.

Bucky removed his hands. “<You're a horrible mentor.>”

“<Steve’s a great mentor,>” Peter argued, his German faulty but way more developed than Steve had expected. They both stared at him.

Tony cleared his throat, gathering their attention again. “Anywho. Hi, Steve, Bucky, random child. How’s the arm been?”
“No problems since the last time we met,” Bucky said gruffly, giving Tony an appreciative nod. “And you?”

“A lot of the same.”

“I heard you died, for like, three days.”

Tony shrugged casually, like what can you do. “Meh. It happens.”

Bruce reached out his hand to shake, and Bucky relaxed a little, shaking his hand. His cheeks went a little pink.

Steve blinked. “<What the fuck?>”

Bucky didn’t take his eyes off of Bruce. “<He’s nice. A good baking partner.>”

Bruce shifted uncomfortably. “I uh, I don’t speak German.”

Natasha grinned. “<We know.>”

Peter craned his head to look at Bucky. “You bake?”

All of the eyes went back to Peter, and Steve sighed, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Everyone, this is Peter. He’s sixteen, from Queens. At risk youth. Bucky and I are the best foster parents ever.”

Peter widened his eyes and sucked in his lips. “Uh, I’m not an at risk youth--”

“Sure you are.”

“--and I’m actually kinda seventeen. My birthday was in October.”

Steve searched his face, looking for his tells, but he apparently wasn’t lying. “What do you mean? We were with you in October. That was-- that was Vegas, right? With the whole murder incident?”

“I feel like I’m not supposed to be hearing this,” Fury commented blandly.

Peter shrugged. “Other stuff was going on. It didn’t seem important to mention.”

Steve and Bucky made eye contact, conversing silently. Then Bucky whapped Peter on the back of the head. “Anyways.”

“Anyways,” Tony agreed, narrowing his eyes. “Murder?”

“I didn’t kill anybody,” Peter explained quickly. “I would-- I am-- I-- hi, Mister Tony Stark Iron Man sir. I’m Peter.”

“Mister Tony Stark Iron Man Sir,” Tony repeated casually, shaking his hand. “Or, you know, just Tony.”

“Tony,” Peter repeated. “Tony. Tony. Steve, I have to go to the bathroom. Not because I’m, uh, nervous or anything, just the car ride--”

“To your right,” Steve cut him off, giving him a light shove. “And we’re not done talking about the birthday thing, either, you’re not off the hook.”

Once Peter disappeared into the bathroom, Fury raised an eyebrow. “Agent.”
“Nicky.”

“You adopted?”

“Obviously not, don’t you know how foster care even works? Look, we went to that place in Elmont you wanted us to check out. I didn’t find anything good, but we got the files and I’ll transfer them to you later.”

“Did the kid go with you?”

“Who the fuck do you think I am? No, the kid didn’t go with us.”

Fury raised his hands in surrender. “I was just checking.”

“<I will check your ass.>”

Fury didn’t understand the German, but to his side Natasha snorted.

“<Gay.>”

“<I will stab you.>”

“<That’s bi.>” Bucky muttered.

“<I would stab her with a knife -- >”

“Anyways,” Clint interrupted. 

Natasha smiled. “Anyways.”

Tony huffed. “I’m going to learn German just so you guys can’t have secret conversations anymore.”

Steve turned to Natasha. “<What languages does Fury know?>”

“<To my knowledge? Just English.>”

“Really? Not even Spanish?”

“I don’t speak Spanish either,” Tony complained. “But if you wanted to practice your Urdu--”

“<What about French?>”

Natasha switched over. “<I can speak French.>”

“<I can too!>” Tony agreed.


Fury looked thoroughly confused. “Are you talking about me behind my back-- in front of me?”

“<Maybe.>” Bucky grumbled behind Steve. “<What are you going to do about it?>”

“<How many languages does the terminator speak?>”
“<As many as Hydra thought he needed.>”
Natasha bit her lip. “<Spanish?>”
“Sí.”
“<Latin?>”
“Etiam.”
“<Russian?>”
“очевидно.”
“<I can speak Russian,>” Tony added helpfully.
Steve nodded. “я тоже.”
“<Should Russian be the official secret Avengers language?>”
Clint grimaced. “I don’t speak Russian very well. I’m working on it, but French really is better for me.”
“<French then?>”
“<French it it.>”
The door to the bathroom opened and Peter jogged over. “Hey guys! What’d I miss?”
“Kid, how many languages do you speak?”
“Uh, English, some Spanish, and now a little German.”
Natasha smiled smugly. Bucky scowled at her. “<We’ll work on it.>”

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They went up to their completely un-lived in apartment and unpacked, sending Peter into the guest room to get comfortable.

When they eventually migrated back downstairs, the others had gone back to what they were doing, except Fury had left and Bruce had started up some intellectual argument with Tony. Natasha and Clint talked in the kitchen.

Bucky had chosen to stay back in their apartment, and Steve probably would've stayed with him if it weren't for the kid.

He immediately set a path towards Clint and Natasha, letting Peter trail behind him. As soon as Clint saw Steve, he rolled his eyes. “Jeez, I don’t think I can stand another one of your dick measuring contests. I’m out.” He jumped straight up, latching onto one of the ceiling rafters and swinging around onto it with ease.

Peter’s eyes danced with excitement, and he cleared his throat. “Um, Mister Rogers-Nomad sir, would you call me a normal person, or like, super special, or like…”
“I’d say, at this point in time, you're pretty special for a normal human boy. Especially with all that gymnastics training.”

Peter immediately brightened. “Yeah, right! The gymnastics, okay cool, thank you, I'm just going to--” Peter jumped up, scampering onto the rafters like it was nothing, though Steve noticed he tried to hide his super-grip.

Clint entire face lit up. “Wow kid, that was pretty good.”

“Thanks, I do gymnastics.”

“I heard. Come on, follow me.”

They scampered around the rafters, swinging and chasing each other. Steve tried not to smile, but it wasn't easy.

He forced himself to refocus on Natasha. “So, are we going to have that dick-measuring contest or what?”

“Let’s not and say we did. We know I'd win anyways. So, Peter, huh?”

“Peter,” Steve agreed. “He’s--"" Mr. Rogers, I'm sorry to interrupt,” the polite voice of Jarvis intoned, “but it appears as though Captain Barnes is ill. He requested I not tell you, but override code ‘New Years Eve 2006’ gives me sanction to inform friends and family of any residents illness.”

“Thanks Jarvis,” Steve said, though he wasn't really there anymore. “Hey Peter?”

Across the room, Peter swung upside down from one of the rafters, hanging on with his ankles. “Bucky’s sick?”

“Yeah. I'm going to go check on him. Do you want to--”

“T'll come with you,” he said immediately. “Just give me--"”

“Peter, wait.” Steve’s tone was firm enough to make the teenager pause. “Natasha, do you think--”

“T'll keep an eye on him,” she promised. “Go ahead.”

“Good. Peter, do you have your phone on you?”

Peter scoffed, because he was Generation Z and of course he had his phone on him.

“I'll let you know if it's anything bad. Or Jarvis will, but otherwise, don’t worry about it.”

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Steve found Bucky leaning over the toilet bowl, his body trembling lightly. “Fucking A.I.” he grumbled, not even having to look up to see Steve behind him. “No goddamn privacy.”

“We’ve been best friends for too many years for you to think you still get privacy,” Steve said soothingly. He got out an elastic and pulled Bucky’s hair back for him. “How you feeling?”

“The Asset does not feel, only obeys.” With that Bucky gagged, retching forwards and vomiting into the toilet. Steve rubbed his back, and when he was done wiped his mouth for him.
Bucky yanked away like a kid who didn't want his nose wiped. “The Asset does not thirst. The Asset does not hunger. The Asset eats when it is told and drinks when it is told. The Asset takes what it is given and does not want.” He repeated the words again in Russian, then proceeded to continue vomiting.

When he was done, Bucky’s body trembled from exertion, and he closed his eyes but didn't pull away when Steve wiped his mouth. “The Asset does not want. The Asset does not feel pain.”

“What about when the Asset was tortured?” Steve asked softly, rubbing smoothly against his back.

Bucky scowled, eyes shut. “The Asset does not feel pain. The Asset thanks its handlers when corrected. The Asset needs to be corrected.” He continued repeating in Russian, but only made it halfway before his back convulsed and he vomited again.

Steve pulled out his phone and sent a quick text one-handed.

From: Steve

Hes sick, WS is out. Giv space

Ask Nataska about her garrots if u get bored

Dknt let her demonstrate on u tho

From: Peter

Got it

Peter had only seen the full blown Winter Soldier once, and it hadn't exactly been the best experience, but it was better than Steve could have hoped for. He’d shoved Peter out the window and by the time Peter had came back up, Steve had already managed to do the anti triggers-- punch in the balls, kick out his knee, and wet finger in the ear-- so Bucky had been brought back to himself and collapsed.

Even now, with Bucky reciting Russian and throwing up, Steve knew it was hardly the tip of the iceberg.

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Bruce had more baking supplies, but if they cooked in the Captain America apartment Peter and Steve were there to pester them, so the choice was obvious.

Bruce and Bucky spent almost half an hour planning and picking out a recipe before settling on some fancy crème brûlée. Steve was pretty sure 70% of that decision was based on the fact that that meant Bucky would get to use a blowtorch, which was his second favorite fire based weapon.

As they moved around the kitchen, trying to get started and not to bump into each other, Steve watched on from the kitchen counter, toying with a straw. Peter had made himself comfortable on top of the kitchen cabinets, where he lay with his arm dangling off the side like a sleeping lion.

“What even is a creme brulee?” He asked no one in particular. “Why do you need a blowtorch?”
Bucky shrugged. “There are some things that are just so good that you don’t question it.”

“The blowtorch is use to caramelize the layer of sugar on top. It’s a type of non-enzymatic browning reaction that-- oh, nevermind.”

Peter sat up on his elbows, suddenly interested. “It’s called carmalization because of the flavor, right? So I'm guessing that as the process occurs, it releases volatile chemicals…”

“Which produces the flavor,” Bruce said, stopping what he was doing to look up at Peter. “Nice job, kid.”

Peter blushed. “Thanks. I-I’m kind of a science nerd, or at least I was, back in school.”

“Yeah? You graduate early?”

Peter ducked his head. “Uh, not really. I sort of. Dropped out.”

“I told you he was an at-risk teen,” Steve interrupted. “Why does no one listen to me?”

Bruce fixed Steve with a look that wasn't really a glare, more of… Bruce was allowing himself to make prolonged eye contact, even if it caused someone to wet themselves. “Yeah? Well if you're such a good foster parent, then he should be going back to school.”

“He is,” Steve waved the aggressive suggestion aside. “He’s already re-enrolled. Seriously, who do you think I am?”

Bruce shrugged, allowing himself to remove the eye contact. “Well, I always thought you were the I.T. guy.”

“Oh, low blow. That was one time.”

“One time… that lasted a year and included the entire time we ‘knew’ each other.”

“Get rekt,” Peter mumbled from his perch. He’d rolled onto his back, letting his leg dangle off lazily.

Steve narrowed his eyes at him. “Peter, catch.” Before he could throw the knife, Bucky had grabbed his wrists, pulling them down.

“He’s got no space to dodge them,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, I know, that's why I said catch.”

Bruce adjusted his glasses, looking at Peter with new interest. “I'm beginning to understand why he’s at-risk.”

“Did you finish measuring the sugar?” Bucky asked, sliding the knife out of Steve’s hand and slipping it into one of his own pockets. He glided to the other side of the counter, treading on silent feet.

“Yeah, do you want to whisk it? My hand will cramp too easily and you don't have an electric whisk.”

Bucky sighed but took the whisk in his left hand, speed-whisking the mixture at a perfectly consistent rate.
After a few minutes of silence (aside from the sound of the hyper-whisking), Steve walked over and smoothly climbed onto Bucky’s back, wrapping his arms around neck and his legs around his torso.

“What’re you doing?”

A few obscene responses came to mind, but instead Steve chose to answer honestly. “Trying to get your attention.”

“It’s not going to work,” Bucky responded, though the corner of his mouth twitched upwards. “I’ve had to carry 200 pound handlers up mountains. You’re nothing.”

“You’ll eat your words when you let your guard down and I stab you,” Steve threatened, still clinging on like a koala. “I may be small, but that just means my rage is high density.”

“I think you've stirred it enough.”

Bucky stopped, setting the whisk down and moving aside so Bruce could slowly mix in the cream. With his hands free, Bucky carefully took ahold of Steve’s thighs, lifting him up a bit. Steve tried not to shiver at the contact.

Bucky shooed Peter out of the room, sending him on an errand that was just an excuse for him to patrol.

As Bruce continued to mix the cream, Bucky shifted on his feet. “So Bruce… anything change while we were gone? You meet anyone?”

Steve rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder, watching quietly. Bruce shrugged, not taking his eyes off of the mixing. “No, not really. I don’t really… yeah.”

It just so happened that at that moment Natasha walked in. Bruce stumbled over himself to greet her, stuttering worse than Peter. Natasha smiled and greeted him casually, leaning over the counter. Bruce quickly excused himself.

Natasha watched as he left, her eyes trailing lower and her mouth twisting into a smirk. Once he was gone, Steve rolled his eyes, hitching up his legs higher around Bucky’s waist. “You know, you could just ask him out. He’d say yes.”

Natasha kept smirking, chewing on the corner of her lip. “I want him to think it’s his idea.”

“It is his damn idea. It’s every fucking guy’s idea who’s ever laid eyes on you.”

Natasha looked at him, tilting her head. “Including you?”

Steve made a face, considering. “No, but that's different. We were against fucking animals in the 30s.”

When he looked over again, he saw that Natasha was practically beaming.

Bucky smacked Steve’s thigh. “Hey, that was rude.”

“Well she is--”

“I’m not saying she isn’t,” Bucky said, standing a little taller. “It’s just rude to say that to her face. I, on the other hand, am completely for fucking animals.” He winked.

Natasha cracked up, and since he was using his hands to hold on, Steve decided to bite Bucky in the
neck instead of risking slapping him. That just made Natasha cackle louder, and it was in fact a
cackle. As Steve continued gnawing on Bucky’s neck (viciously, he might add), he wondered if that
was her real laugh and he’d just never heard it before.

Bucky swatted at him lamely. “What are you doing?”

“He’s a vampire,” Natasha offered. “He’s thirsty, which obviously we already knew about Steve.”

Steve flipped her off before continuing to nom on Bucky’s neck. “I’m not a vampire. I’m a carnivore.
You’re kinda dirty, kinda old, kinda undercooked, but moderately tasty.”

“I will drop you.”

“Hmmm, I don’t know, that’s a lot of salt. Too much sodium, I’ll get high blood pressure.”

“I already have high blood pressure from dealing with your shit every day.”

“Good fucking riddance. We’ve already lived like, ninety years, let’s get this over with. I say we do
a double murder suicide, whaddya say? It’ll be romantic.”

The romantic part was what got Bucky chuckling, and he finally dropped Steve, pushing his thighs
away so he couldn’t keep hanging on.

“Fine, I changed my mind, it wouldn’t be romantic because you're a horrible person who is not
romantic at all.”

“I’m romantic,” Bucky said leisurely. “<Miss Romanoff, care to join me for dinner? Or, if that
doesn’t sound good, we could always skip straight to dessert.>”

Natasha smiled— lips closed. “<Thanks Barnes, but soft pass. I have a feeling if I sleep with you I
won’t wake up the next morning.>”

Bucky looked hurt. “<I have it under control-- >”

“<Not because of you. Because of your wife.>” She gestured to Steve, who was leaning against the
stove casually.

Bucky snorted. “<She’s just jealous.>”

“<Yeah?>” Natasha leaned a little closer to the counter they were talking over.

Bucky quirked an eyebrow. “<We could always make her more jealous.>”

Natasha grinned. “<I like the way you think.>”

They both leaned over and Natasha let Bucky grasp her jaw before wrapping her own hands around
his head and pulling him in for a kiss. They kissed slowly and simply, letting it linger a bit before
pulling away. Natasha stood off and wiped off her perfectly clean pants, grinning and announcing
“Well, I better be going. Bye-bye Bucky,” and winking at Steve.

Steve crossed his arms and remained passive as she left, as if the entire thing had bored him. “Hmm.
Hoe.”

“That is not--"
“I wasn’t talking about her, I was talking about you.” Steve vaulted over the counter, followed closely behind by an enraged Bucky, making idle threats about kitchen utensils and the large floor to ceiling windows in the living room. Steve dodged him for a few minutes before Bucky tackled him, taking him down. They grappled and wrestled for a little while before Steve let himself be pinned, tapping out. “Okay, okay, you got me.”

Bucky smiled smugly. “Say it.”

“You're not a hoe, you're a very classy gentleman who also just happens to be a complete slut--”

That prompted another round of wrestling, only this time it involved much more name calling, hair pulling and tickling. When Bucky finally pinned him again, Steve batted his eyes. “So what about me?”

“What about you?”

“Where’s my kiss?”

Bucky made a face.

“Aww, come’ on, Bucky, baby. You're poor little wifey feels abandoned. How about just a little kissy kissy, come’ on, just a little smoochie-goochie…”

Bucky buried his face in Steve’s neck and honest to God giggled. It may have been the most beautiful noise Steve had ever heard. “Come’ on Stevie, you know I can’t just kiss me. You're my best guy.”

Steve tilted his head to the side, knowing Bucky wasn’t going to do anything but giving more access to his neck anyways, letting Bucky nuzzle it. “Yeah? And you can’t because… why? That’d be queer?”

Bucky sat up. His smile was gone. “Aw, Stevie, you know it’s not that. There ain’t nothin’ wrong with being queer. I just… shouldn't kiss you.”

Steve stared at him with half closed eyes, swallowing. “You did before.”

Bucky scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “That was different. That was a celebratory kiss.”

“Fine, we can kiss when there’s something to celebrate. Guess what Buck, we’re foster parents! Yay, we should celebrate, I'll get the cake, you can get the streamers, and oh yeah, we can’t forget…”

He leaned up and puckered his lips, but Bucky put his metal hand on his chest and pushed him down gently. “Whoa, Tiger.”

Steve pouted on the floor, still pinned down. Bucky seemed to consider for a moment, then he leaned down, so close they were breathing the same air and their chests touched, and pressed a small, lingering kiss to the tip of Steve’s nose. He pulled back, looking pleased. “There you go. You said I'm on streamer duty?”

Steve laughed breathlessly. “Fuck you, Barnes. Fuck you.”
That night, Steve went to the commons to find that everyone was lounging about and the evening news was playing.

“Mandatory viewing,” Tony announced. “From now on. If we’re going to be Avengers again, we need to be informed. Jarvis, tell Barnes to get his buttocks up here. We’ve got the agents, we’ve got big green and handsome, we’ve got short stack, we’ve got the monkey kid, we need the terminator. We didn't have a Christmas party this year, did we? That’s a problem. Pepper got this great haircut, really it’s amazing, you guys have to see it. Monkey-boy can come too, he just has to leave before the party really gets started, mm-kay? We don’t want him seeing his dads making out.”

Steve plopped down on the couch he and Bucky always claimed. It was empty, the others already filling in to their respective places on the other couches and the floor. Clint and Natasha sat together under a blanket, their legs slightly tangled and Clint’s arm around Natasha’s shoulders in a friendly, casual way.

Steve got comfortable and rolled his eyes. “Bucky and I do not make out.”

Natasha snickered and gave Clint a knuckle punch. Luckily, Bruce wasn’t paying attention.

“Don’t worry,” Clint said in his normal, friendly manner. “We are all well aware.”

The door opened silently and Bucky made his way over to the couches, somehow managing to stomp and be quiet at the same time. He scanned over the others in the room with a plain expression, gave a curt nod, and then flopped directly on top of Steve. After a few moments of elbowing and shifting they got into a comfortable position, with Steve slightly propped up against the armrest and Bucky laying flat with his head on Steve’s chest, staring off into space. His flesh hand grabbed a handful of Steve’s shirt and kneaded it softly.

“Cute,” Tony commented blandly. “Snowy Soldier, is that a hickey?”

“It was a completely non-sexual bite mark,” Natasha promised. “From his territorial girlfriend.”

The others looked over, giving Bucky an appraising look. Steve licked his lips. “Wife.”

“Wifey,” Bucky corrected. “Stevie, can you deal with your glock? It’s poking me.”

Tony hummed. “Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

“If it’s bothering you so much why don’t you do something about it?”

Bucky reached up and dragged his fingers across Steve’s face in what was probably the most unenthusiastic slap Steve had ever received. “I just did.”

Steve grumbled a bit more, but shifted around and dug around, pulling out his left handgun and setting it on Bucky’s back, then getting out the right one. “Peter? Are you up there?”

Peter appeared on the rafters above them, sitting and balancing without having to use anything to hold on. “Yeah, I'm here.”
“Catch.”

Steve tossed the guns up one by one, Peter catching them easily. “What do you want me to do with them?”

“Just set them down, thanks.”

Peter did, and Steve glanced over to see all of the others, excluding Clint and Natasha, giving him a weird, slightly concerned look. Clint just raised an eyebrow, and Natasha remained unimpressed. “He’s sixteen and holding a gun. Big whoop.”

“Apparently he’s seventeen.”

With the guns set aside, Peter lowered himself from the rafters and landed on the back of Steve’s couch, laying on his back. “What channel are we watching? Aren’t they all, like, biased?”

“We’ll rotate through all of the channels,” Tony promised. “We’ll be educated consumers.”

Peter seemed to find that an acceptable answer and got comfortable. Across the room, Tony fluffed his pillow and Bruce lounged back. Steve watched and felt Bucky let out a deep breath, his body going lax on top of Steve’s.

It was nice. They were a team, friends even. A few little families. They weren't one family yet, but it wasn't the most ridiculous idea to ever pass Steve’s mind.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter...
-Happy Hogan
-Peter met the Avengers (+language talk)
-Baking with Bruce
-The 'Celebratory Kiss' talk

In other news, I am no longer on summer break so I will be slowing down updates once again, and until further notice I will be posting once a week, every Saturday night. I wish I could do more but this schedule should keep me posting regularly and give me time to think everything through/edit, so I can hopefully post the highest quality content possible.

Thank you for reading, and please let me know what you think of this chapter! Because of the crappy posting schedule this last week I will be posting another chapter before Saturday on a surprise date, and it will be a doozy. I also JUST posted a new oneshot which tells the story of what Bucky experienced in Azzano, including some uncomfortably realistic hallucinations of our favorite pre-serum boi Stevie. If that sounds at all interesting to you, you can find it right here!
Again, thanks for your patience and wonderful comments. I love hearing what you think of the story, and if anyone wants to theorize what will be happening in the next chapter my suggestion is to look at the current date in the story. That's all I have to say about that ;)}
It was early afternoon, and Tony had managed to coerce everyone to gather in the commons area for a catered lunch. Bucky and Clint were talking about something in the corner of the room, but Steve was too focused to care too much; Peter had told him about a specific tumblr page with the best theories that he was reading. At that time, he was on the theory stating that the Avengers was actually just Natasha and her harem of guys. It wasn't very factual, but it served Natasha right. Steve reblogged the post.

Peter sat on the other side of the couch, his feet intertwined with Steve’s. It was an obnoxiously familiar position, and Steve had to remind himself to keep his feet to himself and not kick Peter like he would Bucky. That just wasn't nice.

Bucky seemed to be having a really good day. He had gone full blown Brooklyn Bucky that morning, his accent getting stronger and his smile wider. He always tilted his head a lot when he was Brooklyn Bucky, like his axis was a bit shifted.

He’d made breakfast for the three of them, immediately noticing when Steve was giving him the cold shoulder and pulling him aside to ask. “Hey Stevie, did I do something?”

Steve had jutted out his chin and narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, you existed in my vicinity. I'm personally offended by that turnip you call a nose.”

“Is this about Natasha?”

“No, it’s about your ugly mug, I already told you. Now back off, will you?”

He’d tried to brush past Bucky but he’d grabbed his wrist, pulling him back. “Hey, to the end of the line, right?”

Steve sighed. Bucky looked like he might be genuinely worried, so Steve gave in. “Yeah, yeah. To the end of the line.”

“And back,” Bucky insisted. “To the end of the line and back.”

Steve pulled him into a hug, going on his tiptoes so he could rest his chin on Bucky’s shoulder. “Sure pal, to the end of the line and back. God, you're needy. I thought I was the wife.”

“You are the wife, I'm just making sure you didn't forget. And Bruce says expressing emotions is an important thing to do, I'm just trying to be a man of the twenty-first century.”

That had been that morning. That afternoon, after lunch, Steve glanced up from his article to check on Bucky. He was still where he left him, talking to Banner. Based on Bucky’s posture and the tilt of his head, he was flirting with Banner, but Steve wasn’t sure if Banner had realized yet.
At his feet, Peter tensed.

Steve had just tucked back into his reading when Jarvis dinged politely, but when a voice started talking it was not Jarvis, unless Jarvis had switched from a British accent to a German one. “Ju zought zat ju could escape from Azzano, and zen escape over ze cliff, and zen escape from jour duty, but zere is no escape. Cut one head off, two more grow back, or didn't jou know? Finish jour duty, Soldat.”

The words processed in Steve’s mind at half speed, struggling to fight against the terror. He knew what was happening, he knew exactly what was happening, but at the same time he couldn't process. There was no way, Jarvis’s servers were too advanced, he couldn't…


Bucky was on his feet, eyes wild and gun drawn. He pointed it at the ceiling, but there was no individual speaker: the voice was coming straight from the walls. The others were on their feet, talking loudly and asking what was going on, and all Steve could think was No.

“<Daybreak. Furnace.>” Zola continued. Bucky fired all twelve rounds into the ceiling, but it did nothing to stop the voice. “<Nine. Benign.>”

“What’s happening?” Peter asked, his voice a few octaves too high.

“<Homecoming.>”

Bucky yelled in pain and started digging in his pockets. He disarmed himself as fast as he could, sliding his weapons across the floor.

“<One.>”

Steve got to Bucky just as he crouched on the ground, covering his ears with his hands. Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky’s head, hoping to block out any more sound.

“<Freight car.>” Zola finished, and both Steve and Bucky froze.

Steve could feel a rumble go through Bucky’s body. His arm shuddered, the plates shifting.

“Soldat?”

“<Ready to comply.>”

It was like being dunked in the ice again. Steve’s blood ran cold, his breathing stopping.

“<Your orders are to return to base. Collateral damage is not only acceptable, but necessary.>”

Steve didn't have time to react before he was thrown across the room, his body slamming into the huge windows and collapsing to the ground.

He heard guns being drawn and leapt to his feet, expecting to see Bucky with a gun. He was unarmed, but Clint and Natasha both had guns trained on his head. “Bruce, Peter, out!” Tony ordered, scrambling with something in the kitchen.

Bruce ran for it, but Peter stayed where he was. “Bucky! Hey, look at me, why don’t we just talk—”

Steve leapt, tackling Peter to the ground right as the gun went off. Apparently Bucky hadn’t been able to completely disarm.
Steve heard more gunfire, but he knew the soldier would have deflected them with his arm. Steve jumped to his feet just in time to see Natasha launch herself at Bucky, closing her thighs around his neck and taking them both down. The Soldier threw her backwards and blocked a kick from Clint, grabbing his leg and twisting it away from him.

“Stop it, don’t fight him!” Steve ordered, but they didn’t listen. Natasha was on her feet and Bucky shot, but she moved just in time, the bullet going through one of the windows instead. Clint fired, but it was deflected.

Steve shoved Bucky to the side right as his gun went off again, flipping a switch and yanking the clip out of the gun, throwing it as far away as he could. The Soldier drew a knife and slashed at Steve and Steve barely dodged, flicking open his own knife and catching a strike before it could land. Bucky was too strong for him to stop the hit, but Steve could at least deflect them off to the side. Bucky kicked him backwards and in Steve’s peripheral he saw Natasha lift her gun. He threw his knife and she had to drop to dodge it.

“Don’t hurt him!” Steve managed, barely able to think through the fight. Bucky slashed and kicked him backwards, and Steve leapt, landing on the couch and sending it crashing backwards. He had to do Bucky’s anti triggers, but first he had to avoid being stabbed. “Bucky, look at me! Steve, Steven Grant Rogers, 5-4-9-8-5-8-7-0…” Bucky slashed at him, though there was a bit of hesitation. He could get through, all he had to do was--

Clint dropped on Bucky from the rafters and they went rolling.

Steve looked around for the shield, but it was in their apartment. He’d never recalibrated Bucky without it.

Bucky aimed a punch at Clint and Clint dodged it, grabbing the metal arm like he thought he could stop it. Instead Bucky stopped and wrapped the metal arm around Clint’s throat, squeezing.

“James Buchanan Barnes!” Steve yelled over the commotion. “Winter Soldier, Asset, Soldat, look at me!”

Luckily, Bucky turned to look at him. Unluckily, first he threw Clint across the room. He hit the refrigerator and crumpled.

“Bucky!” Peter yelled, “Bucky, look at me!”

Bucky narrowed his eyes and leapt over the topped couch, slashing his knife at where Peter had been standing a moment before. Steve’s heart jumped into his throat as Peter leapt upwards, barely avoiding being knifed. He swung around the other side, kicking Bucky in the back.

“Steve, what do we need to--” Peter scrambled back, climbing across the wall and leaping to the other side when Bucky tried to get him again.

Steve was not going to let that happen. “Do you have your web shooters on?”

“Yeah, but--”

Bucky threw his knife and Peter dropped to the ground in front of the window with the bullet hole. Steve didn’t even think before kicking Peter backwards with all his might. The boy slammed against
the window and the entire thing shattered, and the glass and the boy fell.

Behind him, Steve heard Natasha scream his name, but he didn't have time to respond. Bucky punched with the metal arm and Steve went flying, hitting the wall. He didn't allow himself to recover, instead rolling and taking the Winter Soldier by surprise. He didn't register anything else as he fought, just the constant kicking, dodging, punching, rolling. The Winter Soldier was a better fighter, but Steve knew all his weaknesses.

Steve took a risk and drew a knife, throwing it. He slid on his knees past the Soldier, who ripped the knife out of one of the plates on his arm. Steve kicked his ass (literally) and then kicked out his right leg, jumping on his back to dig his fingers into the pressure point on his neck. He stuck his finger in his mouth and then jammed it in Bucky’s ear, making them both stumble as Bucky tried to throw Steve off. He was blinking, just starting to register what was happening…

When a force hit them like a tank.

Steve hit the wall again, and this time, he couldn't get up. Bucky had fallen on top of him.

Across the room, Tony had his hand raised, repulsor whirring. “Stay down, Barnes,” he commanded.

The Soldier growled. He didn't know that name.

But he almost did. Steve had been so, so close…

Bucky ran, jumping and grabbing one of the rafters and using the momentum to swing his legs into Tony’s chest, right as the door slammed open and what looked to be an entire swat team rushed in, guns aimed. The Soldier looked at them and reached over his shoulder, the way he would to grab the Captain America shield. But the Captain America shield wasn't there. It bought Natasha just enough time to slam her widow’s bites on either side of his head. Steve could hardly move, but all of his muscles twitched and seized when he heard the scream.

Bucky dropped to his knees and Steve’s brain gave in, and everything went black.

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There were a few expanded tenths of seconds where things floated around Steve's mind, bumping into each other until they found something to connect onto. Steve frowned in his sleep.

Zola?

It was. Which meant he was still alive. He got into Jarvis— how did he get into Jarvis? It couldn't be through the normal security, Tony would have worked to prevent that. It had to be through something else, a weaker channel of Jarvis. Steve imagined that it must have been near impossible to gain access to the speakers, which meant other things should be safe, but the damage was still done.

Peter?

Out the window. He had his web-shooters on, but. May would probably kill Steve if Peter didn’t survive the fall. Too bad for her, she'd have to get in line behind every other Avenger including Steve himself.

Steve hoped he was okay.
Bucky?

Ow.

Bucky?

Too soon. Don't want to think about--

Bucky!

The triggers were still intact. Bucky went full blown Asset-mode.

Steve had been so close, so fucking close, but with the others there it hadn't worked. Steve imagined the widow’s bites coming down on either side of Bucky's head again and shuddered.

No.

*Come backpack. Come on Stevie, time to wake up.*

No. No. Not yet, not ready, no--

Steve woke up feeling like a stack of textbooks was sitting on his chest. It wasn't the tightness of an asthma attack; more of a bruised chest. Still, Steve reached out to make sure nothing was actually wrapped around his chest.

Or at least, he tried to, but was stopped short by two pairs of handcuffs locking his hands at his sides. He tugged on the cuffs, frowning as it did nothing.

“Morning, Champ. Feeling better?” Tony said semi-mockingly from where he slouched in a chair to Steve’s side, letting the hand holding his phone drop to his lap. He looked about as sleep-deprived as normal, but wasn't trying to hide it for once. His hair was sticking up messily, like he’d spent a lot of time running his hands through it.

Steve tugged on the cuffs one last time, just to make sure. “You know the serum was supposed to make me taller. And stronger, too. They thought I’d come out looking like some wrestling champ or something.” He tugged on the cuffs again. “I bet if it’s worked, I'd be able to snap these.”

“Truly a shame. But hey, it’s good to know that I wasn't the first one to disappoint Howard. Water?”

Steve's throat felt dry, but he was more than happy to bear it so he didn't have to go through the humiliating experience of letting Stark feed him. “I'm fine. I’m guessing you're here because of sentimentality? Let me guess: you've been waiting here all night for me to wake up, and when I did you were going to profess your undying love, is that right? I hope I didn't interrupt you.”

Tony gave him something that could pass as a smile, sort of, maybe. He didn't look at him. “Nah, Fury asked me to watch you. Well, not really; Fury actually hasn’t been contacted yet. But he left pretty specific instructions for if you get hospitalized or if Bucky gets taken or anything. Technically, I'm on suicide watch right now.”

Steve huffed out a breath. It hurt more than he would have liked. “Fun.”

“Very fun,” Tony agreed. “Did you know you twitch when you sleep? Otherwise you just look like you're dead, but every once in a while you'll do this full body twitch thing. Do you get nightmares?”

“None that I remember. You wanna unlock these cuffs now?”
“How many times did you attempt?”

“What?”

“How many times did you, you know…” Tony drew a line across his neck, sticking out his tongue. “Stick the fork in the toaster, toaster in the bathtub. Quit the game. Scrapped the project. Abandoned the scrapbook. You know, off yourself.”

Steve stared at him. “I didn’t know you were such a poet. You should write greeting cards.”

“Condolence letters,” Tony corrected. “Come on, how many times?”

Steve made eye contact, and waited a few moments to see if Tony would back down. He didn’t. “Twice,” Steve said in a final way, still looking Tony in the eyes. “But they were so close together that it only counts as once. With the Valkyrie, and then when I woke up in the hospital.”

Tony was the first to look away. He tapped on his screen with just his fingernails, humming quietly. “Hmm. What was your poison?”

“Tried to strangle myself with the curtain cords.”

“Well, bonus points for creativity.” Tony paused to wet his lips. “I tried to OD on pain meds in ‘04. So. I get it, I guess.”

Steve nodded slowly, absorbing it. Despite his best efforts, he was beginning to remember the events that lead him to being in the hospital room this time, and his head ached. Bucky? “Does that mean you’ll take the cuffs off of me?” He asked, though without as much effort this time.

Tony gave him an appraising look. “I don’t know. As soon as I unlock you will you try to stab yourself or something?”

“No.”

“Promise?”

Steve offered up his pinkie, and Tony wrapped his own pinkie around it with an air of sincerity. He stood up and walked over to a drawer, taking out a pair of keys. “You’re sure you’re stable? Because you did sort of push your kid out the window earlier today, which is not behavior I would call normal. He’s fine by the way, which one, what the hell—”

“I knew he’d be fine,” Steve said, waving it away without much effort. “He’s resilient.”

“I… am going to have to interrogate you about that later. Anyways, he was taken to medical and checked out, but he didn’t sustain any injuries, which again, I’ll interrogate you about later. After he was cleared he was sent to your apartment and I gave Jarvis orders not to let him out unless he got clearance.”

Steve made a face. “You locked him in his room?”

“Um, no, weren’t you listening? I locked him in your five-star apartment complete with all the streaming services he could ever ask for and a jacuzzi. I sent Clint up there a while ago to talk to him, he’ll be fine.”

“And the others? Are they okay?”

“For the most part. Some scratches, some bruises, Clint hit his head pretty hard but they don’t think
he’s concussed.”

“Good.” Steve waited.

Tony dangled the keys in his hands, but made no move to unlock Steve. Steve waited. “Is there any reason in particular you’re postponing letting me out?”

Tony didn’t wince, but he did do a full body shift, rolling his shoulders and leaning from leg to leg. “Bucky’s in secure confinement. He’s safe. But he’s… distraught.”

Steve glared at him from across the room, not moving. “Yeah? Is he back to Bucky yet?”

“As in, is he still on a murder rampage? No? I don’t think? He’s subdued, but they’re not allowing visitors for the time being because he’s still doing the murder stare, which by the way, you’re good at, but you’re not quite as good as he is.”

“I haven’t killed as many people as he has,” Steve said easily, not letting up on the glare. “Yet.”

“Terrifying.” Tony walked over and finally unlocked the handcuffs, letting Steve rub his wrists uncomfortably. “But listen, you do need to give him space, and you’re still technically on suicide watch. Jarvis is going to be keeping a close eye on you, and if you do anything out of the ordinary it will be reported to me, got it? Either way, I’m going to do my best to make sure you’re not alone, but—”

Steve sat up and slid off of the bed. “Thanks Tony, but I think I know what to do.”

Tony seemed to be at a loss. “Go hang out with the kid, okay? Maybe bring him down to the commons, let him do his spider-monkey thing in the rafters. Watch a movie. Just give it time, okay?”

Steve turned, if only to give Tony the basic respect of facing him while he was denying him. “I appreciate it Ton’. But if he’s not back to okay yet, I can’t very well go watch a movie. But thanks anyways.”

Chapter End Notes

!!!!!!!!!

In this chapter:
- The trigger words were used to turn Bucky back into the Asset (+Avengers vs Bucky fight)
- Peter revealed his powers
- Tony and Steve had a nice Talk

Please let me know what you thought! Any guesses about what's happening next? And, in case you missed it, this chapter is the beginning of the Winter Soldier storyline, with a light dash of some Civil War stuff.
Steve wanted to stop in his apartment and shoot up first, but he refused to wait any longer. It had been a few hours already, and Steve had a feeling that wasn't accidental. There had been an IV prepared in the hospital room, even if it hadn't been hooked up to Steve. He had a feeling they'd purposely kept him under while they dealt with Bucky.

He went to the level of the tower with the holding cells and marched up the the guard. “I’m here to see Bucky Barnes, let me in.”

The guard-- Agent Rollins, apparently-- was 6’2” of muscle, greased hair, and probably a smaller than average brain.

(Steve would be willing to bet that wasn't the only small thing about him.)

He didn't budge when Steve marched up to him. “Visiting hours just ended. Come back tomorrow.”


“I don’t work for Stark.”

“Yes you do, you're guarding in his fucking building, aren’t you? This is an Avengers issue, not a SHIELD one, so back off or I'll have to make you.”

Rollins didn't look too intimidated, but he did look a bit more aware after being threatened. His expression twitched, like he wasn't used to being threatened by guys 8 inches shorter than him. “Listen, I don't make the rules--”

“Just let me see him.” Steve put his hands on his hips, tilting his chin up in challenge. He wasn't backing down, and apparently Rollins recognized this.

“You get one minute,” he snapped. “Then you'll leave and you won’t bother me again outside of visiting hours.”

Steve made no promises. Rollins scanned a security card and let him in. They passed a few simply labeled cells until getting to another door at the end of the hall. “One minute,” Rollins reminded him. There was another set of scanners, then the door opened and Steve’s blood pressure dropped.

Then it doubled.

“You're fucking kidding me,” he said, then again with a snarl: “You are fucking kidding me.”

The room was not a cell. It was more like a garage, large enough for at least three cars to fit comfortably, with high ceilings and a concrete floor. In the middle of the room sat a small bulletproof glass and reinforced steel cage, practically. It was a box with a chair attached to it. Bucky sat in the chair, metal restraints wrapped around his legs and arms, with another one wrapping around his shoulders. There were double the restraints on his left arm, as if he would be able to escape from the normal ones.

Bucky sat in the box with a slightly glossed over expression-- not a concussion, not drugs, but
resignation. He blinked when he saw Steve, like he recognized him but wasn't sure how he fit into this picture.

Steve whirled around to face Rollins. “What the fuck, I was told he was subdued, not locked in a cage!”

“He was on a rampage.”

“He was mind controlled! He is a victim!”

Rollins shook his head, backing up. “You have thirty seconds. I'm going back to the front; his psychiatrist will be here any minute. Thirty seconds.”

Steve waved him away with a snarl, marching to the middle of the room and ignoring the door closing behind him. Bucky wouldn’t make eye contact with him.

Steve pressed his palms on the front pane of glass, his demeanor breaking. “Bucky.”

Bucky’s entire body was made of stone. His eyes were the only thing to move, shifting from side to side before finally skirting upwards and talking in Steve’s face. “You’re hurt.”

He said it like that in of itself was worthy of a death sentence. Steve bit his lip, shaking his head. “I'm fine. I don’t feel a thing.”

“Stevie, that's not good.”

Steve pressed his forehead against the glass, shaking his head as silent sobs wracked through his body. “I'm sorry, I'm so sorry--”

The door opened and Steve stopped shaking. When he looked up again, his expression was deadly. His face was molten with bruises-- they would fade soon enough, but at that moment they looked horrible, all reds and purples and greens. His eye bags were more pronounced, but instead of making him look tired, they made him look even angry. He looked absolutely fed up, and like he had no patience left.

“The psychiatrist is here,” Rollins said from the doorway. “Your time is up; visiting hours for tomorrow will be from 12 to 6.”

Steve straightened. His expression was absolutely deadly. I'll fix this, he mouthed, before turning and marching towards the pair by the door. “And who the fuck are you?” He asked the new man that was standing there.

Rollins looked exasperated. “This is the psychiatrist, Doctor Helmut Zemo.”

The man shook his head. “No, I told you at the desk, Doctor Zemo was reassigned.” He offered his hand to shake. “Hi, I'm Sam Wilson. And I'm going to do whatever I can to help him, alright?”

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Jarvis’ accented voice was filling the elevator. “Captain Rogers, would you like me to contact Mister Stark? It appears as though you are showing signs of emotional distress--"
“No thank you Jarvis, please bring me to my apartment.”

A pause, then: “Very well sir.”

Inside the apartment, Peter was laying dejected on the couch, tossing a ball up and catching it like a prisoner. “Hey, kid,” Steve said, eyeing him carefully. “Tony said you didn’t sustain any injuries. You wanna correct that statement?”

Peter startled, which was very unlike him. He jumped up, rushing over to meet Steve while still keeping distance. “Mister-- Nomad-- Steve! How do you feel? You look… horrible.”


“I got a few glass cuts from the window and then some bruises on the way down, but they had all healed by the time I got back inside the tower. But Jarvis is saying I’m on house arrest! Do you know--”

Steve shook his head. “We’re being watched. They want to make sure we don’t stage some big prison break or anything.”

He went into his room, Peter trailing behind him. Peter didn’t comment when he pulled the kit out from under his bed, but Jarvis did ding. “I’m sorry Captain Rogers, but non-prescription drugs are filed under ‘harmful’ and are not recommended when under high emotional pressure. Would you like me to contact--”

“No, I’ll put it away. Don’t contact anyone,” Steve snapped.

Peter wrung his hands. His motions were all just a little too fast, a little too twitchy. “I shouldn’t have come back. I mean, I should’ve come back, I’m glad I came back, and my suit is here anyways but I didn’t realize I would be put on house arrest, so now I can’t even patrol--”

“You had to use your healing factor today,” Steve reminded him. “You shouldn’t be exerting yourself anyways.”

Peter whined and shuffled over to the wall, banging his head against it. “I'm going to dieeeeee…”

“You will if you keep complaining.”

“I'm in agonyyyyyy--"'

“Catch.”

Peter didn't even have to turn around to catch the knife perfectly by its hilt. “You know, that's a pretty mean thing to do to your foster kid.”

“Meaner than hip checking you out the window?”

“You kicked me, and no. That was the meanest thing you've done to date. I could've helped!”

Steve shrugged. “Probably. But that fight ended up with me in a hospital room and Bucky in a cage, so I don't know if you wanted to--”

“Bucky was in a cage?”

Steve looked at Peter analytically. The boy was too good for most people, definitely too good to be around him. “Is in, and yeah. It’s a glass box, really, and he’s strapped to a reinforced chair. Not as
claustrophobic as it could be.”

Peter nodded. “Good. They locked him in a box, you know, when they were first trying to break him.”

“I know that, but how do you know that?”

Peter shrugged. “Sometimes he talks in his sleep. Only when he goes to bed as Bucky-- the friendlier one, from the 30’s--”

“I call him Brooklyn Bucky. You've watched him sleep?”

Peter gave him a weird look. “You haven’t? You guys sleep like octopuses, how haven’t you noticed?”

Steve shrugged. “So apparently I twitch, and Bucky talks in his sleep. What do you do?”

“Um, nothing, weirdo.”

Steve tried to smack him but Peter jumped backwards right onto the wall, climbing up it to evade him. “Spider-man, spider-man, does whatever, a spider can…”

“Spider-boy, spider-boy, the spider thing, is a cheap ploy.”

“It’s spider-man.”

“Oh, so you're a man now?”

“I'm more of a man than you'll ever be, Bilbo!”

Steve didn't understand the reference, but he understood that it was an insult. He threw another knife at Peter, who dodged it easily, the knife impending itself in the drywall. Peter cackled and scurried across the apartment ceiling while Steve yelled insults and threw things at him. “Spider-man, spider-man, does whatever, a spider can…”

Steve hurled a pan at him, but it barely missed. They continued the chasing and systematic destruction of the apartment until Peter was crouching from the ceiling, the awkward fidgeting gone. Steve had a knife pointed at him, telling him something about take that back right this instance when the elevator dinged.

Natasha stepped out, stopped to look at the scene in front of her. Peter was frozen in shock, taking a few seconds to remember he was supposed to be normal and fall from the ceiling gracelessly. Steve slid his knife back into it’s holster. “Hey, Nat. What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing much. What about you?”

“Family bonding,” Steve offered.

The corner of Natasha’s lips quirked upwards. “Right.”

“So you just came to hang out, or…”

“Jarvis told me you were ‘engaging in violent activity’,” she said nonchalantly. “Remember, you're still on suicide watch Steve. Don’t get careless.”

The face Peter made was one of pure sadness. One look at it, and Steve wanted to repent for everything even vaguely bad he’d ever done. “Suicide watch?”
“It’s a dumb protocol thing,” Steve promised. “Trust me, the only person I’m a threat to right now is that dumb Rollins guy who’s keeping Bucky locked up.”

Peter raised his hand. “You threw a knife at me. A few knives, actually.”

“Shut up.”

“Okay.”

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Steve sat in the chair beside Bucky’s containment chamber for six hours. He did his best to attempt lighthearted conversation, but neither of them were really in the mood for jokes. Steve filled him in on Peter’s whereabouts, not letting any incriminating details slip, knowing full well that Rollins was probably monitoring their conversation.

At one point, Steve dared to ask Bucky if he knew by rubbing his eye and tugging at his ear. He looked at Bucky intensely.

“No way to tell,” Bucky answered. “What is Peter doing this afternoon?”

Peter was, surprisingly enough, working with Tony all afternoon. He’d demanded to see Bucky, but Steve wasn’t about to let that happen while Bucky was still in the cage.

That day when Steve had arrived at noon for the visiting hours, Rollins had almost not let him in. “He says he doesn’t want to see anybody. When our crazies don’t wanna see anyone, fine, they don’t gotta. It makes the job easier for us.”

Steve had snarled and refused to leave until Rollins checked with Bucky. A minute later, Steve was sitting across from Bucky, his arms crossed over his chest. Bucky’s eyes trailed his every movement with something that had resembled envy.

When Bucky began to retreat further into himself, Steve eventually gave up on conversation and started reciting stories of Brooklyn and the Commandos. The hours droned on, with Bucky only moving or responding enough to keep Steve talking. They couldn’t touch, but at one point Steve left and came back with a bottle of windex, with he used to clean the glass of the box. Bucky watched, possibly slightly amused, but the only way Steve could tell was by looking at Bucky’s eyes. Bucky had told him once that he was trained not to make eye contact with his handlers. Steve wondered vaguely if that was the reason why: Bucky could make his entire body impassive, but his eyes would betray his real feelings.

Watching Steve, Bucky’s eyes glittered dully with amusement.

When the time was almost up, Steve said goodbye and promised he’d be back the next day, same time. Then he left, saluting Rollins vaguely with two fingers (even though he would have preferred just one), and made his way to the lobby of the Avengers tower, where he waited for a few minutes before the door opened and Sam Wilson stepped in. Steve watched him greet the security guard, signing in and making his way to the elevator. Steve followed behind him.

The elevator doors closed and Sam turned around, his expression shifting twenty times in the span of a second before smoothing out. “It’s Steve, right?”
“It is. And you're Sam Wilson. Does he talk to you?”

Sam sucked in a breath. “Right to the point, huh? Sorry man, doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“Right. Jarvis, stop the elevator.”

The elevator stopped immediately. Sam looked around for who Steve had spoken to, but obviously saw no one. “Hey, listen, I know things are at a weird place right now--"

Steve pulled a knife and backed Sam against the wall, pressing the blade against his neck. “Doctor-patient confidentiality, yes? It’s good that you understand that, but I want to make sure that you fully understand that right now I could use this knife to butterfly your skin like a fucking steak and it wouldn’t even be the worst thing I've done this week. I don’t care what he’s saying; he can have his secrets. But, I want you to remember that if someone else comes at you with much less good intentions than me, that no matter what they do to you, I can and will do so much worse. Do you understand?”

Sam’s expression remained plain, his nose slightly crumpled like he found the knife distasteful. After a few moments of silence Steve pulled the knife away, but didn’t sheath it.

Sam swallowed, his Adams apple bobbing. “You really care about him, don’t you?”

Steve didn’t bother denying it. “Do you understand what I told you?”

Sam leaned more against the wall, his hands resting on the guard rail. He looked far too casual for someone who was just threatened. “I understand your threat,” he decided after a moment, “and will keep that in mind. And, for the record, I don’t like the containment chamber any more than you do. Barnes doesn’t seem actively dangerous. He should still be watched for a few days, but I don’t believe the current situation is ideal. I'll do what I can, okay?”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter...

-Steve saw Bucky again for the first time after the Triggering
-Steve met Sam Wilson
-Steve & Peter had some lovely family bonding
-Steve stayed with Bucky
-Steve threatened Sam Wilson

(Honestly, this fic in a nutshell)

Question: Was anyone freaked out when Zemo was mentioned? Did anyone go ohshitohshit so this is how it’s going to be before finding out it was actually Sam?

Note: I love how Steve talks his way around literally everything using vaguely accurate political terms and pretending he knows what he's doing (ex: “Visiting hours just ended. Come back tomorrow.”


"I don’t work for Stark.”

“Yes you do, you’re guarding in his fucking building, aren’t you? This is an Avengers issue, not a SHIELD one, so back off or I'll have to make you.”

)
There will be more of this later in the book as well.

Please comment and let me know what you think!
That evening Steve tried to leave the tower to shoot up, but Jarvis wouldn't let him. “Would you like me to contact Mister Stark to accompany--”

“No.”

Instead, he and Peter ended up watching a horror movie. Steve found himself searching the movie beforehand, only to realize that it didn't matter. Bucky wasn’t going to watch it, so it didn't matter if it had any of his triggers in it.

Steve ended up daydreaming through a lot of the movie, occasionally blinking back into focus when Peter jumped or hid his face against Steve’s shirt. The movie had a lot of jumpscare, with the main characters being chased through a huge abandoned building by ghosts and ghouls. A few of the scenes got to Steve too: one that included a huge drop and one with a ghost with a grueling accent whispering to the main character. It left Steve trembling like a leaf and aching for a needle.

Later that night, with Peter asleep on the couch, Steve sat with the shield on his lap. He stroked over the smooth, curved metal, feeling the dip where the plates had been loose and the knife had dented it. His hands no longer trembled.

When Steve eventually set it down—carefully, as to not disturb the sleeping boy— he wandered over to a mirror hanging on the wall, checking his reflection. His eye bags were ever present, but all of the bruises had vanished. He looked normal, and he hated it. There was a reason, he decided, the human body wasn’t designed to heal so quickly. The physical remnants of painful moments had disappeared before the moments had even processed, leaving Steve feeling like a tree that had fallen in the woods with no one around to hear.

“Jarvis,” Steve said plainly, “Does weed count as a harmful drug?”

“Yes, sir.”

Steve cussed, marching to his room and going through his things. He shoved aside a baggie of already rolled blunts, fumbling with his lighters and ignoring the packs of chewing gum, digging through his things but finding nothing that could help him.

Steve marched into the kitchen and dug through the knife drawer, already feeling a calmness wash over him when he had something to grip, something familiar to hold onto. He only had the one throwing knife left, the one he’d threatened Wilson with earlier, but he wasn’t willing to risk losing it. Ignoring Jarvis’ warnings, Steve marched over to where Peter was sleeping on the couch, crouching down next to him and gripping the knives tighter. He forced himself to be silent, straining his ears to hear Peter’s heartbeat. Adequate. He then watched Peter’s eyes, standing when he saw they were
moving behind his eyelids. Content that Peter was in REM sleep, and would not wake easily, Steve threw the kitchen knives three at a time at the wall.

The elevator opened without a ding for once, and Tony stepped in, looking about as rough as expected at ass-o’clock in the morning, but probably not as bad as Steve.

(Good.)

Tony looked at Steve, then the knives embedded in the wall, then to Peter, sound asleep on the couch. His expression softened. “Wanna tell me what's going on?”

“You know exactly --”

“Woah, I didn't mean right now. Let's make some coffee first, the caffeine is good for you.”

When Peter eventually woke up, he woke up to Steve and Tony sitting on the couch diagonal from him, both watching him with mugs in their hands.

The next day, when Steve went down to the holding cells, he was led down a different hallway. Both walls were covered in thick glass with metal supports, and behind the first panel of glass, Bucky sat on a small cot in the corner. His ankle was cuffed to a long chain that attached in the corner opposite from the door.

“You can go in,” Rollins said with a tone of exasperation. “But no funny business, and if he has any other visitors, I'm letting them come in too. If he hurts anyone, even on accident, it’s straight back to his containment unit with no visitors, got it?” He spoke to Steve, but pounded on the glass, leering at Bucky. Bucky met his gaze, but his own gaze remained mostly impassive, not betraying whether or not he heard the threat.

As soon as Steve entered the cell he was wrapped up by two firm arms, his cheek right over Bucky’s heart. He could feel the steady beating, much slower than his or even Peter’s hearts. Steve wondered, idly, if Bucky was still on sedatives.

Steve peppered him with questions while Bucky pretended he wasn't smelling Steve and checking his arms for track marks. When Steve was done, Bucky asked some of his own, but not many.

“You’ve been doing coke?” He asked quietly.

“No, I haven’t been doing anything. Jarvis is still watching me.”

“Good. Someone ought to be.”

They talked for a little while, sitting on the bed with legs and shoulders touching, before the talking seemed to become too much for Bucky and he suggested Steve take a nap. “I'm not leaving you,” Steve protested.

“Don’t have to; I've got a bed.”

Steve continued to argue but didn't fight back when Bucky grappled him into laying down on the cot. He tucked the sheets in around him and arranged Steve in a comfortable position before ordering him to sleep. Steve pulled Bucky down to sit on the bed next to him, nuzzling against his thigh.

When Steve woke up late that afternoon, Peter was leaning against the wall and talking to Bucky in a low voice. Steve forced himself to sit up, and leaned against Bucky for support as he scowled at Peter.
“He changed cells,” Peter protested before Steve even said anything. “You said I couldn’t see him until he wasn’t in the small cell anymore!”

Bucky slapped Steve on the arm so lightly that Steve knew he appreciated it.

Steve shook his head. “It’s too early for this shit.”

“It’s five in the afternoon.”

“Too early.”

“Anyways, I also came here to talk to you, Mister Steve Nomad Rogers sir,” Peter said casually, watching Steve out of the corner of his eye to gage his reaction. Steve was pretty sure when they first met Peter’s titles were genuine, but now he just said them to annoy him. “Um, we were called in for a meeting with Fury.”

“Is Bucky going?”

“Um, no. They said it’s about a new threat, or something.”

Steve felt Bucky’s shoulder flex. “Peter, why would they invite you?”

“Right? I don’t know, emotional support? Like one of those dogs?”

Bucky’s gaze shifted off center and glazed over. “I wonder if we could get him certified…”

“Anyways …”

“When’s the meeting?” Steve asked, not-so-subtly nudging Bucky back to focus.

“At six; as soon as visiting hours are over.”

Bucky exhaled through his teeth. “Shit. I have to talk to Wilson again.”

Steve sat up a little straighter, and in the back of his mind he noted Bucky’s arm that snaked around his waist, tugging him closer. “Wilson, huh? Is he giving you any shit?” Steve leaned closer, eyes wide. “Do you need me to kill him?”

Bucky pushed his face away, but didn’t loosen his grip on his waist. “You’d like it too much. He just tries. To get me to talk.”

Peter shrugged. “I mean, he is a psychologist. Isn’t that his job?”

“Doesn’t mean I have to comply.”

Steve sighed and rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder. “Ugh.”

“<Agreed,>” Bucky muttered in Russian.

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When they got to the meeting room, all of the other Avengers and Fury were already there. Steve and Peter pulled up chairs, looking around expectantly.

“Hey Clint. How’re you healing up?”
Clint shrugged. “Just some bruised ribs.”

“Oh, congrats.”

Fury cleared his throat. “I'm guessing you're wondering--"

“Yes, get on with it please.”

Fury glared at Steve in his normal I’d-hate-you-if-I-had-enough-energy way. “Every time I see you, I swear I consider euthanasia. For both of us, or if that doesn’t work than just for me.”

Peter raised his hand. “Um, excuse me, sorry, but why don’t you like Mister Rogers?”

“Yes,” Steve agreed, batting his eyelashes.."What did I ever do to you?"

Fury didn't even hesitate. “The first time we met he stabbed me-- multiple times, actually. Then the second time, he peed at me.”

Tony perked up. “He peed on you?”

"At me, he peed at me. It was absolutely vile and the fact that we haven’t aimed a missile at that stupid target on his back is actually amazing. But that's not what we’re here to talk about.”

“We want to talk about Bucky,” Natasha said smoothly, arms folded on the table. “His psychologist hasn’t been able to get much from him, but he is suggesting that it was an event that occurred due to the triggers, and therefore isolated. He is suggesting we take small steps into releasing him from custody.”

“He doesn’t need to be in custody at all,” Steve argued. “He should be freed right now. He doesn’t need small steps.”

“Really?” Tony raised his eyebrows. He didn't even wear a hint of a smile. “Because I would say that you both should be taking small steps. You're not off the hook yet either, Rogers, you did turn against your teammates and cause damage.”

“And even without that, we’re worried.” Sitting side by side, arms crossed and hands clasped, Tony and Natasha looked like a married couple scolding their teenager. It was not a comparison Steve liked very much. “He’s your weakness, no matter how hard you try to hide it. That will be used against you.”

The room was quiet for a few moments, everyone letting that sink in. Slowly, Steve raised his eyebrows. “You think I've been trying to hide it?”

Natasha looked a little less comfortable, but to her credit she didn't let it show. Steve continued. “You're telling me that you thought that was subtle? Ever since we've met, ever since any of us have met, I have never, ever been discreet about Bucky being my weakness. Yeah, fucking clearly he’s my weakness, he’s my best friend in the entire world and I would kill any and all of you if that's what it took to protect him. It wouldn’t be fun, but I'd do it, and not once have I ever tried to hide that, so I don’t know why the hell you were surprised that I tried to detain him myself, in the safe way I knew how, and wouldn't let you fucking shoot him.”

The temperature in the room had dropped about ten degrees.

Bruce was the first to speak up. “But you didn't detain him. Natasha detained him.”
“No, I had almost brought him back to normal, when Natasha jumped him and knocked him out in about as cruel a way she could. And the worst part? I knew what I was doing, but you didn't listen to me, because clearly I'm too--" Steve cut himself off before he could finish his sentence.

Unfortunately, Natasha didn't let it slide. “Because you're too what?” When Steve didn't respond, she prompted “...Does this have something to do with your size?”

“You can actually fuck off.”

“You think-- what, you think that because you're small we don’t take you seriously?”

Steve raised his chin defiantly. “Maybe if I was a 6’2” musclehead like the serum was supposed to make me, you might actually think I know what I'm doing for once.”

After a few moments of awkward silence, Tony put his head in his hands. “Ugh. We’ve steered so far off track, we’re in Mexico. Okay, refocusing: is Bucky a danger or is he a danger. Should we take a vote?”

“The shrink said to do it in small steps,” Clint pointed out. “He knows more than I do. I'm with him.”

“Ditto.”

“Sounds fine.”

Bruce and Natasha both nodded. “Then it’s decided.”

“I want to be taken off suicide watch,” Steve declared, loud enough that no one could mistake his words. About half of the people looked surprised. “It’s annoying and I think Jarvis has been watching me shower.”

“Oh, he has, but he always does that. You're not special.”

“Great, how do I uninstall it?”

“Steve’s a big boy,” Natasha said lowly, glancing at the others. “He’s managed to stay alive this long, and besides, the one incident he’d had had had been directly after extreme emotional duress. Really, it’s just a formality at this point.”

“Great,” Steve said blandly.

Peter turned to him, looking genuinely concerned. “Does this mean you're going to start carrying knives with you again?”

Steve raised an eyebrow and smoothly pulled a knife out from his waistband, flicking it open and throwing it against the opposite wall of the room, where it thudded and stuck. “Jarvis doesn’t see everything.”

“What the fuck, yes he does--”

“Tony,” Fury scolded. “Would you like to present the other issue?”

“Oh great, there’s more.”

“There is,” Tony confirmed, rising to his feet. “Now, I know you have been basically raised by two assassins with half decent abilities to lie, and they've probably taught you some things, but I would
remind you that the people in this room are no slouches either. No matter how sauve you think you are, we will not fall for it. So, without further ado: Peter, you're Spiderman, right?”

Peter stood so abruptly the chair fell backwards. “Spider-what? Hmm? I didn't even hear you, that's so crazy, I saw this one cartoon about spiders once except I don’t really remember it and did you know that some spiders build nests underground? Fascinating creatures they are, really, but a spider man, ha, that's hilarious!” He’d managed to back up all the way to the wall, but apparently didn't notice as he began backing up the wall. “Spiders also have eight legs, which is why they're arachnids not insects, unless they're amputees I mean, but then they’d still be arachnids, you know? Imagine if a spider lost it’s leg and it was given a metal one, ha, the winter spider! That’s hilarious! Oh, was that the doorbell, I’ll get it!” He grabbed the vent gate and tore it off, scampering into the ceiling.

Steve leaned back in his chair and sighed. He really didn't want to look at Natasha.

He really, really didn’t want to look at Natasha.

He looked at Natasha.

She looked unimpressed.

“We’ve only had him for a few months,” he defended. “And he was anxious. He has a hard time opening up to people.”

“But he is Spider-Man, right?”

All of the Avengers (in the room) turned and looked at Fury like he was the stupidest person alive. “No, I think we got the wrong guy,” Bruce said in a monotone. “It’s not like he just climbed up that wall or anything.”

Tony tapped his chin. “Do the webs come out of his hands, or--”

Steve waved aside the question. “I’ll go find him, send him down to your workshop, Tony. He can answer whatever questions he wants to.”

Tony immediately brightened. “Is it Christmas?”

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Steve hissed through his teeth as he packed, shoving a few extra necessities into the crash bag unceremoniously.

Bucky had rejected him, openly, plainly rejected him. Steve had told him what Fury had said about taking small steps and going on probation, and Bucky had denied it without a thought. “No,” he said, not crossing his arms or making any other defensive movement. He was-- well, Steve didn't know what he was. Not the Winter Soldier, but not quite Brooklyn Bucky-- he was what Steve imagined he’d transformed into after being at Azzano for a while. Before his brain started folding in on itself and his body lay limp and twitching against the restraints, but after the procedures had started, Steve imagined he was this creature; stubborn, unmoving, taking the torture with his chin held up. He didn't have to cross his arms: his entire body sent the signal of defiance, his eyes lighting up with boldness. He was an immovable object.

“I’m not leaving here,” Bucky said, like he’d had a choice in the matter in the first place. “Not with Zola out there. I can live knowing that there are some people who might be able to-- to mess with
me. But not him. It’s safest for-- for everybody if I just… stay here.”

Steve had set his own jaw. “You're wrong. And you're going to make yourself miserable.”

“Maybe. But I'll be miserable here.”

Steve had stayed for another five minutes before announcing he had a meeting with Fury. Bucky had taken it as a direct insult, standing and shifting forwards, lips parting in a way that suggested Steve had accepted a challenge Bucky hadn’t meant for him to accept. Steve watched him swallow, actually watched his Adam's apple bob. “No.”

Steve had smiled shyly. “It won’t take long.”

“No. No, you, you dipshit, you dickwad--”

“Wow, rude.”

“Don’t you dare, don’t you fucking dare--”

Steve had stood and Bucky made to grab him but Steve squirreled away before he could. He danced backwards until his back hit the wall and the chain around Bucky’s ankle pulled taut, almost yanking him off of his feet.


Steve crossed his arms, trying to force himself to smile. He couldn't. “Thanks, but I'm good.”

“Promise you'll be back tonight. You're meeting with Fury won’t last six hours--"

“Traffic is just… crazy, in this part of town. I'll see what I can do.”

“Promise me, promise me--"

So Steve shrugged, because he’d broken enough promises before, so what was one more? When Bucky had seen him again however many years ago, Steve had known he was a disgusting person. Blood on his hands, blood on his feet, dirt in his heart…

“I promise,” Steve said, like it was easy. It was easy, in a harsh, painful way. “I'll be back tonight.”

Bucky had exhaled, but the panicked look in his eyes didn't change. He let his arms drift away from his sides, his subtle invitation for contact.

Steve tried again to smile, failed again, let the smile drop and said a little “Later, Bucky” as he turned and walked out the door.

The elevator ride was not long, but it was long enough to get the blood pounding in Steve’s head. He was angry, he was bitter, he was… the word he wanted to use was ‘in pain’, but that wasn't right. His body was fine. It was everything else that hurt.

He packed the crash bag, then tore out a piece of paper and scrawled a note across it.

Peter--
Things are about to get messy. Go home. Say goodbye to Bucky before you go, give him a hug. Lie to the others, don’t tell them about this note. Will contact soon.

He left the note in the middle of the floor, hefted his bag (which was wide enough to fit the shield inside it) and marched onto the elevator.

Jarvis dinged once the elevator had started moving. “Miss Romanoff has requested you meet her in the commons after visiting hours are over.”

“Jarvis, can you send a delayed message?”

Jarvis sounded offended. “Of course.”

“At 6:04 send a message to Nat telling her that I just need to shower, and then I'll be right there. Okay?”

“Understood.”

“And unless they specifically ask if I left the tower, I'd like if you can keep it under wraps. Can you do that Jarvis?”

“I assure you, I will retain confidentiality to the best of my ability.”

“Thanks.”

Outside of the tower, Steve took a cab and went straight to SHIELD. Once there, he marched directly to the server room, where a large handful of people paced around, adjusting things and running diagnostics. He made a beeline for a server on the far side of the room with three people talking around it.

“This is the server that was attacked, isn’t it?” He asked, stuffing his hands in his pockets. The people turned to look at him.

“Attacked?” One repeated.

“The Zola attack on Avengers Headquarters. Stark’s security is fine tuned, he had to get through a pathway that was already there. This is the server?”

“Wait, Zola? What’s a Zola?”

Steve rolled his eyes hard. “Were any of you working four days ago?”

“Um, it was Monday. We were all working.”

“Any of you working here?”

“We work everywhere!” One of them defended. “The servers can cause issues anywhere in the building. We spend like, half of our hours navigating and the other half resetting the wifi!”

Steve shook his head and kept moving. There was nothing about that particular server that suggested it had been the problem, aside from the techs around it, but he’d hoped that they would have been amateur enough to tell him which server was the problem. It turned out he’d overrated them.

He went up to one of the top levels and walked with purpose to Fury’s office. The door was open
and he let himself in. The pirate-wannabee was nowhere to be seen, so Steve helped himself to the desk drawers.

“I'm guessing you're looking for this?”

Steve was so startled he whipped his head back, trying to hit the person and hopefully break their nose, to no success. He whirled around, grabbing Natasha Romanoff by her jacket and slamming her against the wall, holding her in place with a knife to her neck.

She didn't seem surprised, but she did look mildly concerned. “You’re looking for this,” she said, holding up a flashdrive. Steve snatched it from her, gritting his teeth.

“What’s on it?”

“I don’t know.”

Steve jerked the knife upwards, pressing the smooth hilt against the underside of her jaw, “Stop lying!”

“I'm not, I only act like I know everything!”

He lowered the knife slightly and she shoved him backwards. There were no fancy moves involved, just a shove, like kids fighting. Her eyes never left him as she moved back to the outcropping of wall she’d apparently came from, hidden out of sight from the doorway.

Steve gripped the flash drive in between two fingers, flipping it over to look at it. “Where did you find this?”

“Inside Fury’s desk, inside that envelope.” She gestured to the empty envelope on the desk. In poor German, it read:

I may not speak the language but I can use Google translate.

She shrugged. “Seemed like it was for you.”

“So you took it. Thanks.”

Steve was about to ask another question when a man walked by the room and doubled back. He had smoothed back gray hair and a rather unfortunate mustache: Senator Ross. “Steve Rogers. You can’t be in here.”

Natasha was still hidden in the shadows, so he only addressed Steve. “Sure I can,” Steve said easily. “Fury said so.”

“Fury died last night.”

Steve blinked. Oh. “He told me in advance.”

“What’s on that flashdrive? I'm going to have to ask you to give that to me.”

Steve walked forwards, offering up the flash drive in an open palm. When Ross reached for it, Steve decked him in the nose, making him stumble backwards. It was all he needed to slip out the door and
sprint down the hall, slamming his fist against the elevator button. Already he could hear Ross calling into a phone for backup.

The glass elevator opened and he pressed the button for the lowest level onetwothreefourfive time, yanking the shield out of his bag and zipping it back up. Halfway down, televator doors dinged and fuckfuckfuck, opened to reveal what looked to be a full strike team, goddamnit Ross. Steve let his reflexes guide him into spinning and slamming the shield through the control panel. The elevator dropped into free fall, only slowing when the emergency brakes latched on at the bottom. The doors opened automatically, halfway between floors. Steve made eye contact with a half dozen pairs of black boots marching towards him. “Give it up Rogers, you have nowhere to go!”

_No, I really don’t_, Steve agreed mentally. Then he took a running start and leapt through the glass wall shield first.

Free falling was a mixture of weightlessness and being too heavy all at once. He floated for a moment, then the shield was dragging him downwards like it was drawn to the molten center of the earth and was willing to take Steve with it. He plummeted, falling for minutes in milliseconds until the impact. His shield hit and his body hit the shield, his shoulder and elbow and side and legs and head all making contact at once. The vibranium shield absorbed the worst of the impact, but Steve was still left disturbed and disoriented as he clambered up.

He’d landed by the front of SHIELD, outside on the sidewalk.

In the street, a little two door coupe drove up and stopped by the sidewalk, the passenger door opening from the inside. Natasha sat in the driver's seat, looking bored. “You could've just taken the stairs.”

Chapter End Notes

_In this chapter..._

... Steve had some helpful knife throwing therapy (while Peter was asleep)
... Bucky was moved out of the containment chamber and into a cell
... Family jail bonding time <3<3<3
... Small steps discussions 1 & 2 (with Avengers and then Bucky)
... Steve doesn’t give a shit about what anyone has to say ever and will gladly throw himself off a building to prove it

I’ve had some doubts about my writing lately, so comments would be seriously appreciated right now. Thanks for reading!
Steve suggested they go to the library to use the flash drive, but Natasha dismissed him easily. “It won’t be hard for them to figure out what are next move will be, and while I don’t think we can afford to wait around, the library will be the first place they look. We’ll go to the mall-- there’s an Apple store we can use.”

“Don’t you think they’d have a problem with us taking advantage of their displays?”

“Nah, the workers at big companies don’t care, they’re on the corporate payroll so they don’t get commissions.” She glanced over at him. “You have a disguise?”

“Yeah, I’m not going to shave for thirty minutes and let my mustache grow out.”

“You’re hilarious,” Natasha said in a monotone. “You should go on the road.”

“I really should.” Steve unclipped his seatbelt and climbed into the tiny backseat, bag in tow.

“What are you doing?”

“Changing?”

“What, you couldn’t do that in the front seat?”

“Not without you looking!”

Natasha made eye contact with him in the rearview mirror, smirking. “Nice, Rogers.”

He scowled and finished changing. His disguise consisted of dark blue skinny jeans, a light blue v-neck, a hat and his non-prescription glasses. When Natasha saw them in the mirror she snorted. “Nice, really nice. If you want I could draw a beard on your face, just to sell it.”

Steve clambered back into the front seat, purposely digging his knee into Natasha’s shoulder. “Oops.”

At the mall they sped-walked to the Apple store. “First rule of going on the run is, don’t run, walk,” Natasha chided without looking at him.

“My legs are too short to not-run.”

They stepped aside into the Apple store, which was busier than Steve had expected. Natasha guided them to an open display computer and Steve inserted the flashdrive.

It loaded eerily fast, showing a line of code. Natasha immediately leaned over it, typing in commands and highlighting entire lines of text.

Thank you for all the wonderful comments! I really appreciate all the kind words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“What are you doing?”

“Getting through the firewall. It’s basic stuff, makes sure the computer won’t record the data on the drive—”

“Well obviously, but why did you just delete that line?”
She glanced at him. “It’s password encrypted. I can get rid of the password, it will just take a little longer.”

“I know the password.”

“You do?”

“Well, Fury intended this drive for me, so I must know it.”

Steve typed in the password for his SHIELD account, then his full name. Neither worked.

“It wouldn’t be something that’s on a file somewhere, Fury’s too smart for that.”

“Agree to disagree.”

“It’s probably an inside joke, something that—”

Steve typed in stomachhandside and it unlocked.

Natasha almost let her confusion show, before shoving him aside to start digging.

“Can I help you with anything?”

Steve almost jumped out of his skin. “Jesus!”

Natasha, on the other hand, was unfazed. She stood and leaned against Steve’s shoulders, smiling with teeth. “Oh, no. My fiancé was just helping me with some honeymoon destinations.”

Steve almost kicked her. Instead he looked back to the Apple employee—long blond hair, slight beard, company shirt—and tried to smile. “Right, we’re getting married.”

The guy didn’t seem fazed at all. “Congratulations. Where do you guys thinking about going?”

Steve glanced at the screen. “New York.”


It was Steve’s turn to smile with his teeth. “We’re still deciding.”

“Well that’s great, I’m personally more of a football fan but my cousin is super into the minor baseball leagues there—”

“Over my dead body.”

Someone passed by the store window, dressed in Strike team black. Steve ducked his head, hoping the baseball cap would obscure his face enough, and nudged Natasha’s leg.

The Apple guy laughed good-naturedly. “Okay, okay, I won’t get in your way. Oh, and if you need anything, I'm Aaron.”
As soon as he was gone, Steve leaned over the computer with Natasha. She shoved him gently. “Calm down, will you? I have an address: Wheaten, New Jersey.”

“Shit.”

“You know it?”

“I used to. Let’s go.”

Natasha pulled out the chip and shoved it in her pocket. They strode out of the store, headed for the escalators to go down to a different level. The strike agent from before had come from where they’d parked their car, meaning that they probably recognized it.

Steve looked around, beady eyes snapping from person to person. “Standard tac-team. Two behind, two across, two coming straight at us. If they make us, are you prepared to engage or will you have to run?”

“Shut up and laugh at something I said.” Natasha threw her arm around him and they both ducked their heads, laughing oh so casually as a pair of agents passed them. “And I’m always prepared to engage.”

“To get engaged, maybe. Fiancée?”

“You wish I was your fiancée.”

“I would, but I'm not a masochist.”

They got on the escalator, which was too crowded to walk down. Below them, one of the Strike agents boarded the escalator going the opposite way, looking around. He hadn't spotted them yet, but there was nowhere to hide.

Natasha turned around, looking Steve intensely in the eyes. “Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable.”

The horrible image of Clint and Natasha pretending to jack each other off in a alley in Budapest passed through Steve’s mind. “I know what your idea of PDA is and I absolutely refuse--”

Before he could finish, Natasha pressed her lips against his, artfully tilting their heads and placing her hands so their faces were obscured. They held still there for a few seconds, all soft lips and exchanged heartbeats, then pulled away to step off the elevator.

“That wasn't so bad, was it?”

“Is your lipstick poisonous? Do I only have an hour to live?”

“My lipstick is not poisonous. Well. This one isn't. Shall we?”

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An hour, a stolen truck, and some questionable driving later, Steve sat behind the wheel of said stolen truck, taking the scenic route to New Jersey. Natasha lounged in the passenger seat, gazing out the window.
“So, where did Steve The I.T. Guy learn how to steal a car?” She started, watching his face to see if he annoyed him. Steve did his best to remain impassive.

“Nazi Germany. Where’d you learn your evasion tactics, prom?”

“Soviet Russia.”

“Same difference.”

She grinned and leaned back in the seat. After a few moments, Steve couldn't handle her creepy smile anymore and had to ask. “What?”

“Oh, nothing.” She toned down the smile a little, shrugged. “I'm just proud.”

“Of what?”

“I'm one step closer to collecting the whole set.”

“The whole set,” Steve repeated, adjusted his hands on the steering wheel. It felt too big for his small palms.

“The Avengers. I've already kissed Clint, and Bucky, and now you. I'm taking my time with Bruce, letting him be the one to initiate it, and I'm saving Stark for last. I need a good reason to kiss him.”

“You think you'll ever find a good reason?”

“I found a good reason to kiss you, didn't I?”

“Still wasn't a kiss.”

“Then what was it?”

“Just two people pressing their mouths together in an attempt at survival.”

“Cute. Should we try again then?”

Steve glanced at her. “Is that the person speaking, or the assassin?”

For the first time ever, Natasha looked surprised. “It can’t be both?”

“If it’s both, I'm not going to kiss you.”

“I'm not Barnes. There’s only one voice in my head.”

“And it wants to kiss me?”

“Yes.”

Steve checked the rearview mirror to make sure no one was trailing them, then carefully pulled over to the side of the road, putting the car in park. He looked at her expectantly.

Natasha shrugged and leaned in. In less than a second, their lips were pressed together, moving slowly, just barely out of sync. Natasha’s lips, unlike Bucky’s, were actually extremely soft. She tasted like strawberries.

After a moment, they stilled, and then Natasha pulled away, sitting back in her seat like nothing had happened. Steve licked his lips, trying to get any last remnants of strawberries. “Was that good?”
"You tell me."

"No, was that good for you?"

Natasha judged him for a second before her expression smoothed out in a smile. "Steve… is there something you want to tell me?"

"I just wanted to know if it was good!"

"Just out of curiosity…"

"You're a witch. You're evil. Fury told me you didn't have any powers, he lied--"

"Was that your first kiss since 1945?"

Steve opened his mouth in horror. "No. " Natasha kept smirking, and it was clear that she wasn't going to give it up. Steve sighed, putting the car back into drive and pulling onto the road. "It was, however, the first time I've kissed a girl."

"Aww. It's nice, right?"

"Not really."

"Girls are much better to kiss. It's just a better experience overall."

"Agree to disagree."

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They kept driving late into the afternoon. Steve watched as the clock ticked to five, and then as it slowly progressed to six. When it actually changed to six, Steve tried not to sigh. He stared at the clock for a few seconds longer before pulling his eyes away.

Natasha was staring at him from the passenger seat; he knew that without looking. She’d ‘slept’ for a little while, but he had a feeling she’d faked it, just like Bucky did.

"It's six o'clock," she said obviously.

"I know."

"What’s important about six?"

"Nothing."

"You're lying."

Steve had a sudden urge to drive the car off of the side of the road into an unsuspecting tree, ending it all. He gritted his teeth and ignored the urge. "I'm not a trained spy, this game isn't fair."

Natasha waited for a few minutes, then at 6:04 checked her phone. "Jarvis just sent me a message. From you."

"Hmm."
“It says ‘let me shower and I'll be down in thirty minutes.’ Nice.”

“I have no regrets.”

“What about Bucky? You could've spent these last few hours with him, and instead you're sitting in this car, with me, and now visiting hours is up.”

Steve shifting uncomfortably. “He can handle himself.”

“What’d he do when you told him you were going?”

“I didn't tell him.”

“So what’d you tell him.”

Steve’s hands were sweaty on the steering wheel. “That I'd be back before visiting hours are up.”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“You knew you were lying when you said it, and you said it anyways. You lied to his face.”

Steve forced himself to calm down, setting his jaw. “I did.”

“And now you feel guilty about it.”

“I can live with that.”

“You lied to me too, does that make you feel guilty?”

Steve considered lying, but he couldn't. He shook his head.

It was quiet for a few minutes, leading Steve to believe Natasha had dropped the subject. Then, she spoke up-- quietly, as if she didn't want to disturb the silence too much. “When we were all on that quinjet, and Bruce and Clint said that they trusted you… that was stupid.”

Steve wasn't sure where that was going, but he shrugged anyways. It was easy. “Agreed.”

“You didn't need to be trusted. If anything, you needed to be recognized as what you really were.”

Steve blinked. “I'm not following you.”

“You're straight forwards. Like you said yesterday, you never tried to hide your loyalties, not really. You didn't need our trust. You never did. But we needed your trust, otherwise our trust wouldn't matter.”

“Don’t say ‘our’ trust. You never trusted me.”

Natasha smiled sadly, shaking her head. “I didn't get a serum, just training. They did their best, but I'm not like you or Bucky. They couldn't remove my humanity.”

It was quiet for a few moments. Steve glanced at her, trying to keep an eye on the road at the same time. “I'm still a human.”

“Yeah?” She didn't look convinced.
The coordinates lead them straight to the doors of Camp Lehigh. Steve slung the shield on his back, wishing he had time for a light pick-me-up before searching through his old camp, but time was of the essence, and they'd already waited long enough.

They started exploring the old army barracks, with Natasha using a device to check for heat signatures. The entire camp was abandoned, and looked to have been for a while. There were footprints every so often, but there was also graffiti stains on the walls, trash tangled in the weeds. Steve forced the rusted top off of an old trash can, confirming that the contents inside were charred, probably from a homeless person looking for warmth.

The sky fell dark soon after they arrived, but they didn't give in to flashlights. Steve knew his eyes were enhanced so he could see better than a normal person, but he wasn't sure how much, or in what ways. Either way, Natasha didn't seem to have any issues with the dark, so he didn't bring it up.

At one point they stumbled upon an office in a mock ammunitions warehouse. They looked through the few remaining files, seeing if anything might hint at whether Zola had been there or if Fury’s information was wrong.

Steve walked over to the bookcases, skimming them with his eyes. All of the books were dusty, in equal amounts. As he passed to the next shelf, he felt a small spurt of air.

He stepped back, looking closely at the crack in between the two cases. “Nat.”

“What is it?”

Steve wriggled his fingers in between the bookshelves—something he couldn't very well do if his fingers were much bigger—and pried the bookshelves apart. As soon as a little pressure was put on them, something shuddered and they opened on their own.

Inside was an elevator that looked slightly newer than the rest of the building. Inside there were only two buttons: one for the floor they were on and one for a lower floor. They pressed the lower button.

When the elevator opened, they stepped out into a large room full of ancient computers—just the boxes, with almost no actual monitors. All of the machines whirred with activity. Steve pressed his hand against one, pulling away quickly to avoid burning his hand. The rest of the room was extremely over air-conditioned to the point of chill, which was probably the reason why the servers hadn't overheated yet.

“These must be the servers Zola used to hack into Jarvis,” Steve muttered.

Natasha shook her head, pulling out her SHIELD phone to check something. “This can't be the data-point, this technology is ancient.”

The silence of the room was filled with ominous laughter, sending a shiver of ice through Steve’s entire body. In a single second he had two knives drawn and was ready to fight. “Zola, show yourself!”

At the other end of the room there was a flicker of motion and Steve spun to find it. It wasn't Zola—instead it was an equally ancient camera, tracking them. Natasha saw it too, walking with him to the
large screen silently.

The screen went blue, then an all too familiar face flickered into existence. “Rogers, Steven. Born, 1918. Romanoff, Natalia Alianovna. Born, 1984. It is good to see you again Steven, although I am saddened you did not bring me back my tier. Although, I do suppose that would be difficult, if he vere… how do you say… shot in ze head?”

Natasha crossed her arms impatiently, ignoring the monitor to look at Steve. “It’s some kind of recording.”

“I am not a recording, Fräulein. I may not be the man I vas ven ze Captain took me prisoner in 1945, but I am.”

“Why don’t you tell us where you really are so we can talk face to face?”

“Oh, but we already are. You see, in 1972 I received a terminal diagnosis. Science could not save my body, my mind, however, zat vas worth saving on two hundred thousand feet of data banks! Right now, you are standing in my brain.”

Steve let out a hiss through his teeth. “How did you get here?”

“I vas invited. SHIELD thought I could help zeyir cause. I also helped my own.”

Instead of his wrinkled, alien-like face on the monitor, the image changed to show the Hydra emblem. It switched back to his sickly expression. “I will answer whatever question you want of me after asking one of my own. You see, zey don’t tell me much. I am very… alone in my head, as it vere. So tell me Herr Rogers. How is my tier?”

It took a few moments for the word to translate in Steve’s mind: pet.

“How he healed?” The scientist continued. “I vas always so proud of his healing. I vas very fond of him you know, a wonderful specimen.”

Steve threw one of his knives. It embedded itself in the screen right where Zola’s forehead had been before the screen cracked and went to black. Zola reappeared on another screen.

“He was never hurt,” Natasha said with an air of plain confidence. “Now, how were you able to hack Jarvis? Does anyone else know the codewords you used?”

“Ahh, I vould love to tell you. Unfortunately, you vill be too dead to hear.”

Steve turned around just in time to see the elevator slam shut.

“Steve, we’ve got a bogey,” Natasha announced, looking at the SHIELD device. “Short range ballistic. 30 seconds tops.”

“I am afraid I have been stalling, Rogers. Admit it, it’s better zis vay. Ve’re both of us...out of time.”

There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide…

“Steve!”

Natasha yanked up a metal grate from the floor and Steve ran for her, ripping the shield off and grabbing her in one fluid motion. They landed, rolled, and had just enough time to brace themselves before the entire world exploded.
It was thunder and fire and madness, and at first, it seemed like it missed them. Then the walls collapsed around them and the weight of the building slammed down on top of the shield, forcing them down against the ground. The shaking and heat and noises kept going, more and more weight piling on top of them, until it just… stopped.

Natasha was still pressed firmly against him, and Steve would have reached out to find her pulse if he didn't feel her heart beat in his own bones. He was tucked over her, bending over her with the shield raised to protect them.

His lungs felt like they'd been filled with soot. “You okay?”

“Fine,” she hissed through the dust-filled air. “I’m… are you?”

“I'm great. Wanna get out of here?”

“Let’s.”

Steve huffed and pushed a chunk of rubble to the side. With Natasha’s help, they were able to dislodge it and climb through into the ashy sunlight.

They just barely got out when there was the familiar click-and-slide sound of a gun, and shouting: “You're surrounded! On your knees!”

Steve whirled around, still trying to adjust to the light and haze of the blast zone. As soon as he turned, he found a gun pointed directly at his head. The man holding it was wearing the black and green suit that others may have missed, but Steve knew personally as the uniform of Hydra.

He tensed, hand reached down to retrieve a knife, when the man holding the gun jerked his head to the side, at a nearby building that had survived the blast. Steve stared at it for a few moments before catching the small glint of metal coming from the roof; a sniper rifle. Steve had a feeling this wasn’t exactly a friendly one.

“Knees!” The man shouted again, jerking the gun towards him. Steve glanced behind him at Natasha, who gave him a hesitant but knowing look.

As appealing as combat was at the moment, it wasn’t realistic. They were surrounded by a circle of six hydra agents, all with guns raised and ready, not to mention at least one long range sniper.

And either way, Steve was tired. Getting blown up had taken a lot out of him, and he wasn't at his best even before. They would have to form a plan, figure out some way to get free before anything happened, but if they tried to fight now, they would die.

Steve made eye contact with Natasha and shrugged. Then, turning his focus back to the soldier, he said “I won’t get on my knees for you. For your friend, maybe,” he added, winking at the other soldier.

About ten seconds later, he was loaded in the back of an armored van with his wrists cuffed behind him, the skin underneath his right eye beginning to swell and bruise, and a big grin on his face.

Natasha was loaded in next to him, also with her wrists cuffed but without any new injuries. They talked with their eyes for a few minutes as the van drove off, pulling away from the site at highway speeds.

There were two guards sitting in the back with them. Helmets obscured their faces, but Steve knew they would listen in to any and all verbal conversations.
After a few minutes, Natasha leaned her head against the metal wall and sighed. “Bucky said you had a habit of finding yourself fights out of nowhere. I guess he was right.”

Before Steve could respond, one of the guards yelled “No talking!” through their pitch black helmet.

“Oh, fuck off,” Steve clapped back helpfully.

The other guard jerked up their weapon, a baton that crackled and hissed with blue electricity. Before Steve could say anything— the words ‘shock me daddy’ came to mind— the guard slammed the baton against their ally, who shook with electricity before slumping over.

Reaching up, the agent pulled off the helmet with a relieved sigh, messy brown hair spilling out of it. “Ugh, what a relief,” Agent Hill sighed. “That thing was squeezing my brain.”

Steve blinked. “Hill.”

She smiled, a little smugly. “Rogers.” Her eyes darted over and landed on Natasha, who was speechless. “Nat.”

Meanwhile, Natasha was gaping at her like a fish. “The driver?” She managed weakly.

Hill smiled a little wider. “An ally. Speaking of…” She stopped mid sentence to pound three times on the back wall, and immediately the car drifted to the side of the road, pulling over. It stopped for just long enough for Hill to drag the body of the real Hydra agent out and dump them on the side the road and slam the doors shut, brushing her hands together with an air of finality. “Not that I can’t handle one body on my own, but you could’ve helped.”

“Actually, we couldn’t.” Steve smacked his wrists together a few times, the metal cuffs clicking together. “Handcuffs, remember?”

Hill sighed. “What do you think, Tash? Should we uncuff him?”

By that point the shock had worn off enough for Natasha to smirk— though, if Steve was right it was her spy smirk, not her real person one. It was weird to see Natasha shaken for once, but if she was going to be obnoxious then she deserved it. “Definitely not. If anything, we should make him keep the cuffs on and throw him out the back like the other guy.”

Hill seemed to like that suggestion a little too much for comfort. “We should. Alone at last.” She opened a pocket and pulled out a set of keys, gesturing to Natasha to turn so she could unlock her cuffs. “Unfortunately, there’s someone who wants to see him.”

Natasha seemed to understand immediately. “It’s not…”

“It is,” Hill agreed, moving on to help Steve. “Fury sends his regards.”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter we had the:
- Mall scene
- Truck scene
- Zola scene + Hill
Let's all do a slow clap for Steve managing to surrender and get himself in more trouble at the same time. We stan an idiot.

In other news, I'm not saying anything, but I would keep an eye on Natasha and some of the different things she's up to in upcoming chapters. I'm definitely not implying anything.

Also: I wrote a new story! It is title-less and not actually ready for posting yet, but I do think it's a pretty neat concept. Basically, it's a mixture of Greek Mythology with Marvel characters, and it was supposed to be stupid and a crack fic but then plot happened?? Idk man, but its a fun time. Does anyone want to guess who each character is? The mains are Steve, Bucky, Maria Hill and Peter. Please let me know if this sounds like an interesting story to you!
After being saved/captured by Hill, they’d been taken to a warehouse where Nick Fury was hiding out. He looked worse for wear, but altogether very much alive. People in high places were coming after him, he explained; he didn’t know who to trust, but sometimes you have to jump in the deep end first to see if there are sharks. In this case, there were. Hill had been busy, it seemed, and the sharks had been taken care of, quickly, effectively, and somehow, nonlethally.

At that part, Steve was pretty sure Natasha started drooling.

Hill assured them everything would be taken care of. They were to stay low temporarily as things were figured out and wrapped up, but they’d done a good job finishing off Zola. They were dismissed.

Approximately four hours after the Zola incident, they were sitting freshly showered in a half-decent motel room. Natasha sat on the edge of the bed, positioned in a way that was supposed to be casual, though Steve knew better. She was sitting based on the sight lines of the door and window; even when off duty, she was always ready.

Then again, Steve had three different knives hidden in his sweatpants, so he wasn't one to judge.

Natasha towelled off her hair, her expression so carefully plain that Steve knew she was hiding something. “Are you excited?” He asked blandly. “Fury’s alive. Yay.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I think… I think I was looking forwards to mourning him.”

“That’s weird.”

She shrugged, not denying it. “I don’t imagine you were going to mourn at all.”

Steve looked her over carefully. “I wasn’t. Which is why I thought the KGB would’ve taught you to get over stuff like that.”

“They didn’t let us get attached in the first place. After I left, my first big act of rebellion was allowing myself care about people. It wasn't wise, but…” she shrugged. “It was nice. A little real, for a little while.”

Sighing, Steve lowered himself onto the bed next to her, leaning his elbows on his knees. “I'm sorry for your almost loss. And for the record… Fury wasn't that bad. But I wouldn’t have mourned him even if we did get along. I… just don’t do that.”

He could feel her eyes on him. “Is there anyone you would mourn for?”

Steve lifted a shoulder then let it drop.
“What about Bucky?”

“He already died. A few times. More times than I have.” He chanced a glance at her, the corner of his lip twitching up. “The first time, I refused to accept it. The second was after I watched him fall to his death. I had a duty. I finished it. Then I tried to finish it. But I never mourned.”

“Did he… ‘die’ any other times?”

“He was in Hydra’s claws for… a lifetime. I don’t know how many times he died, just that I wasn’t there for him anymore. There was no one to mourn him. They killed him then resurrected him, over and over, until he was dead enough that they could put a gun in his hands and tell him who to shoot, and he’d do it. Then, when they were done, they killed him again, and when they needed him, they resurrected him again. Over and over, while I napped in the ice.”

“Do you feel guilty?”

Steve stared firmly at the ugly carpeted floor, all the intertwined cheap and fraying threads that had been trampled down. “No.”

“I think you’re lying again.”

“Am I?” Steve asked with a dry sort of amusement. “I can’t always tell anymore.”

“I like mourning,” Natasha said, changing the topic back gracefully. “I don’t like having to mourn, but I like being able to. It’s like… at least some things matter. You can’t fully appreciate something until it’s gone.”

“I should die then. Then you could fully appreciate me.”

She punched him lightly in the arm, smiling slightly. Closed lips—her real smile. “I’d prefer if you didn’t. Please and thank you.”

He hummed softly, sitting up to look at the ceiling instead of the floor. “Hey Nat?”

“Yeah?”

“I think I trust you.”

She pursed her lips. “Good.”

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Natasha slept for the entire night with one wrist against the headboard, like there was an invisible handcuff keeping it there. Steve on the other hand, slept curled up in a ball, wrapping around an extra pillow tightly. They didn’t touch during the night, not even by accident.

The next morning Hill sent them a message telling them that it was safe to go back; SHIELD was no longer hunting them. So they loaded up in a car and drove back in silence.

Steve tried to process everything, but it was made harder by his headache. His arm itched horribly, right in his inner elbow where he always shot up. It had been… two days? Three? And the withdrawal was making him physically ill.
Still, he tried to focus. Zola, dead. For real this time. Peter, hopefully safe. Steve had done his job.

(Even if it hurt).

Of course, there was one more person he hadn’t let himself think about, which was probably going to be slightly problematic.

———

Steve leant against the door of the glass cell, well aware that he was out of the radius that Bucky’s ankle cuff allowed him to travel. Bucky didn’t try to fight it, just sat on his bed, his eyes a little clearer at the sight of Steve but without betraying his emotions very much.

Steve chewed on his bottom lip. “Zola’s dead. I'll explain later, but he’s dead, for real this time.” He hissed in a breath, trying to stay calm. “Listen, I can't promise that there’s no one out there who knows the trigger words, and I can’t promise that everything will be fine, but I also refuse to leave you here. You're a good person—”

“Bullshit.”

“Fine!” Steve snapped. “You're a shit person. But I'm a shit person too, maybe even worse than you, so I'm not going to fucking respect a word of defense you say because I'm not letting you stay here. You wanna stay in a cell so badly, we’ll put you on house arrest in our apartment until something is figured out, but goddamnit, you're not staying here. I will not let you be alone.”

Bucky rose to his feet, looking every inch like the assassin he was. “You're a fucking idiot.”

“I know that!”

“I'm not done!” Bucky roared, silencing him immediately. “You're a fucking idiot, and you are full of shit. You know how I see it? That first day that we found each other again, every goddamn word out of our mouths were promises. And you promised me that you wouldn’t leave me. So when you pulled that shit? You disappeared on me to take on Zola alone, and the entire time I was hoping that you'd be okay and you'd win but if you didn’t? I was praying to God that you would die. No one, and I mean no one, knows the pits of Hell that Zola crawled from as well as I do, and if he found you, if he captured you…” His voice broke. Bucky looked straight at Steve with his wild animal eyes, and for one of the first times, Steve realized just how much danger he was in. His body stung and burned, aching to get to safety, while everything else wanted to lunge forwards and just touch him.

“That was a shit thing to do,” Bucky said, steeling his voice. He stood a little taller. “And if you ever try to pull a stunt like that again, I will knock you the fuck out and you'll wake up in a padded room in fucking Africa, and I will personally make sure that you never throw your head on the chopping block again, you hear me? Never again. Swear it to me, never again.”

Steve’s chest heaved. He blinked rapidly, ducking his head to try and hide it. He breathed in, then out, then in, then tried to breathe out but the only thing that came out was a choked out sob. He covered his face with his hands, trying desperately to get his breath back as his lungs choked and spasmed.

“Stevie.”

Steve shook his head as he sobbed into his hands. Slowly, he forced one foot forwards, then the
next, until he was engulfed in a pair of warm arms. Bucky pulled him against his chest and held him fiercely as he sobbed dry.

As soon as Bucky got a hold on Steve, he didn't let go.

Once Steve stopped crying, Bucky dragged him over to the cot, manhandling him onto it. Steve let it happen, curling in on himself and letting Bucky pull him close, rubbing small circles in between his shoulder blades. Once Steve had nuzzled in close enough, Bucky pulled up the sheet over him, tucking it around him until the only things poking out were a few tufts of blond hair. They stayed like that for a while, with Steve drifting in and out of reality, his thoughts a lazy, purposeless plain. He needed a hit of something strong and numbing--oxy, maybe. He needed a shower. He needed sleep, real sleep, and he needed to figure out how to breathe and stand and move again.

Bucky smelled like Bucky, except maybe a bit dirtier than normal. He didn't smell like he'd had a shower since before the fight, but the smell was so authentically him that it just made Steve press closer.

After a while, Steve stretched out his legs, and when he bent them again Bucky laced a hand around the back of his knees, pulling him in. When he was adjusted again, Bucky didn't move his hand. It was the metal one, which meant that Steve was currently dealing with the Winter Soldier; Bucky was disgusted by the metal limb and tried not to touch Steve with it whenever possible. It was the Soldier’s hand, not Bucky’s.

After about an hour, Steve maneuvered so he could look at Bucky’s face. Bucky looked calm and relaxed, and like he was half asleep himself. His hand rubbed against the back of Steve’s knees gently.

Steve knew he had bedhead, but ignored it. Bucky had seen him at much, much worse. “You're leaving here, today,” he said quietly. Bucky stared at him. “I already said my part. We’ll figure out how to get rid of the trigger words, but Zola’s gone. It’s time to go.”

Finally, Bucky sighed, and Steve could feel his chest moving against him. “I don’t want to let you go.”

“You'll have to. It’ll be quick though, I just have to get Tony to have him clear it.”

“I don't want you to leeeeeeave. Stay here.”

“Be reasonable.”

“I'm tired of being reasonable.” He squeezed Steve a little tighter for emphasis.

“Oh, fuck off,” Steve said, slapping him lightly on the arm. “Okay, let me up and I'll get Tony. Then we can shower and eat and sleep for a full nine hours.”

“Let’s not get too crazy.”

Bucky didn’t explicitly let him go, but he did loosen his grip so Steve could climb out. As soon as Steve did, his eyes danced with spots and he groaned, closing them for a few seconds until he
regained his vision. “I'll be back.”

Bucky grumbled something into the sheets that sounded like “Fucking liar”, but Steve ignored it.

Later that night, after they were freshly showered and in clean boxers and t-shirts, Brooklyn Bucky made a reappearance, all wide blue eyes and softened features. “Stevie. I'm… sorry.”

Steve had been sitting on the counter, a glass of warm milk in his hand. His hair, still wet from the shower, was plastered against his head. He glanced up at Bucky with his own set of baby-blues, hesitating for a moment before licking his lips and going “I forgive you.”

“Good… good. Thanks, Stevie, I…” he huffed, running a hand through his wet hair. “I'm a mess,” he admitted finally, shaking his head at the floor. “I'm just… and I don’t want to be… but I am.”

Steve didn't know what to say, so instead he looked straight ahead, sipping more of his milk. When all that remained were the dregs at the bottom of the cup, he gestured Bucky over, pulling him to stand between his legs. He wrapped his legs around him to keep him in place, and when Bucky crumbled against him Steve was the one rubbing his back. “Yeah, well. I'm here, and I'm a bit messy too. But now, things will get better. We’ll get better, Buck, I promise you.”

Bucky sniffled against his shoulder. “We’re pretty problematic for a coupl’a ninety-year olds. You’d think we’d’ve figured it out by now.”

Steve snorted and pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

They stayed there for too long, with Bucky’s arms around Steve’s waist and Steve’s legs around his, Steve’s chin on Bucky’s head. They intertwined together naturally, easily even. Slowly, Bucky tilted his head up, and then even slower, pressed upwards to kiss Steve. Steve froze, just letting it happen while rubbing his back for a few moments before kissing back, digging his fingers in Bucky’s damp, tangled hair to pull him closer. As the kiss became more heated, Bucky pushed harder, forcing Steve to wrap his legs tighter around Bucky’s waist to hold on as he was leaned back with every kiss.

It was an open mouthed, sleepy but passionate, wet-lipped warm milk sort of kiss. They rolled against each other, bodies fitting together like puzzle pieces, and it was so warm and good that Steve had to force himself not to moan. When they needed to stop for breath, Bucky leaned his head on Steve’s chest and let Steve continue carding through his hair, both panting quietly.

“Okay, Buck,” Steve said finally. “Let’s go to bed, yeah?”

Bucky nodded against his chest, then gripped on to the bottoms of Steve’s thighs and straightened effortlessly, carrying Steve on his front. Steve just hugged him a little tighter, letting him bring them into the bedroom and flop Steve onto the bed, flopping down right after him.

“You're my best friend,” Bucky mumbled into his neck. He sighed, his breath hot against Steve’s skin. His leg was bent at the knee and draped over Steve’s, as if trying to keep him where he was, and Steve reached down and splayed his hand over the bare skin, pulling it a bit closer.

The warmth, the comfort, the body pressing against his all put Steve in a drowsy, relaxed mood, and the exhaustion hit him easily. A few deep breaths later, and he was out.

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The room is dim with morning light coming in through closed curtains. Steve is alone, as he usually
was when he wakes up, but when he lets his head lull to the side he sees that Bucky is laying on his side with his back to him. He listens to his breaths for a few moments, until he can remember what they mean. He’s awake, Steve is sure, but he would be willing to bet money that Bucky’s eyes are closed. His arms and legs are both bent, and though he isn’t curled up in a tight ball his body curves in that way. Under his white tshirt, his spine will be a pathway of smooth bumps that Steve could run his fingers over and count.

It is a surreal morning. Steve can feel the freckles on his cheeks, the dark white of his scleras, very human but alien at the same time. His body is reptilian, and he feels it in the way he crawls across the bed without really crawling, almost slithering, like he had to slither on his forearms through the mud at Lehigh. His tongue is dry, and in his mind he can imagine it split, he can hear the hiss of a snake, the hiss of himself. They’re not freckles, they’re scales.

Steve slithers across the bed on his forearms, climbing up Bucky’s firm shoulders to lean over him. His dark hair is in that phase between clean and soft, messy and bedraggled and dry, and Steve brushed his hand through some of it, just appreciating. He leans down, nuzzling at Bucky’s neck. His reptilian tongue darted out—it’s not actually split, in reality it’s pointed and rounded, not forked—and lets his tongue taste the oils of his skin. His body rocks and slides on it’s own accord, hips adjusting and legs balancing on either side of Bucky’s, who is still laying on his side. Steve is fully laying on top of him, body smoothing against him like he was trying to leach Bucky’s warmth, and he lays with the grace and relaxation of a panther in a tree.

Bucky stops breathing for a few seconds. Steve slides his hand over his shirt, feeling his steady heart rate, smooth and constant like a truck on the highway. Steve’s own bird heart flutters and flutters, tapping away like a metronome for a rap song, counting out onetwothreefourfivesix fast fast fast.

Bucky inhales sharply, and with his eyes still closed, he grabs onto one of Steve’s wrist and rolls and pulls at the same time, easily pulling Steve’s smaller body onto his stomach. Then Bucky opens his eyes, and they look at each other, bedmates lifemates best friends. And Steve is hit with an urge of warmth, and all he wants, all he wants is to tell this beautiful man that he loves him, his best friend, and then maybe he could grow in the dark as long as he stayed right on top of Bucky.

One of them should say something. ‘Good morning’, maybe, but Steve is only half present and his skin is turning to scales, hair dried grass. He shifts, and then he is human, soft, breakable skin and pink cheeks and freckles. He shifts again: pale, pale blue skin, eyes in between brown and blue, murky water, and if he were to drag his fingernails over his skin it would leave smooth white lines.

He separates his legs, putting one knee on either side of Bucky’s muscular torso. The motion releases some of the pressure on his genitals and presses his torso closer against Bucky’s body. It’s like non-sexual nudity, except he’s still wearing clothes, though he only wears boxers on his legs, so if Bucky wanted he could rub those little circles on his bare upper thighs. Scales; pink and baby soft; murky blues with seaweed veins.

Bucky rocks against him lightly. Their crotches aren’t even close to touching, Steve is too high up on Bucky’s stomach—but the motion still lifts and lowers Steve’s body an inch or two at a time, making the contact shift and pressure adjust. Steve turns his head and rests his ear against Bucky’s heart, fingerling the collar of Bucky’s white tshirt.

They are quiet as Bucky continues to roll. Steve is limp like a rag doll. He doesn’t say it, but he would let Bucky do whatever he wanted to him at that moment. He could touch him in whatever
way he wanted, and Steve would take it, anything to make Bucky happy and to keep from losing contact. Steve was light and small, a dove with a chest full of air that could be taken away by a strong gust of wind. Bucky was an anchor, a tree, the only solid thing. Steve wanted to dig his nails in and never let go.

After laying there for maybe ten minutes-- a long time, but maybe not long enough-- Bucky slipped his flesh hand under Steve’s shirt, feeling the grooves and notches and bones in his back. He stuck his hand up Steve’s shirt like he was a marionette, and Bucky his puppeteer. It wasn’t far from the truth. Steve’s limbs felt like sticks, sanded and molded and limp, easy to move. Whatever you want, he thought, hoping that if he thought it hard enough Bucky would be able to hear it. Whatever you want. Anything. Anything.

Bucky groaned lowly, from the back of his throat, and his body shifted under Steve’s, making him bite his tongue and close his eyes.

“We should probably get up,” Bucky muttered, and when Steve met his eyes his they were bright with pride and contentedness. So he knew what he was doing to Steve, touching him, fucking existing in his stratosphere.

Steve whined and rubbed his head against Bucky’s shirt, like a cat refusing to admit it was vying for affection. Bucky let out a tight breath, then used his arm in Steve’s shirt to make him sit up. Steve let him, helping where he could but mostly just letting it happen. The metal hand was on his thigh, and Steve definitely had a kink for that. No one ever touched his thighs. It was sacred ground.

Bucky could have it all.

With some adjusting, Bucky sat up too, pulling his arm out of Steve’s shirt and interlacing his hands behind Steve’s waist for a few seconds. Steve tried not to creen into the touch, tried not to arch his back or grind his hips, but he knew his pupils were blown wide with lust, his lower lip tucked in between his teeth.

Bucky’s hands were still on his back. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“You.

“Dunno. Uh… food, I guess.”

Bucky laughed, all airy and easy. His grip tightened, then was removed, pushing Steve off of his lap gently and how did he get there? “I’m going to brush my teeth. Morning breath.”

What he didn't know was that Steve didn't care. He would drink up his morning breath like it was fine nectar, let it trickle down his throat like molten copper. But Steve just nodded, letting him get up and walk away. His body seemed to have stopped shifting, and now he was back in one of the first forms-- small and boney with freckles and a flustered expression to him. He’d have to avoid seeing anyone else like this-- Bucky could have him flustered and only half present, but that was only because Bucky could have whatever of his he wanted. The others weren't allowed to see this part of him.

When Bucky trudged back in to get dressed, Steve flopped back on the bed to let Bucky change without being watched. As much as Steve daydreamed and imagined and pretended, they were not lovers. Bucky did not want him like that.

But oh, to be wanted.
Chapter End Notes

In this chapter:
- Mourning conversation in motel
- Steve / Bucky post Zola conversation
- warm milk kiss
- lizard Steve (he's a scaley)

These bullet points are great without context.

My favorite quote of the chapter is:
"You're a fucking idiot."
“I know that!”

It's good to be self aware, Steve. Don't ever let anyone take that from you.
They stayed close and touchy all day, until Bucky quietly announced that he had to go to therapy with Sam Wilson. He got ready silently and disappeared without another word out the door.

Steve sighed and considered for a few moments before turning on his heel and going into the kitchen. The counters were lined with stones, which made the irritatingly pastel cabinets a little more bearable. Steve found the stone he was looking for, twisting and pulling it out. Behind it in a carefully hallowed out alcove sat a nice little bag of pills.


He pulled out the bag, fingering one of the dark blue pills before popping it in his mouth and swallowing it dry. After considering for a moment, he popped two more in his mouth, then put the remaining pills back in their hiding place.

He climbed up onto the counter, swinging his legs as he waited for the drugs to kick in. After a few minutes of nothing, he groaned and checked the cabinets, confirming what he already knew. He flipped off the kitchen as he strode to the elevator.

Tony was surprisingly in his penthouse, not the workshop. His eyebrows shot up when he saw Steve leaned against the doorframe. “Hey. Do you have something to drink?”

Steve pushed past Tony, letting himself in. The penthouse was exactly the same as it had been when Steve had first seen it… two years ago? Jeez.

Tony ran a hand through his hair, looking Steve up and down. “I’m a recovered alcoholic. What
makes you think I keep liquor in the house?”

“Oh, I’m sure you don’t. Where’s the stash?”

It took a moment, then Tony was almost smiling. He quickly schooled his expression, like he didn’t want Steve to see it. “Fourth cabinet. Jarvis, unlock it.”

Steve surveyed the small assortment, finally picking out one of the heavier liquors, uncapping it and sipping. “Mmm.”

“Is it good?”

“It tastes like diesel fuel,” Steve admitted, taking another sip. “Thanks for the hookup.”

“Don’t mention it. I thought you can’t get drunk?”

“I don’t need to get drunk. Anyway, what’re you doing? Anything interesting?”

Tony shrugged. “I was about to go down to the lab. Wanna come with? Dum-E and Butterfingers always like meeting new people.”

They went down to the lab and Tony introduced Steve to his bots before getting set up at one of his counters, messing with 3D projections. Steve giggled, face flushed as Dum-E reached a metal claw out to him and they intertwined their fingers. He leaned forwards and kissed the side of the bot’s arm, and Dum-E whirred happily.

U raced over, tires squeaking against the floor as he tried to turn too quickly. He rammed into Dum-E and Steve let go of his claw, laughing too loudly as the bots fought each other. U rammed into Dum-E and sent him rolling backwards, and Dum-E retaliated by digging his claws into a mass of wires connected to U’s arm. One of them was yanked out and U made a horrified squeaking noise before slapping Dum-E repeatedly as Dum-E tried to run away. Due to the cord being ripped out, U could no longer open and close his claw, but he still managed to cause decent damage by whirring angrily and repeatedly ramming into Dum-E. They chased each other around the workshop, somehow managing to cause mayhem without actually disrupting anything important.

“Children, please,” Tony chided. “Butterfingers, you’re on babysitting duty.”

The other robot, Butterfingers, who had greeted Steve with fist bump and then immediately hid in the corner, perked up with newfound energy. Butterfingers was faster than his brothers and fizzed after them, squealing at them in their robot language as they tried to run away, back to the other side of the room away from Tony and his project. Steve watched with red-faced amusement, reminiscing fondly of other vehicles that made sounds like them, cars and motorcycle brakes and the clatter of a train on its tracks…

He groaned, thumping his head on the work table. In the background, there was some confused whirring and a sound like one of the robots spinning around, before something was gently nudging him. He looked up from his arms to see the bottle only a few inches from his face, held up by a jittery Dum-E.

“Thanks,” Steve said tiredly, taking it. He brought his legs up on the stool and curled around the bottle, nursing it. The burn reminded him of sparkling water, but it was smoother and thicker, a rich and bitter tonic. He let his head lull in between drinks, fingers tapping absently.

“If you want to talk about it,” Tony started, still not looking up from his project. “Butterfingers is a great listener. He is… tactiley challenged… but he’s probably the most emotionally mature person in
Steve smiled sadly. He wasn’t going to say anything, but then Butterfingers was rolling up alongside him and rubbing his arm against Steve’s cheek affectionately. Steve wrapped an arm around the robot, leaning heavily on him.

“I’m tired,” his whispered to the steel arm, too quiet to be picked up by Tony. “And… lonely. I know what I want, but there’s no one around who wants it back. Not even Bucky.” He pressed a little kiss to Butterfingers’ arm, and the bot actually shuddered, then creened closer. “I don’t know what the serum did to me, don’t know if I have one year or fifty or a hundred. But I don’t want to be lonely for it.”

U rolled over slower, clicking his claw open and closed. Apparently he’d managed to get the wire reattached. He spun a circle around them then squatted down and pinched Steve’s big toe through his shoe. “Thanks,” Steve said, and almost smiled when the bot squealed and rolled away, spinning in a few more circles.

Steve sat there for a while, nursing his drink and stroking Butterfinger’s cool metal arm, listening to the sound of Tony tinkering and sipping on his liquor. Eventually, the oxy must have kicked in because things stopped hurting so vividly. Even the robot he clung on to seemed far away. When Steve couldn’t handle any more diesel-alcohol, he handed the bottle to Butterfingers, who promptly dropped it on the ground. Steve snorted, and watched the robots scurry around to clean it up.

“Steve! Steve!”

He was jerked roughly by too-tight hands on his shoulders. Steve’s eyes opened slowly. It was way too bright and he groaned, rolling over to the side and covering his eyes to avoid it. His face hurt, like he’d been slapped. The rest of his body felt like… warm skin filled with warm goo, his blood having turned into jam. It oozed through his veins and arteries, only taking the easy paths.

He realized in annoyance a few moments later that his name was still being yelled. “What?” he groaned. “What doya want? Leave me… alllone.”

“Stevie? Stevie, how do you feel?”

“I feel fuck you.”

“Stevie. Steve.”

Steve groaned again. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

He heard the hitch in Bucky’s voice that meant a few different things. It’s visible emotion, which means he is currently more human than soldier. It also means that he is panicked.

Bucky digs his finger into the groove in Steve’s neck and Steve whines, trying to roll away but Bucky doesn’t let him. “Shit. Shit, Stevie, your heart is-- Jarvis! Why didn’t you notify anyone?”
The AI seemed as confused as Steve was. More so, probably, because Steve just wanted to sleep. “Mr. Rogers’ heart rate is approximately 65 beats per minute. The average resting heart rate is 40 to 50 bpm, and his bpm continues to lower. I had no cause to be concerned.”

Bucky slides his hands under Steve’s body, a little too roughly. “This is Stevie, his heart rate is like a hummingbird, it’s gotta be at least twice as fast as a normal person’s. It never gets this low. Come’on, Stevie, help me out here, hold on.”

Bucky lifted him up in a cradled position and Steve tried to grab onto his neck, but it was too far away. As they stood, the movement was too rapid, causing his head to spin.

Steve groaned against Bucky’s chest. “Steve, listen to me. I need you to tell me what you took.”

“‘m didn’t take anything,” Steve grumbled. He was supposed to keep the drugs hidden from Bucky. That way, Bucky wouldn’t be tempted to use them to fix his Winter Soldier issues. Steve needed to be a good friend.

“Yes, you did. I know you were drinking, what else? What’d you mix it with?”

Steve’s eyes were closed– had he opened them yet? He didn't think so. He let them relax, let his breathing relax. Bucky was being stupid.

A few long seconds later, there was a sharp slap against Steve’s cheek. “Owwww! What the fuck?”

“Don’t fall asleep, you are not allowed to go to sleep. Stevie, what the hell did you take?”

Steve nuzzled against his chest. Bucky was so nice and warm, like an electric blanket. Steve wondered if Bucky would hold him like this as he slept, cradling him tight to his body. He hoped so.

Steve felt himself starting to drift again, but was awakened by a sharp poke to his side. “Owwww, what the hell?”

“Just tell me what you took, I won’t be mad.”

“Shuddup.” Steve clawed uselessly at Bucky’s shirt, trying to get more warmth from it. “Shuddup, shuddup, shuddup.”

There was a weird noise, like an elevator dinging. “Jarvis, take us to the med bay. Stevie, can you open your eyes for me? Please?”

Steve kept them closed. “You never say please. Never say please and thank you… fuck you. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you. I don’t wanna go to the med bay, I don’t wanna…”

“We’re going to the med bay unless you tell me what you took. It was a depressant, I know that, just tell me which one. I promise I won’t be mad.”

Steve whined. The noise made his throat relax, so he made it again, whining and mrowing into Bucky’s shirt.

Bucky maneuvered him, checking his arms. “How long ago was it? You took a pill, I know you took a pill. What was it?”

Steve continued to whine into Bucky’s shirt. It was so soft, so nice. Smelled good.

“Goddamnit Stevie, tell me! What pill did you take?”
“M didn’t take a pill,” Steve said, mostly because Bucky was getting all worked up over nothing. He giggled tiredly. “I took three.”

There was more movement and some commotion, some talking, but for the most part Steve drowned it out. Bucky was distracted, so Steve took the opportunity to smooth out his breathing again, the darkness beginning to close in...

There was a rough yank on his ear, and Steve groaned, but let his head lull again. He was so close, so close...

A finger was jabbed into one of the pressure points in his neck, and Steve mrowled in pain, but it didn't let up. “Stevie, I need you to stay with me. You're not allowed to fall asleep.”

Steve’s head lulled to the side, but the finger followed, continuing to hold down the point painfully. “I hate you. You… shithead, you fuck up, fuck you. Fuck you, fuck you so much, you miserable…” Steve tried, but couldn't think of the word. “Fuck off.”

He was laid down and Steve immediately started shivering.

“Are you going to have to pump his stomach?”

“Possibly, but we have better methods that are preferred. Are you sure you don’t know what he took?”

“He said he took three pills, depressants, but I can’t get him to fucking tell me--”

“Sir, please calm down. We will run a test to see what it is, but until then, how about you sit with him and try again, okay? A nurse will be right with you.”

There was some shuffling, then based on the creaking, Bucky pulled up a chair and was sitting next to Steve. Steve kept his eyes closed. “Stevie?”

Steve ignored him.

“Hey!”

He groaned, trying limply to give Bucky the middle finger but his body was too numb. “I hate you.”

“I know, I know. What else do you hate?”

“Nothing else… just you…”

“You hate giving people stitches, don’t you? Tell me about that.”

He crinkled his nose. “It’s gross. Keep your skin to yourself, I'm not your… your fucking pin cushion.”

“Ha ha, that’s funny. What else do you hate?”

Steve’s lungs hurt. He hated that. His throat felt dry, but he couldn't make enough saliva to swallow. He listened to his breathes: were they always that loud? They sounded high and wheezy, like someone being suffocated. Steve hated that he knew what that sounded like.

“Steve!”

Steve flinched at the noise, right by his ear. He was fading in and out. He was tired, why didn’t
Bucky understand that? He had to sleep every night, not once a fucking year like Bucky did.

“Fuck you,” Steve repeated, only a whisper. “I hate it. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it. I wasn't supposed
to be like this, I wasn't, I was, I was, I was supposed to die in the 50’s, confirmed bachelor, I was
supposed to choke on my own inhaler, fuck you. Look at my, look at my fucking-- my fucking
hands! They aren't supposed to hold a gun, they're supposed to-- to not hold a gun! All your fault,
you ass.”

He was going to say more, but then a mask was affixed over his face, breathing for him. It hurt.
Everything hurt, he needed some, he needed some painkillers. Some oxy, some more oxy. He would
need to up his dosage, go to four or five pills…

A needle was stuck into his arm, and Steve started to cry because he didn't need stitches! He wasn’t
a human pin cushion, wasn't fair!

“We just started the medicine, he’ll need to stay on it for a few hours. It’s okay if he sleeps now. Our
monitors will let us know if anything happens.”

“Thank you.”

A hand touched Steve’s, and Steve tried to grip onto it. He was slipping, slipping. He’d almost got
his fingers intertwined when his body went completely numb and his mind fogged over.

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There were a few moments in the haze that had become his existence, where he became numbly
aware of his surroundings; quiet talking, too far off to properly understand; monitors beeping, chairs
rolling, someone on the other side of the large medical wing crying. Pressure on his hand, on his
wrist; a strange smooth texture on a few spots over his chest and on his side; pressure on his nose and
around his mouth.

When he finally woke up, he spent the first few minutes adjusting to the brightness. There was a
light directly over his bed, it seemed, and it was simply too much.

It took a few more minutes after that to regain function. He had to move one finger at a time and
then his wrists before he could reach up to his face. His wrists, surprisingly, were not bound by
handcuffs or otherwise, which was a nice change of pace. He reached up, feeling the tape around his
nose, and carefully pulled it off, taking off the tube that had been slightly inside his nose. He reached
around, his muscle control still weak as he fumbled for his IV.

“I swear to God,” a familiar voice said in a very familiar annoyed tone, “If you pull out your IV I
will strangle you.”

In one smooth motion, Steve plucked out his IV. He turned and gave Bucky an obstinate look.
“Fight me.”

Five seconds later, the IV was back in and Bucky’s metal hand was around Steve’s neck. Steve
waited until he removed it to breath again. “Dickwad. I'm in the hospital, everyone knows you don’t
strangle someone in the hospital unless you really hate them.”
“Who’s to say I don’t really hate you?”

“Oh, well that’d explain things then.”

Bucky sat back down in his chair, rubbing his metal knuckle joints with his human fingers. “I don’t hate you.”

“Great. I’m glad we established that.”

“However, that does not mean you are not a fucking idiot.”

“I never claimed I wasn’t.”

Bucky seemed to be getting actually mad which was always an… intense experience. He clenched his jaw, his body rigid. “Oxy and alcohol? You really thought that was a good idea?”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t a bad idea.”

Bucky reached over and pinched him on the arm. “Ow! Fuck off, dickhead!”

Bucky just sighed, shaking his head as he pressed the button calling for the nurse. “I don’t know if you being self destructive is a symptom of the self-righteousness or what, but it’s not funny.”

The nurse came in and Bucky stood. He leaned over Steve and Steve thought he was going to pinch him again, but instead he pressed a kiss to his forehead, far too sweet for what they’d been saying to each other. Steve shoved him off and he left, leaving Steve alone with the nurse.

After she checked Steve over and said he was in stable shape and could be reassessed in an hour, Tony and Bruce came in. “Where’d you go?” Steve asked Tony as soon as he saw him. “Why weren’t you still in the lab?”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “I was in the lab. Then Bucky came down, started freaking out and then carried you up to med bay, and I went with him. I was there the whole time.”

Steve frowned. “Oh.”

“Selective memory?” Bruce suggested. “It’s alright, you’re not the only who tries to block Tony out.”

“More like accidental overdose. Well. ‘Accidental’.”

“Was it? Accidental?”

Steve shrugged. “I didn't mean to overdo it, but I did take three pills and then drink. I just wanted to do it just enough.”

Tony shook his head. “I hope so.”

“By the way, why wasn’t I handcuffed this time around? I thought Fury had a standing order?”

“He did, but we knew that with Bucky monitoring you there’d be no way you could do something stupid, and then if he tried to strangle you you at least had a fighting chance.”

“Gosh, thanks.”

Tony clapped his hands together. “Anyway! I have to go, but I'm glad you're feeling better. Let's
talk later. You should come down to the lab more often, and like, not drink yourself halfway to death or whatever it is you did. The bots miss you. Okay, bye!”

Tony left Steve alone with Bruce, who didn’t seem to know what to do. He read Steve’s chart, then looked at the heart monitor. “You bpm’s pretty fast,” he noted.

“Yeah. That means it’s returning back to my normal rate.”

Bruce hummed and continued avoiding eye contact. “Are you in pain?”

“A little.”

“I’m sorry.”

The conversation—or whatever the hell it was—continued on for a little longer before Bucky came back and Bruce took his cue to leave. As soon as Bruce was outside of hearing distance, Steve sighed dramatically. “Thank God you’re here. He was smothering me. You never smother me.”

“Thanks,” Bucky said, without much effort. “I'm glad you like being around me so much.”

His tone was strange, like he was being sarcastic, but Steve let it slide.

They waited together in silence for a while until the doctor came back. Bucky stood. “I'll give you some space.”


“What?”

“To the end of the line?”


Then he left, leaving Steve feeling like he’d just been punched in the gut.

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Not forty eight hours later, Steve was high again. Well, ‘high’ might not have been the right word. He didn't know what it was like for other people, but his inhibitions didn't really leave. Instead, he became more relaxed, more easy and honest and admittedly, more nice. The stinging under his skin seemed to disappear, or at least it was replaced with a warm buzzing, and his memories became warm and mushy like a thick soup.

Steve would’ve been high sooner, but Bucky hadn’t left him alone for a minute the first day. He’d taken extra care of him, making him food and watching crappy competition shows with his head on Steve’s lap. His hair was really greasy, but not as greasy as it sometimes got, and either way Steve had developed a bit of an immunity to it.

Steve’s body spent most of the day overworking itself in healing him so that by nighttime he was exhausted. He fell asleep before Bucky even came to bed, wrapped around an extra pillow like he was trying to engulf it.
The next day, Bucky had tried to stick by his side. He invited Natasha and Clint over to hang out with Steve while he went to therapy, except they didn't know what had happened, so it really did seem like just a social call. It was all too easy to challenge Clint in a race across the rooftops. Natasha plopped down on the couch and used Steve and Bucky’s Netflix while Clint ran downstairs to get his gear, and with Bucky gone it was all too easy for Steve to open one of the cabinets that wasn't actually supposed to open and pull out his small stash of high-dosage brownies. He grabbed one and ate it as he went to meet Clint.

They raced each other across the rooftops, jumping onto fire escapes and climbing up balconies before sprinting across the lengths of the roofs. Steve was a bit better, but Clint was no slouch; he spent a lot of time sniping on rooftops so he was used to navigating them.

Finally, as the sun began to sink, they found a nice roof to sit on the edge of, dangling their feet over the side. Steve walked along the edge of it for a few moments first, daring the wind to pick up and push him over, and then daring his own feet to do it, before eventually going and sitting with Clint. “You're good,” Clint complimented.

Steve shrugged, though he couldn't help his smile. “You should see Peter do it. He’s… crazy.”

“I mean, it makes sense, what with him being Spiderman and all.”

Steve nodded, smiling a bit. They’d already dealt with that lie, which meant next time Peter was over he could be honest. It was nice. Someday, if they lived long enough, maybe Steve could go through all of his lies one by one until they were all gone, blown away in the wind like dandelion fluff. The other Avengers would know about his recreational self-medication, his casual attempt to nosedive into the Arctic, his sexuality, and his not-so-secret feelings towards Bucky, even though Steve had a feeling no one would ever know the extent of those. Then there was the way his mind worked, filtering and calculating and removing unwanted emotional reactions like the good soldier he was. How many more were there?

“I have to leave tomorrow,” Clint said, randomly but still in his normal, casual tone. “I'm going on a mission for SHIELD. It'll be around two, three weeks until I get back. Just thought I'd let you know.”

Steve nodded. “Thanks. I have a feeling… I don’t know. I feel like we’ve been stationary too long. Like it’s time to get moving again, dunno where yet though. Somewhere.”

Clint nodded in understanding. “I get that. When I first settled down and started training with SHIELD, after the first few weeks it felt like I was going mad. I used to always be on the move. I went wherever the circus took me, and now--”


Clint stared at him. “Did I never tell you that? I used to work with the circus.”

“As what, a tent-raiser?”

“No, a performer. I did trick shots. Duh.”

Steve let out a light laugh, leaning back. “Wow.”

“Uh-huh.” Clint sounded less amused.

“When did you start?”
“Early high school. My brother Barney and I skipped town, joined up. We took turns being the thrower and the target. I’m pretty sure I lost the ability to flinch.”

“Did he ever miss?”

“The question is, did he ever not miss? Look at this.” He lifted his arm, showing off a long scar above his elbow. “But it’s not like we ever got in trouble. Seeing people lose is almost as fun as seeing them win. Sometimes more fun.”

“I hear that.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Clint got to his feet, brushing off his jeans. He offered Steve a hand up. “Let’s head back.”


Chapter End Notes

TW: Steve accidentally overdoses on a mixture of drugs and alcohol.

In this chapter:
- Steve substance mixed (do not try at home kids)
- Hospital Talk
- Climbing with Clint

Personally, my favorite part of this chapter was when Bucky found Steve and was super freaked out, but I’m excited to hear what you guys have to say!
When Bucky got back from therapy and Clint and Natasha went back to their apartment, there was an awkward staring contest before Bucky said “You need to eat” and Steve said “You need to shower” in unison. They continued to stare at each other.

“I’m not hungry,” Steve argued.

“I'm not dirty.”

“Liar.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“I'll fight you.”

“You'll fight anyone.”

“Shut up.”

Bucky went over to the freezer and pulled out two boxes of the same frozen dinner. Steve watched him microwave them, then dump them both onto one plate and push it in front of Steve. “Eat.”

“How about: no.”

“How about: eat.”

“How about: fuck you.”

Bucky sighed. “Will you eat if I shower?”

“Will you shower if I eat?”

Bucky ignored the way Steve tried to goad him into a fight, instead answering as if it were a legitimate question. “Yes.”

“Then yes.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

“Good.”
So Steve ate while Bucky showered. Usually Bucky showered like he was still in the military, and if he didn't finish up in under five minutes he'd be court marshalled, but on that particular day he took his time. He was still in the shower when Steve finished eating, so Steve made his way over to the TV.

A few minutes later the shower clicked off, and then a few more minutes later Bucky reemerged, wearing a black tshirt and sweatpants. He looked pleased to see Steve on the couch and not, say, throwing himself off the rooftop-- which was honestly rude, Steve never threw himself off rooftops, he only threw small children named Peter off of rooftops. When Bucky came over, he walked in front of the TV and analyzed Steve for a few minutes before going “Good.”

“What?” Steve snapped, because Steve.

“You didn't do anything while I was gone.”

“The fuck do you mean, I ate dinner and then I watched TV, I did stuff.”

“I meant drugs.”

“Your mom’s a drug.”

Steve squeaked as Bucky scooped him up before sitting down himself on the couch, adjusting them until they were spooning with Bucky in the back.

“Woah, back it the fuck up. You can’t be the big spoon.”

Bucky leaned his head on Steve’s shoulder innocently. “Why not?”

“It'll make me look smaller. Or like I'm like, a house cat or something.”

Bucky blinked. “Do people normally spoon their house cats?”

“Literally give me a break.”

Bucky scooted down on the couch, then made Steve lay on his back instead of his side. Bucky stayed curled up on his side, and rested his head on Steve's stomach. “Better?”

Steve shrugged, like he didn't care. His hands automatically went to Bucky’s towel dried hair, before realizing something.

“Holy shit. Your hair is so soft.”

Bucky smiled shyly. “Is it?”

“It is, it really is Buck.”

Bucky curled up a little closer to Steve’s side. “Sam suggested I try… treating myself. Better, I mean. Like a person.”

Steve frowned. “Do you normally treat yourself… not like a person?”

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

“So you put product in your hair?”

oil… extract. For smooth and silky locks.”

“Oh really.”

“Yes.” He paused. “There was a girl on the box it came in. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Really pretty. Reminded me of you.”

Steve was taken aback by the compliment for a few moments, before realizing it was an insult, Bucky said he looked like a girl. “Hey, watch it!”

Bucky giggled, and Steve could feel the vibration against his chest. “There’s nothing wrong with looking like a girl.”

“I’m a man!”

“Okay.”

“I am!”

“I believe you.”

“I am almost 94 years old, I am not only a man but an elderly man—”

“I already said, I believe you.”

“I have chest hair and everything.”

“Chest peach fuzz.”

“What did you just say?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s what I thought.”

They were quiet for a few moments before Bucky went “I don’t have any chest hair.”

Steve blinked. “I know.”

“I used to.”

Even quieter: “You did.”

“But not anymore. I don’t remember what they did to me to get rid of it. I don’t remember why.”

“I do.”

Bucky looked up at him. “You do?”

“It was to make you look sex-ay.”

Bucky snorted, punching him lightly. “It was not. I’m not sexy.”

Steve could feel a smile spread across his face. “You are.”

“Am not.”
“You have your soft hair, and your hairless chest-- like one of those hairless cats.”

“Hairless cats are not sexy.”

“Yeah, but you're not completely hairless. You have soft, luscious hair, just not on your chest. If anything, you're like one of those shaven poodles.”

“Shaven poodles are not sexy.”

Steve made eye contact with him, tilting his head like Well I don’t know about that. He winked and Bucky huffed out a laugh and punched him again.

“Excuse you, I'm delicate.”

Bucky punched him again, harder this time. “Then. Perish.”

“What.”

“What.”

Steve blinked. “Okay then.”

Bucky relaxed against his stomach, turning towards the TV. “What manly TV show were you watching before I came in?”

“Sixteen And Pregnant.”

“Oh. What's that about?”

“Well it’s not about sixteen-year-olds getting pregnant, that’s for sure.”

Bucky flicked him on the side, and in retaliation Steve kicked him in the leg. They ended up in a full blown poke war, until finally Bucky conceded. “I give in!”

“That’s fucking right you do.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes at him. “Let’s just watch the freaking show.”

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The next day, Bucky slept for an extremely long time (almost eight hours) and for what felt like the first time ever, Steve woke up before him. He watched him for a few minutes, waiting to see if he would say anything in his sleep or do anything weird, but he didn't. Steve had enough time to scurry to the bathroom to shoot up before Bucky woke.

They spent the morning shopping for non-tattered clothes and groceries, choosing to go to the store instead of letting Jarvis order for them. They made the mistake of going to a huge chain grocery store and Steve ended up having to go outside for a few minutes, hiding his face in Bucky’s jacket as he
tried to regain control. There was just so much food, all in one place, stacked high on shelves and in boxes. It was too much.

They finished up their shopping quickly and agreed silently to find a smaller store to shop at next time.

Midway through the afternoon, Tony called for Steve to come down to the lab with the shield. He asked some questions about the new magnetic grip feature which Steve had been forgetting to use, and then waved Steve away, announcing he was going to improve the shield some more and he could pick it up in one to two business days.

When he came back to the apartment, Natasha was lounging on the couch with Bucky. As soon as Bucky saw Steve, he didn't share any greeting before saying “Natasha is a shaved poodle too.”

Steve made his way over to the living room, raising an eyebrow. “Do most girls have hair on their chests?”

“They do,” Natasha said carefully, like she was trying to assess how obnoxious Steve was planning on being. “Most girls just have peach fuzz. Like you.”

“How did--"

“Bucky told me.”

“Traitor.”

Bucky shrugged. “But the KGB didn’t just remove the hair on her chest. They got rid of all of her body hair, including her legs and armpits.”

“Remember Steve, we agreed no below the belt jokes,” Natasha reprimanded. “So keep it to yourself.”

Steve pretended to be insulted. “I wasn’t going to say anything! I am way too much of a gentleman to say something about the carpet not matching the drapes. I would never. But your body is completely hairless?”

“Besides my eyebrows, eyelashes, and hair, yes.”

A more serious look snapped over Bucky’s expression. “What did they do to us?”

“I don’t know about you, but mine was a series of injections. Five a day for five days, into the dermis of the skin. By the end of it, I was scraping my skin off with a knife, literally molting half a centimeter thick of skin. That was after they’d had trial and error with it. I don’t know for sure, but…”

“I was probably the trial and error,” Bucky finished for her.

“It wouldn’t surprise me.”

Steve was fading in and out of consciousness in a phase that resembled sleep, but wasn't sleep,
when Natasha asked “Okay Bucky, what's his deal?”

Steve did his best not to change his breathing or to shift at all. Above him, fingers still carding through Steve’s hair, Bucky asked “Who?”

“I’m not stupid. I’m not going to say his name and risk waking him up. But I know you're lying about something, and if someone’s pregnant, I want to know.”

A pause, then “Me. I'm pregnant.”

“Haha, Barnes. Is he sick?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Mental health issues? Repressed trauma?”

He hesitated. “We all have repressed trauma.”

“Yeah, I know, which is why I can tell he’s not fine. You can tell me, you know. I care about him too.”

“He is in a stable state.”

“But something’s wrong.”

“Maybe you're what's wrong.”

“Don’t try to turn this on me,” Natasha said plainly, without any bite. “I'm a concerned friend.”

“I'm sure he appreciates it. But there is no cause for concern.”

“You're concerned.”

“I'm always concerned. I spend half of my waking hours checking to make sure he’s still there, and that he’s not just another hallucination. Why do you think we touch so much? It sure as hell isn’t because he wants to. If we’re touching, I don’t have to check to make sure he’s there.”


“No,” Bucky said tiredly. “I'm too de pendent. He can be alone, he’s done it before. He left with you without a second thought, and the entire time I felt like I could hardly exist. Thank you, by the way. For bringing him back.”

“He brought himself back.”

“No, I don’t know if he did. He got sick the other day, all his inhibitions basically gone. You know what he told me?”

“That he loves you?”

Steve could feel Bucky shake, like he was laughing, maybe. “The opposite. He spent every moment he could telling me how much he hates me.”

Natasha sighed. “And you think he was serious.”

“I wouldn’t blame him. Sometimes I…” he caught himself, ending the sentence there.
Natasha seemed to wait to give him a chance to respond, but when he didn’t, she spoke up. “You should talk to him. He certainly doesn’t seem to hate you.”

Steve felt a light pressure in his hair, one of Bucky’s hands kneading through his hair. He curled into the touch automatically, sighing.

Bucky’s hand stilled, then continued. “He’s drooling.”

Steve could almost see Natasha’s face in his mind, crinkled up like she was seeing something cute but gross. “Nice.”

The next morning, Bucky left early to train. Steve woke up to his flesh fingers trailing over his cheek. “I’ll be back in an hour. Don’t die,” he ordered.

“Lower your expectations,” Steve grumbled.

He laid in bed for a while, waiting for Bucky to leave and then spending a few minutes trying to get up. His body felt achy and tired, as if he’d spent the past few days fighting and running for his life as opposed to sleeping and snarking. He found himself craving caffeine, which was weird as he didn’t usually drink coffee. It took a few more minutes for his mind to catch up and go oh, you’re not craving caffeine. You’re craving heroin!

Steve could almost here Peter’s voice inside his head: Oh!

Regardless, he got up and climbed under the bed, unlatching the kit from where it was sneakily hidden against the top of the frame. He went through the steps and shot up, putting the kit away before going to the bathroom to get ready.

Fifteen minutes later and he still felt nothing. Steve knew Bucky would be back soon, so he ended up going back, going through the whole process again—heroin took a lot more prep time than, say, oxy—and shooting up with another half a dose. He’d just put the kit away when the elevator dinged, announcing Bucky’s presence.

Steve all but tore his shirt off, running to the closet and pulling on the first long sleeve shirt he saw: his light pink sweater.

He threw himself on the bed, grabbing his phone and opening it right as Bucky came inside. “Oh good. You’re up.”

“Oh course I’m up. How was your workout? You smell like shit.”

“Was fine. Why are you wearing that sweater?”

Steve felt his cheeks heat up. “Huh?”

“It’s pink. You feeling extra pastel today?”

Steve puffed out his chest, jutting out his chin threateningly. “So what if I am?”

Bucky snickered, and walked past Steve to get to the bathroom.
Admittedly, one and a half of his normal doses of heroin was a bit much, but it lasted a lot longer than usual and he could really feel it, so it was worth it. Steve would become more tolerant with time.

He was aware of himself being nicer to the others, but didn't mind it. It was mandatory news night, so they were all in the commons already to see Steve beam his way in, vaulting over the couch and landing on his back with a contented sigh.

Natasha was sitting on the lone chair with a book in her lap, and snorted at him. “Hey short stack. I like the pink, it matches your personality.”

“Natasha, you are such a sweet person, thank you. I think this is my favorite shirt.” He didn't have time to register Natasha’s confused expression before he was talking again. “It’s so comfortable and nice. I feel really nice. Life is good.”

“Oh oh, someone's been drinking too much happy juice,” Tony joked.

Steve narrowed his eyes, but it didn't look at threatening as normal. “Hey, that's not funny. I wish I could get drunk, but I have a condition. Don’t make fun of me.”

“We’re not making fun of you,” Bruce promised. “We’re just all in awe of that shirt.”

“Well jokes on you, because I'm in awe of it too.” Steve rolled off of the couch, landing on his feet and strolling over to Natasha. “What are you reading?”

“Anna Karenina. It's written in Russian.”

Before she could finish, Steve ducked in and kissed her full on the lips, yanking away and giggling at her expression. “I bet you weren't--”

Natasha grabbed him by his shirt collar and yanked him back in for another kiss, being overly rough before shoving him backwards and returning to her book.

Steve fell on his ass, and snickered. “Well played, witch. We will have to duel again another time.”

Bruce cleared his throat. “Sorry, did I miss… uh, are you guys a thing, or…?”

Steve snorted obnoxiously. “No. She’s like a sister to me.”

“That’s incest,” Tony noted helpfully.

“She’s like a fourth cousin twice removed to me.”

“Still incest!”

“We kissed as a cover on the mission,” Natasha explained casually, making eyes at Bruce. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a… okay.” When he swallowed, Steve could see Bruce’s adam’s apple bob.
When they eventually settled in for the news, Bucky laid with his head on Steve’s chest like normal, wiggling around until his ear was over Steve’s heart. Steve realized too late, and shoved him away.

“It’s slower than normal,” Bucky observed quietly. “Anything you’d like to tell me?”

“Nope.”

“You sure?”

“For fuck’s sake, get off my ass about this.” Steve ran his hand through Bucky’s hair roughly, adjusting him so he wasn’t lying over his heart anymore. Bucky wiggled and made a fuss, but let Steve adjust him.

Across the room, Natasha watched them carefully, eyes narrowed.

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“I… really don’t want to do this.”

The training floor was covered in obstacles, ranging from traffic cones and stuffed animals to actual bear traps.

“It’s a trust exercise!” Tony announced. He was standing in front of the disaster zone, wearing grubby work clothes that smelled like they may have been worn for a few days without washing. “Everyone will get a partner, and one person will be blindfolded while the other leads them through the course with their voice! Fun, right?”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Um, no?”

“Shut up, Microchip. Okay!” He clapped his hands together, so loudly Bruce jumped. Bruce was wearing sweats, his curls rumpled and face slightly pinker than normal. Steve would be willing to bet he had morning breath. “Tony, do we really have to do this now? It’s only eight.”

“Everyone else has been up for hours. It’s not my fault you slept in.”

Natasha took a step over to Bruce, smiling with the closed lip Peggy Carter look. “Hey Bruce.”

Bruce immediately straightened, running a hand through his hair. “H-hey Nat. How are you this morning?”

“I’m good, thanks Bruce. Do you wanna be my partner?”

“Oh, sure. Yeah, we can…” he cleared his throat, turning away.

“<Oh, the sexual tension,>” Tony teased in French.

Bruce blinked. “I’m sorry, I don’t speak French.”

“<We know.>”

Bucky ticked his head to the side. “Does that mean we have to change the Secret Avengers Language?”
“Depends. Bruce, can the Hulk speak French?”

“I, uh… I don’t know.”

“Sounds like a problem we’ll deal with when we get to it.”

“So the obstacle course!” Tony said, clapping obnoxiously loudly again. Bucky’s arm whirred nervously. “Everyone, grab a partner. Since our dear friend Clint is gone we have an odd number, so if one of our lovely fugitives wants to pair with me--”

“Hard pass,” Steve said right as Bucky went “Stevie will.” They made eye contact, communicating through a series of threatening expressions before Bucky pushed Steve forwards. “I’ll do it!” Steve said halfheartedly.

“I’m not going to do it,” Bucky said plainly.

Tony whined, his impression of a rejected toddler perfect. “Aww, but trust building! Why not?”

Bucky twitched. “I was. Trained. Using a similar… exercise. Sensory deprivation. Complete obedience.” He paused, waiting for someone to respond, but when no one did he shoved Steve forwards. “Stevie will do it. He needs to learn obedience.”

“Hey, fuck off. I'm not your wifey.”

“He’s my wifey. A horrible wifey.”

“I will fight you.”

“No you won’t.” Bucky shoved him forwards again, lightly. “You will do the obstacle course.”

With some more grumbling, they got ready, with Steve and Bruce going first.

“Turn 360 degrees,” Tony ordered to Steve. “Okay, there is a box in front of you, I need you to leap on top of it.”

“How high is it?”

“You're like, four feet tall? So like, half that.”

“Hilarious.”

Steve jumped, barely making it onto the box. He teetered, and in the distance he could hear Bucky’s arm clicking and rearranging itself.

“Alright, now climb off. Good, squat and walk like that.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes! I need you to trust me!”

“Steve doesn’t do that kind of thing,” Natasha teased.

“Shut up, witch.”

“Now crab walk towards my voice.”

“Tony!”
“Trust me!”

Steve got into the position and started crab walking.

“And stand.”

He stood.

“And sprint!”

“Tony!”

“Trust me! There’s nothing there, I promise!”

“I swear to God Tony…” Steve started jogging, too hesitant to full on run. He winced every few steps, feeling like he was about to slam face first into a wall.

“Stop!”

Steve stopped abruptly. He reached his hand out, feeling the wall directly in front of me. “Tony.”

“You sound like Pepper. Steeeeeeve.”

Steve heard a light smacking noise-- Bucky lightly hitting Tony. “Hey! Back off, Freezer Pop!”

Natasha and Tony went next, and they both had a slightly more difficult time. Tony was extremely hesitant, refusing to so much as speed walk when Steve told him to run, and though Natasha was better, it still seemed to take a lot of effort for her.

Once they were finished, they were getting ready to leave when Bucky went “I want to try.”

Steve turned to look at him. Bucky looked paler than normal, but determined. “Give me the blindfold.”

“Buck--”

“I want to try.”

He took the blindfold, tying it himself as the others gathered to watch. “Okay,” Steve said, hesitantly. “Are you ready?”

“Ready.”

Steve took a deep breath before beginning. “Walk forwards.” Bucky did so, walking as he always did. “Stop. Move a bit to the right. Go forwards some more.”

“Take a left,” Tony ordered. “Another left. Another left. Another left.”

“Tony, stop making him walk in a circle. Bucky, stop. Go left.”

Natasha poked Steve in the side. “That’s boring. give him a challenge.”

“There’s a box in front of you. Reach out and feel it. See? Okay, now step onto it. You can take your time--”

Bucky stepped onto the box without using his hands, his balance not faltering.
“Do a flip!” Tony called out.

Before Steve could reject the command, Bucky’s entire body tensed, then he leaped forwards, flipping blindly off the box and landing with one foot on a large stuffed animal and the other on the ground. He lurched forward, fumbling upwards even though he clearly didn't know which was was up.

“Stop! That’s it, we’re done. Bucky, great trusting, do me a favor and exercise your free will.” Steve hurried forwards, yanking off the blindfold and helping Bucky right himself.

Bucky blinked a few times. “Free will.”

“Yes. Exercise it.”

“No.”

“Just do-- oh, I get you, so sneaky. You're hilarious.”

Bucky still looked dazed, but he managed a lopsided smile. “Fuck you. How's that for self expression?”

“Fuck you too, and it’s great, Buck. You're so damn valid.”

“Asshole.”

“Shithead.”


“Fuck you too.”

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Steve craved heroin like one craves alcohol, and craved weed like one craves sugar; but it became too hard to be inconspicuous about it so he settled on narcotics, the cute little pills he had stashed around the apartment that took mere seconds to swallow. He upped his dosage, and calculated just how often he needed to take the pills to remain pacified all day.

Bucky started acting weirder than normal, but by that point he’d been going to therapy with Wilson every other day for a week or two, which would make anyone act weird. When he was gone, he assigned an Avenger to babysit Steve, usually Natasha. However, the joke was on him: Steve and Natasha spent the time gossiping about the others, including Bucky, talking about their lives like they needed to remember their covers. Natasha told Steve about a book she’d read, The Handmaid’s Tale, and other one about feminism. She tells him about the roots of gossip, wives and workers spreading news through the grapevine that they otherwise wouldn't have access to. Steve says in that case they are gossips: underprivileged and underrepresented, the two smallest Avengers who must band together to build stronger foundations. Natasha said he needed to get his head out of his ass and stop pretending that small meant weak.

As a way of spiteing Bucky, they also spent a decent amount of time kissing. Natasha was continuing to make moves on Bruce, but the whole situation left her distraught (even though she tried to hide it) and kissing was a good relief. They kissed like scientists, stopping every once in awhile to
discuss methodology. Natasha only ever held Steve by the back of his head, which wasn’t quite forceful enough for him; Steve wasn’t very sure how to hold her, and his attempts usually failed.

By the end of that next week, Steve had upped his dosage to four pills a day, and he and Natasha were kissing like experts. She put her hands on his shoulder blades and he used his hands to frame her face like she’d requested, and they got into an easy rhythm. Still, Natasha insisted they keep practicing, and Steve had no reason to argue, so they did.

On one of those such days, they were laying on the living room floor, resting after a more vigorous practice session, when Natasha said “You know, Bucky thinks you hate him.”

Steve slung his arm over his eyes so he didn’t have to look at her. “I know.”

“Why haven’t you said anything to him?”

“He doesn’t… I don’t know. He doesn’t deserve it.”

“What, to be told that his best friend doesn't hate him?”

“Shuddup.”

“What? Am I wrong?”

Steve rolled over onto his stomach, propping himself up with his elbow and playing idly with a few threads of carpet. “It’s a loaded topic.”

“Because you're in love with him?”

Steve glared at her. “Leave me alone. It’s none of your damn business.”

“You didn't say no.”

He groaned. “It’s not like that. I just…”

“…want to spend your whole lives together?”

“Yes! Is that too much to ask?”

Natasha smirked. “Come here. Let me make it better.”

When Bucky arrived a few minutes later, they startled apart at the ding of the elevator, both red-lipped and breathing heavy. Natasha pulled herself up easily, sent Steve a knowing look, then pressed a lingering kiss to Bucky’s cheek before leaving through the elevator without a word.

Bucky looked at Steve like his brain wasn’t sure how to process that. “She’s nice.”

Steve cracked a smile. “You and I both know she’s not. Come ‘ere.”

Bucky collapsed on the floor next to him, curling up in the mass of blankets and pillows Steve had dragged over from the reading nook. They intertwined their ankles together as Steve put on The Great British Bake Off, and they watched in silence. When the first episode was over, Steve considered telling Bucky that he was his best friend and that he could never, ever hate him, but Bucky had just come back from therapy so that probably would’ve been cruel. Steve settled with scooting his legs up so their knees were touching too, and called it a day.

A few days later Clint came back from his mission, seeming surprised to see Steve and Bucky still at
the tower. Like clockwork, Tony left the next day, heading for upstate New York to look at an old Stark warehouse.

Everything was in control. Until, five days later, Steve pushed himself a little too hard and he woke up in the medical bay once more, his mouth dry and head racing. Bucky looked like he had just been slapped.

“I swear to God Stevie,” he muttered, still looking absolutely shell shocked. “Come on, substance mixing? You know that stuff’s lethal as all Hell. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to die.”

Steve just licked his lips, willed his mouth to feel less dry, and closed his eyes. He didn't answer.

Chapter End Notes

TW for even more drug problems and references suicidal intentions

But besides that, this was a pretty peppy chapter, huh? We had:
- forced mutual self care (showering and eating and cuddling)
- hairless cat / shaven poodle talks
- Natasha trying to get Bucky to spill the beans on Steve's issues
- Early morning heroin
- Shes Like A Sister To Me But Not In An Incesty Way
- Kissing and Oxy
- The official We Both Think We Hate Each Other talk
- overdose whoops

Get ready for a super fun next chapter! Please comment and let me know what you think!
The next day, Steve was dismissed from the medical bay just in time to go down to the commons for the required news team bonding session. Tony had gotten back earlier that day, so the whole team was there.

Meanwhile, Steve felt like absolute shit. He’d woken up drowsy, miserable and sweaty, with a sore throat and an aching stomach. He felt about as weak as he’d ever been, except still Bucky made him trudge all the way to and from the elevator, feeling with every step like he was about to collapse. The entire world felt distorted, tinged in the corners with green, and Steve’s head throbbed. It had been almost 16 hours since his last fix— which counted as even longer, what with his super metabolism and the emptiness in his gut.

The others were already sprawled around the couches, as usual. Clint was the first one to look up, grinning automatically before his face fell. “What happened?”

“None of your goddamn business,” Steve snapped.

All other conversation in the room stopped. Natasha turned and looked at Steve with a fierce gaze, like she was about to fight him for being rude to Clint, but her expression shifted just as quickly, looking almost worried. Almost being the keyword; Natasha didn’t show emotions like real people did. Steve supposed they should form a club.

Tony scratched the back of his head, looking Steve up and down like a technician, trying to figure out the problem. “You look horrible.”

“Yeah, well I feel horrible, what’s your excuse?”

Bucky put a hand on his arm and Steve slapped it away, having to physically grit his teeth to keep from lashing out. “I’ll fight you, and I’ll win.”

Bucky’s touch on his shoulder was reassuring, gentle. “I don’t doubt it,” he muttered, sounding more concerned than anything else. “But let’s get you feeling better first, alright?”

“I can’t feel better, not like this.”

Bruce looked around uncomfortably. “Can someone explain what’s going on? Does this have to do with Steve’s hospital visit earlier this week?”

“What?” Natasha said so violently Bruce pressed his back against his chair, eyes wide.

“I’m sorry, was I not supposed—”

“This isn’t about his hospital visit on Sunday, this is about his hospital visit last night,” Bucky snapped, eyes never leaving Steve. “Stevie, is there something you want to tell them?”

Steve narrowed his eyes, all but shaking at the betrayal. That wasn’t Bucky’s information to tell. “Yeah, there sure is. There’s going to be one less Avenger on the team when I fucking strangle James Ass-kisser Barnes, and if he doesn’t get off my dick right this fucking second—”
“Cut the crap,” Bucky snapped. “You can fight me later, right now you need to tell your teammates what’s going on. We’re a team, remember Stevie? Remember what that’s like?”

“We were never a team,” Steve snapped. “We’re just some fuckers who fought at some of the same places, it doesn’t mean shit—”

Bucky rubbed his face with his hand, looking like he was barely holding himself together. Steve wanted to be pleased, but everything hurt, and seeing Bucky upset made his pain receptors flare up dully. “Stevie.”

Steve turned back to their audience— their team, their coworkers, their housemates, whatever. They didn’t exactly look… enthusiastic about what he’d just said.

This was exactly why he needed the drugs. Steve was miserable without them— and not just miserable by himself, but an actual miserable person to be around. It was better for everyone that he kept self-medicating, and maybe one day, it’d fix him.

Still, he pressed his shoulders back and lifted his chin. “I was in the hospital last night. I, erm, do drugs. Some drugs. Sometimes. And last night… I mixed some, and it wasn’t good, so Buck took me to the hospital. It’s what I need to exist a little easier, I just… it’s none of your business, alright? I have it under control.”

“Stevie, you were in the hospital—”

“You don’t think I know that?” Steve snapped, a little gentler this time. “And it’s none of your business either.”

“Oh, so next time I should just let you die?”

“Maybe you should!” Steve yelled. The room was silent as Steve’s aching brain took a few moments to catch up, realize what he’d said, and try to fix it. “I mean, I’ve died before. It never took.”

Bucky shook his head. “You’re horrible.”

“I am.”

“You’re— you’re sick.”

“I know.”

“You’re supposed to— you’re supposed to be righteous, Stevie. What about… about duty? What about your duty?”

Steve tried to arrange his features in a sympathetic way. “My duty was over with the war.”

Bucky stared at him for a few long, hard seconds. Then, as easily as shrugging on a slightly too-small coat, he shifted, standing taller, entire body tensing up in one easy motion. Steve watched in subdued horror as his broken expression smoothed over, eyes unfocusing. Slowly, they came back into focus on Steve’s face, and Bucky’s mouth twitched before going back to how it had been before: cold, impassive, and painfully impersonal.

Then he marching forwards, forcefullyshouldering Steve out of the way. Steve stumbled back, almost falling on his ass but catching himself on the couch at the last moment. “What the—”
Bucky made a beeline to the stairs, and after taking a moment too long to process, Steve yelped and darted after him, but the Soldier was already in motion: there was no slowing him down.

Bucky got to their apartment before Steve did, and by the time Steve made it there he was already pulling the place apart. He yanked a stone out of the kitchen’s backsplash and pulled out the ziplock of pills, throwing it condemingly at Steve’s feet. He didn’t even glance at him as he went to the next spot, tearing out the couch cushions and unzipping one of them, pulling out another bag. Just like that, he went through the entire apartment, tearing it apart as he found bag after bag after bag. Not all had pills; there were also joints, and Steve’s heroin kit that was taped under the bed. Steve wasn’t surprised about Bucky knowing about that one, but all of the others?

Steve found himself drifting. When he blinked back into awareness, the Soldier was looming over him. He was sitting cross legged in the middle of their wooden floor, his legs covered in neat sandwich bags of drugs. Somewhere behind him stood the Avengers, observing silently.

The Winter Soldier chewed on his lip, before realizing what he was doing and forcing himself to stop. “Where are the others.”

Steve looked down at his lap. There were… seven bags. That was it.

“There aren’t any more,” Steve mumbled, like a kid who’d just been caught.

He listened but didn’t watch as the knife was drawn. He lifted his head obediently when it was placed under his chin, the cold metal slotting into place naturally. Bucky—The Soldier used it to press Steve’s head upwards, forcing him to meet his gaze. “The others. Where are they.”

Steve made himself retain eye contact as he said “There aren’t any more. That’s it.”

The knife was removed, and as if it were happening in another world, Steve’s hand was lifted, held in Bucky’s metal hand. Steve relaxed into the touch. He loved the metal hand, probably a lot more than he should. It was the forbidden fruit, and even if it wasn’t, it was the sign that Steve wasn’t the only one who changed. Truth be told, he preferred it now that he was dealing with the Winter Soldier. There were less emotions. Finally, Steve could interact with someone who knew what it was like to be cold on the inside and out.

The metal thumb pinched Steve’s hand tightly, making it impossible for him to pull away. Then the knife was pressed against the knuckle of his pinkie finger, and the Soldier’s gravelly voice toned out “If you are lying. I will cut it off. This is. Your last chance.”

A small part of Steve’s brain, near the back, screamed Do it! There were two possible options for what it could be: one, it was the serum, egging him on to be brave and refuse defeat, no matter the form; two, it was himself, the gnarled, twisted part that he needed the pills in his lap to quiet. He wasn’t sure which one was worse.

“I only remember these ones,” Steve said honestly, suppressing the urge to lie. The cold metal continued digging into the skin of his hand from both sides. He lashes fluttered as he made himself meet the Soldier’s eyes again. “I don’t think there’s any others.”

There was nothing behind those eyes. Those murky blues that Steve had fallen in love with were dark, blank. There was just the Soldier, and nothing else.

The soldiers orders were so low Steve almost missed them, except he didn’t, because every part of him, every inch and every cell and every atom, was turned into him and Steve realized at once why adrenaline was both the love hormone and the fear hormone. “Get up. Bring the pills. Flush them.”
His hand was released, but Steve didn’t move. He could feel his eye bags grow heavier, the tremble in his hand he’d had the past 16 hours grow stronger. “What if I don’t want to?”

In response, the Soldier drew a handgun, clicking off the safety and pulling back the slide, loading the bullet into place. He pointed it at Steve’s forehead without a single moment of hesitation.

In the background, Steve heard Tony say something, a warning if the tone of his voice was anything to go on. The Soldier didn’t move, didn’t shift, didn’t even try to look at him, and neither did Steve.

Then Steve sighed and leaned forwards, pressing his forehead against the barrel of the gun. His trembling hands grabbed at the plastic bags, squeezing them in closed fists. He couldn't let them go. “Do it. Please .”

There were a few long, long seconds where nothing happened. Then Bucky shifted the gun up, away from his forehead, and fired. Natasha didn’t scream as she went down, but she gasped so loudly and horribly that Steve forced himself to look back to the floor. There were nine bags of pills in his lap. He stared at them as he listened to Natasha choke on her own blood behind him.

He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was laying in a bed in the medical bay, with only the sound of his own heart beating on the monitor to fill the buzzing in his ears. He felt… he felt sick. He was sick. He was sick, wasn’t he? Horribly sick. A liar, a fake. He’d cheated fate; he was living on borrowed time.

He rolled his head to the side, meeting Bucky’s eyes. Bucky’s eyes were lined with red; he looked like he’d just been slapped.

“I swear to God Stevie,” he muttered, still looking absolutely shell shocked. “Come on, substance mixing? You know that stuff’s lethal as all Hell. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were trying to die.”

Steve couldn’t help it; he let the wave of anguish, of misery and pain and heartbreak wash over him, and his entire body seized up, shaking with big earthquake tremors as the tears welled up and rolled over. He reached out, and within an instant Bucky was grabbing onto his hand, holding him through the thunder wracking his body. Steve met his eyes, those same beautiful, beautiful murky blues, now alive and just as miserable as Steve felt, and Steve’s cheeks became wet with tears.

“I don’t wanna die,” he sobbed. “I don’t— I don’t— I, I, I—”

He couldn’t speak anymore, couldn’t say another word through the gut wrenching sobs. But he didn’t need to. Bucky pulled him up into a sitting position and wrapped him in a bear hug, letting Steve let out those horrible choked up sobs into his shoulder.

It took hours; it took years. But once the sobs subsided to small seizures of his diaphragm, he was able to whimper: “Please. Please, Bucky, please help me, I, I, please. I— I’m sick. I had a, a hallucination, I, and, and, Bucky please, don’t leave me, I can’t, I, I, I, I, I, I feel so bad right now, I feel so, and, and, and Bucky, please, I don’t wanna die. I don’t, I don’t wanna, Bucky please!”
them press a stethoscope to his stomach when they asked. He was obedient, something he never allowed himself to be, but, but, but, but.

Once he was given permission to leave, Natasha stayed with him while Bucky left to retrieve some clothes for him. Natasha didn’t smile at Steve, and Steve didn’t smile at her, well aware of the redness of his eyes. She was wearing a tank top under a jean jacket, revealing her neck and much of the skin below it. It was clear of any scars, wounds, or bandages, proving once and for all that what he’d imagined was never real. It was just a hallucination, a result of mixing two substances that were never, ever meant to be mixed.

She crossed her arms and stared at him. Neither of them offered each other any words, no condolences, questions, apologies or otherwise. They just existed. It was all that was needed.

Bucky came back with clothes, and as a result of Steve’s pleading gaze Natasha ducked out of the room while Bucky helped him change. A few times, Steve felt the cool metal of the arm glance against his skin, but Bucky always tried to keep it from touching him. When he was dressed, Steve sat on the edge of the bed with his face up against Bucky’s chest for a few minutes, letting Bucky rub up and down the knobs in his back.

When they left, Natasha fell into line with them, walking slower than normal to match Steve’s pace. Bucky’s offered to help him walk, but Steve just shook his head.

“The others are in the commons,” Natasha said coolly, like it was just another normal day. “It’s News day. If you want to go back to your apartment and rest, I can make up something. They don’t have to know.

Steve hesitated, but again, he shook his head. “I want to talk to them about something.”

They got into the elevator and Jarvis announced that he was taking them to the commons. Before they got there, the doors opened for Bruce, who offered Natasha a small, slightly embarrassed smile. The doors opened again for Clint, who came in with a relaxed “Hey guys.” When they all exited into the commons, Tony was there waiting for them, a bowl of popcorn in his hands.

“Hey, you guys partying without me? Rude.”

They moved to the couches as a group team, all of them bumping against each other and talking good naturedly. Tony laid out on his couch, fluffing a pillow, and Bruce made himself comfortable in his chair. Natasha and Clint grabbed the pillows and blanket they kept set aside and went to their spot on the floor, elbowing each other and making jokes under their breath.

Steve didn’t move. He stood behind his and Bucky’s couch, as still as a statue, watching his group coworkers housemates team get settled in their normal spots. Bucky stayed behind him, offering silent support as he waited to see what he’d do.

“I do drugs,” Steve blurted out suddenly, not able to hold it in anymore. The others quieted. “I’m a druggie. I, I, I’ve done them for a while I guess, since the second or third year on my own, and, and I never really stopped. But I haven’t been exactly safe and that’s why I was in the hospital, medical bay, whatever, earlier this week, and, um, today. Just now, actually, because I took too much and mixed and— and I didn’t mean to overdose, I don’t want—but I did, on accident. And I thought, you know, maybe… maybe I should let you guys know. Maybe. Just too… keep you in the loop. But. I’m going to, stop, I guess, or at least… get smarter about it. So. Yeah. I thought. I should just… let you guys know what’s going on, because we’re a…” he couldn’t bring himself to say the word. Because we’re a team. He licked his lips, crossing his arms defensively. “Anyways.”
The others didn’t looked surprised. “Good job,” Natasha said softly, expression carefully smoothed out.

“Thanks for telling us,” Clint added. “That must have been really hard. We appreciate it.”

Steve felt horrible, but not miserable horrible, more like… more like his-face-was-heating-up-and-his-cheeks-were-doubtlessly-bright-pink horrible. “Oh. Okay. Th-thanks, I guess.”

Bucky put a hand on his shoulder, nodding to the couch, but Steve gestured for him to go first. Bucky laid out on the couch, and only when he was settled did Steve climb over the back of it and lay down next to him, wedged in between his warm, familiar body and the back of the couch. Bucky was tossed a blanket, which he laid over the two of them, tucking in around Steve, and Steve pulled it higher so he could hide his head underneath it. It took a little while for him to finally re-emerge and tune in to watch the news with the others, but when he did Bucky just shifted his arm, making it easier for Steve to see. Steve rested his head on Bucky’s chest, breathing in slow, relaxed breaths and almost groaning in relief when Bucky’s metal hand rested in his hair, massaging it pointedly gently. Steve settled closer against him.

His head hurt, buzzing with pain, and his lips were still too dry, and his hands still trembled. But— but— but—.

“When we get back,” Bucky whispered, “How about we go through and find all of you stashed drugs. I think I know where most of them are” —and he said this with a slightly shy, slightly embarrassed smile— “but maybe you could help me find the rest?”

“Yeah,” Steve whispered back, relaxing even further when the hand continued massaging his hair, “I think that’d be good.”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, Steve goes on a fun and wonderful drug trip where he thinks that his addiction causes Bucky to turn into the Winter Soldier, confiscate all of his drugs, threaten him with a knife, and shoot Natasha. In this scenario, Steve sees himself as the villain, not Bucky. He eventually wakes up and realizes it was never real, and that he really, really doesn’t want any of that to happen, which is when he makes the decision to let Bucky help him quit.

Please let me know your thoughts in the comments! Was anyone freaking out thinking that the hallucination was real?
Lasagna and Assault Rifles Are Not Supposed To Mix

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

A Stark car drove them to Queens. It was driven by someone other than Happy, which was good, because Steve wasn't sure if he had the mental capacity to abuse Happy at the moment.

Aunt May hugged them when they came in, giving Steve a concerned once over but not saying anything. “Peter says he has SAT practice, but he’s actually on patrol if you boys want to go look for him.”

They dropped off their things at the apartment and started walking, checking in alleys and keeping an eye on the sky. Bucky shifted between the Winter Soldier and Brooklyn Bucky with every few steps; it was something about the alleys, Steve thought.

They found Peter after about a half hour, and it took another five minutes to get close enough. When they did, Steve almost had an aneurysm. The stupid Spider-boy hoodie was gone, replaced with a perfectly shaped one piece suit, gleaming red and blue with big white eyes that adjusted with the smooth robotic motions of Stark tech.

Steve was miserable, so he pulled up his hood and pulled out a knife, throwing it at Peter just to watch him dodge it. He pulled out another and got close enough to fight hand to hand with Peter, but the boy’s reflexes were too good and he blocked every swing. Steve had half a mind to pull out a gun and try shooting, when Peter went “Mister Rogers!” and squashed him in a hug. Steve just about stabbed him in the back-- literally-- but Bucky took the knife before he could, sliding in into one of his pockets.

Peter pulled back from the hug that Steve never really returned, completely uncaring of that or the fact that Steve had recently tried to stab him. He yanked off his mask like an imbecile, smiling at them like a filthy golden retriever. “What are you guys doing here? I missed you so much! Bucky! How are you man?”

Bucky’s head ticked to the side, and his arm shuddered so loudly even Steve looked over to see what was wrong. “Functional.”

“Hey man, that’s great!”

Bucky nudged Steve. “Stevie’s drying out though. So he’s angry.”

“Hey, *fuck you*.”

“But he’s functional too. Mostly.”

“That’s great! Steve, I'm so proud of you, you know all those drugs weren’t good for you.”

“He didn't.” Bucky frowned, like he was trying to remember how words worked. “He didn't want to stop. He’s. An idiot. Took too much. Mandatory drying-out period. Now he wants to stop, though.”

“So they say,” Steve said dryly. Bucky shrugged one shoulder, like he wasn't going to deny it.

Peter spider-ed his way across a few buildings, then returned a minute later dressed as a Gen-Z prick, as per usual, and together they all walked back to Aunt May’s apartment. Peter remained
unaffected by Steve’s misery and Bucky’s ticking, and recounted them with stories of how his summer school was going. “It’s really, really easy, especially because no one else wants to be there either. I’ll probably go back to normal school for my senior year, but Aunt May and I have been looking into an accelerated program. There’s this girl MJ, who’s really weird, but it’s cool. We’re going to see a movie on Saturday. Have you guys ever been to the movie theater here? Oh man, it’s awesome, they have really comfy seats and if you pay like, a lot of money, you can go to a 4D movie which has like, smells and stuff, and oh man, it’s really cool.”

He doesn’t seem to mind when they don’t reply, but Steve knows that both of them are listening to every word. Peter was too happy, but Steve accepted it, brushing off the waves of pure, bubbly energy the boy radiated off of him.

When they got back to the apartment, they got the opportunity to watch Aunt May and Peter exchange one of the fakest interactions of Steve’s life. It started with Aunt May ignoring Peter’s sweaty hair and smell, instead asking pleasantly “How was SAT practice?”

“It was great! MJ explained the oxford comma to me, which was really good.”

“Good for you!” May met Bucky’s eyes, looking equal parts pained and amused. “You know Peter, I’m so glad we can tell each other the truth, and I really am proud of you taking a break from Spiderman. It’s very mature of you.”

“Oh, uh, thanks! I’m going to go to my room and plug in my phone, I’ll be right back!”

May watched him leave, and then unblinking, continued to stare down the hallway in his wake. “One of these days, I’ll break him down. I’m reading a book right now: Psychological Manipulation For The Single Parent? I think it’s working.” She seemed to shake back into herself, and grabbed a plate, offering it to them with a pleasant smile. “Cookie?”

Her cookies were overly chewy and had chunks of white chocolate and raisins in them, but Bucky had four. Steve managed to eat half of one, before making eye contact with Bucky and throwing it away. Normally, he would’ve given his leftovers to Bucky, but he was still pissed.

Peter came bounding back into the room, his StarkPhone in his hand even though he’d just claimed he was going to plug it in. “Mister Steve Rogers Nomad sir, look! I found this picture for you, I was going to send it but I forgot because—”

Steve leaned over his shoulder, watching as Peter navigated through his apps almost too quickly to track. Steve noted the sleek design of the screen—full screen and curved gently, the same size as Bucky’s phone, meaning it was too fucking big. He squinted at the sides, at the embedded volume buttons.

“Look!” Peter said as he pulled the picture up. It was a nude of Thor, drawn in incredible detail, holding the Captain America shield in front of his crotch. Steve appreciated the drawing—he definitely appreciated the drawing—but there was something else on his mind.

“Peter? Where did you get this phone?”

Peter immediately went bright red, which just confirmed Steve’s theory. He glanced around, making sure Aunt May was no longer in the room before glaring at Peter accusingly. “Peter, is Tony Stark your sugar daddy?”

Bucky looked up so quickly he could’ve gotten whiplash.

“What?!” Peter stepped back, looking rightfully horrified. “No! I mean, sorta, but without— no!
Actually no, 100% definitely not, he just gave me this stuff, I didn’t even want it but he wouldn’t take it back, and—"

“Stuff? Plural?”

“The suit!” He defended, holding up his hands. “And the phone, and uh, a new computer, and desk, and uh, the new spiderman suit, and a normal suit, but he said that it was important to have a really good suit for— and that’s it! Just those, I swear. And uh. He got Aunt May a new toaster oven, because ours was… anyways.”

“<He is definitely Peter’s sugar daddy>,” Bucky growled in German.

“<He is not!>” Peter argued immediately. “<I don’t any have!>”

Steve rolled his eyes at Peter’s grammar, and switched to Russian, cracking his knuckles. “<I swear, next time I see him Tony and I are going to fight—>”

“Oh, shut up. You say that about everyone.”

“<But now I have good reason!>”

Bucky turned to Peter, who was still red and actually looked angry, for once. Before Bucky could say anything, Peter said “You guys are assholes. I’ve been studying with Duolingo everyday for the past fifty years it feels like, and as soon as I say one word in German you switch languages. It’s not funny, and it’s not nice.”

“It hasn’t been fifty years, it’s been like, a month.”

“Same thing!”

Steve shook his head. “What else did Tony give you?”

Peter crossed his arms, glancing back and forth between Steve and Bucky. “An. Um. Animmpernsnit.”

“A what?”

“An internship.”

Steve looked up at the ceiling, shaking his head. “I can’t handle this. I can’t handle any of it. God, I want to shoot up. I’m going for a walk.”

Bucky caught the back of his shirt and pulled him back before he could. “You want a nap,” he corrected.

Steve sighed. He wanted to argue, but the images from the bad trip came back so vividly he could almost feel the ziplock bags gripped in his hands. “Fuck you,” he grumbled, making his way over to the couch.

Steve ended up laying down, but he couldn’t fall asleep. He could feel his heartbeat in his head and he squeezed his eyes closed, hoping the pain would go away soon.

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Steve woke up in time to watch the others eat dinner. When he didn't make himself a plate Bucky took the liberty of making one for him, but apparently Steve’s glare was intense enough that for once, Bucky didn’t give him shit about not eating. After dinner, Peter made them hot chocolate with an obnoxious amount of whipped cream, insisting that it’s now a tradition. Steve slipped at his mug silently, glaring at Bucky whenever they made eye contact, because honestly, fuck him.

The hot chocolate seemed to spur some sort of memory in Peter, sending him scurrying to his room for blankets and pillows. As soon as May saw the pillows, she shook her head. “Good luck boys. I'm going to bed now. Peter, make sure to clean it up before tomorrow afternoon, okay?”

“Aunt May, I promise. I will not let you down.”

May said goodnight, seeming only minorly amused. Once she was gone Peter retrieved more pillows, blankets, about a dozen clothespins and the entire Encyclopedia Britannica. He carried the stuff over in two trips, more for balance than anything else. He ordered Bucky to work helping him create the blanket fort, letting Steve watch and supervise. When Steve asked about the reasoning behind the fort, all Peter supplied was “Uncle Ben”, and, well. It wasn’t like they’d object to that.

“Why doesn’t Stevie have to help out?” Bucky complained, hauling books to where Peter directed them. “No matter what he tells you, he’s not actually king of the entire goddamn world. Come on Stevie, off your ass. We’ve got marching orders.”

“He’s recovering,” Peter said, like it was Bucky that was being rude.

“Also, I am the king of the universe,” Steve said plainly. “And I was never good with orders.”

“You think I don’t know that? Every god-- gosh darn day…”

“Set them here,” Peter pointed. “It’s pretty much good, it just needs…” he tapped his chin, then jumped upwards and stuck to the ceiling like it was nothing, crawling above the fort and shooting down a web. He attached the end of the web to the ceiling, keeping the roof of the fort supported, and easily made his way down. “Perfect!”

They all climbed in the fort which was just big enough for the three of them. “This is too fucking wholesome,” Steve grumbled. “I hate it.”

“Thanks! My Uncle Ben was an architect, and we would always have hot chocolate and then make blanket forts together, and I'd sleep in them for weeks. I always wanted to be an architect, until I started getting into science.”

“And now?” Steve asked. “You planning on being a full time arachnid?”

Peter ducked his head. “No. I still want to do science stuff, hopefully get a degree and work for Mister Stark for real. In R&D, jeez, I hate you both, that's not even funny, he's my mentor.”

Steve opened his mouth dramatically. “I thought I was your mentor!”

“Can I not have more than one?”

“No! That's why I'm your mentor and Bucky isn’t!”

“Also, the whole murder-bot thing,” Bucky added helpfully.
“Whatever.”

Peter smiled, his nose crinkling. “Yeah, well, now Mister Stark’s my mentor, so you'll just have to deal.”

Steve faux-gasped. “How dare you!”

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Bucky didn’t sleep that night. Steve knew because when he woke up at three in the morning and considered going on a quick drug run, Bucky was sitting across the fort from him. He scowled at him like he knew exactly what he was thinking and Steve rolled his eyes, rolling over to go back to cuddling with Peter. It wasn’t full on cuddling, not like what he did with Bucky, but they were laying close to each other, both curled up facing each other. Peter’s breathes tickled Steve’s skin gently.

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The next day, they left.

They did that a lot. Sometimes it felt like they left places more than they ever arrived.

As soon as they got to the Tower Natasha was grabbing Steve’s hand and claiming she had something important to show him—just him, Bucky could stay in their apartment. She and Steve went to her apartment and her ‘important thing she had to show him’ ended up being a box of obscenely fancy chocolates. They shared them, then talked on the couch for a while about Clint and Tony and whatever else, just using words to fill the time and fill the space and fill the spot in between Steve’s eyes that hurt like hell. Steve had a feeling Natasha was trying to distract him, but she did a decent job of it so he didn’t mind.

“Tony’s doing a charity gala in a week, and he’s making us all go,” Natasha said as she retrieved a box full of folded dresses. “Jarvis ordered these for me. Wanna help me choose one?”

Steve sighed tiredly. “There’s nothing I want more.”

Natasha smiled a little cockily, leaving Steve with the strangest impression that she might enjoy making people miserable. “Good answer,” she said, and leaned down to peck him with a kiss. It felt just a little warm and nice, but Steve didn't have the energy for any makeout sessions at the moment, so he didn't object when she pulled away. “I'll go try on the first one.”

When she left to get changed, Steve wandered around her kitchen, peering in her refrigerator. He’d expected health food, and that's what he found, though it wasn't as obnoxious as he’d expected. No salads. Good. Natasha deserved better.
The first dress was bright red and a bit too loose on top and too tight on the bottom. “You look like a firetruck someone forced into a paper towel roll,” Steve commented without emotion.

Natasha leaned this way and that, admiring herself critically in the full length hall mirror. “I think I look sexy,” she said.

“You do. Like a sexy firetruck stuffed in a paper towel roll, obviously.”

Natasha flashed him a smile then left to try on the next one. It was pine green, and Natasha posed for Steve, putting her hand on her hips and puckering her lips. “What do you think?”

He gave her a solid look up and down, red hair to green dress to bare feet, and said simply “Merry Christmas.”

That got a real laugh out of her. “I could get a star to stick in my hair.”

“Maybe some ornaments too. What’s the next one like?”

Steve had a feeling she saved the best for last, because none of the others were right. They were all ill-fitting, bad colors, too frilly, too low cut (“What do you think? I look good enough to eat, don’t I?” “I would, but I don’t have any spare change on me.”), but at least they made for good entertainment.

The last dress was midnight blue and glittered in the light in a muted enough way as to not be obnoxious. It was floor length and fit perfectly, and Natasha looked absolutely gorgeous in it.

“I love this shade of blue,” Natasha said idly, waiting for Steve’s response to it.

Steve breathed out slowly, still taking it in. Then: “It’s so dark it’s almost black. Do you know what else is black?” His eyes darted up to meet hers. “Garbage bags.”

She snorted-- a real, completely undignified snort, the type that’d probably get her in trouble in the red room-- and Steve grinned.

Natasha changed back into sweats and they got comfortable on the couch to watch a movie. Steve’s entire body ached from withdrawal, but Natasha’s lips were soft, nice. She had her knees bent and resting over Steve’s thighs, and she leaned against him, petite in a purposeful way.

About halfway through the movie, the elevator dinged and Bucky trekked his way in, looking at them over the back of the couch silently until Steve patted the cushion next to him and Bucky sat. Immediately they adjusted with Steve slinging his legs over Bucky’s and Natasha scooting closer until they were in a comfortable pile. Natasha leaned up enough to peck Bucky on the cheek. “I think I’m going to ask Bruce to the gala with me.”

“You should,” Steve said without thinking about it. “Will you ask him straight forwards, or--”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll make him think it was his idea.”

Bucky’s lips twitched up. “ябеда.” *Sneak.* A nickname, one Steve hadn’t ever heard him use before.

Natasha smiled lazily. “You know it, негодяй.” It was also said like a nickname-- Scoundrel, or Bastard. Coming from Natasha’s lips, it sounded like a fond endearment.

They’d almost finished the movie when Clint came in, still in his Shield uniform. Without even blinking at their little dogpile he kissed Natasha on the cheek and grumbled something about going to bed. Steve waited until his door was closed to say “So, there’s a theory on the internet that says that
the male Avengers are all your secret harem of boyfriends. Do you have anything to say about that?”

Natasha hummed fondly. “Not true. Tony is a male avenger, and he’s not apart of the harem. I would never want to get on Pepper’s bad side.”

“No, but I’m sure you’d gladly get on her other sides. Her lower side, maybe.”

Natasha nudged him playfully. “Hush. You’re prettier when you’re silent.”

Steve got ready to argue, when Bucky snorted and Steve’s mind immediately went blank. He leaned closer against Bucky, and to Natasha, muttered “Witch.”

Her hand tangled in his hair, massaging it and sending the message again: hush. This time Steve decided he might just listen.

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The next day, Steve shot up.

He shot up. Because he was a horrible person who sat on the counter and directed Bucky towards all of his stashes, letting Bucky find a few on his own-- but, he didn't tell him about the backup needle he had, already filled and ready to use. It wasn't heroin; it was some long lasting high profile painkiller, the type that would leave a normal person tripping off of buildings and crying about pretty colors, but left Steve with an intense numbness under his skin, like he’d been out walking in the cold without gloves for too long and now his skin was cold and doughy to the touch.

After injecting, he promptly wrapped the needle in about six feet of toilet paper and buried it in the trash. Steve slumped onto the couch, closing his eyes and letting his breathing slow.

Bucky came back what was probably a few minutes later, but Steve’s mind had numbed with his body and time wasn't really relevant anymore. Bucky walked over and peered down at Steve on the couch, who blinked back at him.

“What did Nat want to talk about?” Steve whispered. Bucky’s eyes were blue, but not really blue. More like hazel blue. Murky. Honey and water. Tea.

“Our past,” Bucky said, simply enough. “What did you do?”

Steve shrugged. “Layed down. I was napping, earlier.”

Bucky blinked at him. Steve blinked back.

“Is it a cry for help?” Bucky managed, without context. “Or is it something else?”

Steve smiled, sleepily, dreamily. “I dunno what you're talking about.”

He must have drifted, because the next thing he knew Bucky was scooping him up like he was some goddamn bride and carrying him to the elevator. “Hey!” Steve protested. “Back off, handsy! I ain't your dame!”
The elevator took them down to Tony’s workshop. When the doors opened and Steve saw where they were, he immediately went serious. “Hey, Buck, what-- stop! No, set me down, don’t get Stark--”

Bucky ignored him, marching the two of them into the workshop. The door opened for him-- no passcode needed. Tony was leaning over what looked to be a large engine, but looked up gobsmacked when they came in.

“You said you would help,” Bucky said, addressing Tony. “Help. I can’t-- I won’t deal with this shit. Sam says establish boundaries so I’m establishing boundaries. Stevie, I’m not your fucking mom and clearly whatever I’m doing isn’t fucking working, so we’re trying a new strategy.”

Then, as easy as that, he dumped Steve unceremoniously on Stark’s couch, turned, and left, with Steve and Stark still staring.

Steve sighed and flopped on the couch. DUM-E immediately scrambled over, petting his arm a bit aggressively. Steve groaned when he heard Tony’s footsteps draw near.

“So, you shot up.”

Steve flipped him off.

Tony didn’t seem to care. He strolled over, holding up a simple plastic strap of some kind. It looked horrifyingly like that trend from a few years back-- a walkfit? A Bitfit?-- but with chunky square of plastic attached. Tony dangled it in front of him. “Do you want to stop?”

Steve shrugged.

“People on the outside tend to think that the only way to get better is to quit cold turkey. It can work. It can also hurt like shit. I developed something to help, but I’m not giving it to you unless you’re serious.”

Steve stared at it, eyes half closed.

“Are you serious?”

Steve didn’t know. He didn’t-- but Bucky-- and--


Tony nodded. “This attaches to your brachial-- that is, your upper arm. It’s semi permanent, but it’s waterproof, so you can shower with it, and when I was wearing it in my early weapons development days I didn’t break it, so you should be fine.”

Steve nodded, swallowed. “What does it do?”

Tony turned it around and pressed the sides, and a needle stuck out from the middle of it. “Simply put, it monitors your blood toxicity, and if you do any sort of drug not in the system’s clearance, it’ll set off an alarm and be annoying as fuck, not to mention let everyone in the tower know what you’ve been doing. Twice a day, it releases a bit of a… little cocktail I mixed up. You’ll have to break your drug habit, but in the meantime it’ll slowly take you off until you’re no longer dependent. It’s like a caffeine patch but… for heroin. But it works. Tony tested, Tony approved.”

He held the strap up invitingly. With another sigh, Steve shifted, holding out his arm for it, and Tony chuckled. “Yeah, no. We’re not putting it on until after what you just took works its way out of your
system, unless you want to become a walking fire alarm. We’ll see about it in a few days.”

Bucky did an excellent job of avoiding Steve. He didn’t talk to him, didn’t remind him to eat, and when Steve woke up in the middle of the night, he found Bucky sleeping silently on the floor, apparently equally unwilling to sleep on the couch or in bed with him. It was fine; Steve didn’t care. He was an adult, he didn’t need to be fucking coddled.

A day passed, and Tony tested Steve’s blood toxicity. He was clean, so Tony locked the strap in place, pressing the sides so the needle plunged its way into Steve’s arm. Steve prodded at the strap uncertainty. “Can I just take it off? Doesn’t that defeat the point?”

“It would,” Tony agreed. “Except, you can’t. It only unlocks with my fingerprints. I can change it to work with someone else’s too if you want.”

Steve shook his head. “This is perfect. Thanks, Tony. It means a lot.”

Tony shrugged, like it was nothing. “It sucks, but it works. Good luck.”

There was more damage control to do after that. Bucky spent some of his time in therapy, some at another dog shelter, some training with Clint, and some reading. At least, Steve assumed that’s what he was doing when he picked up a book and left for five hours without a word.

Bucky was still pissed at him then, which, rude. Steve was a delicate fucking flower, how dare Bucky. To the end of the line and back motherfucker, get your head out of your ass and stop avoiding me, please and thank you. Bitch.

But as the days passed, and Steve progressively became more bored… well, it wouldn’t do. His own stubbornness be damned, boredom was a trigger for every addiction, and Steve needed this for his own health.

So Steve pulled out all the stops and made dinner. A good fucking dinner. A delicious fucking lasagna, so that way Bucky could not only get seconds but also thirds and fucking fourths and fifths, and Bucky was going to eat it if Steve had to hold him down and shove it down his throat, goddammit. Steve was going to eat too, because he was a good fucking person who could take care of himself, fucking fucking shidamnit fuck. Bucky would see his fucking lasagna and Steve eating his fucking dinner and he would sit down and fucking eat too for fucks sake because Steve couldn’t fucking handle him being a little fucking bitch and ignoring him.

For fucks sake.

It took about an hour to prepare the lasagna, and another hour to cook it. During that time Steve cleaned the kitchen, because again, he was a good fucking person who could fucking take care of himself. Then he set the table— with fresh fucking fruits and vegetables— and waited.

And waited.
That *thot*.

Steve pulled out his phone, put it back, pulled it out again, checked it, put it back, swallowed his pride, and called Bucky.

He didn’t pick up.

*Motherfuckingdickcuntassbitch*--

They were *superheros*. Fighting or not, superheros were always, always supposed to answer their phones. If Bucky saw that Steve was calling, he would answer. Which meant…

Bucky didn’t see that Steve was calling.

That--

Steve blinked rapidly, feeling like he'd just gotten a rush of adrenaline, but different. It wasn't adrenaline, it was the serum doubling and tripling in size. His brain split into twelve different pieces, all running and whirring and working overtime. Calculating.

Possibilities:

1. Bucky's been captured/killed by Hydra.

2.

…”

Calculating.

…”

Well *fuck*.

At least Steve knew how to deal with this. He went into his room and loaded up his clothes with five more knives (in addition to the seven already on him), and his two handguns. After a few moments of consideration, he took out one of Bucky's paratroopers too. This was no time for games.

Steve opened the door to the stairwell, fully intending to march out and show some Hydra bastards what their own dicks tasted like, when he ran straight into Bucky.

The initial frustration that passed across Bucky's eyes was quickly replaced to confusion when he saw the machine gun. “Steve. What the *fuck*.”

“It's Stevie to you, *bitch,*” Steve said, pointed a finger into Bucky's chest. “And secomph of all, wherewere you, you... thot? I…” Steve frowned, looking to the side. Was that a ladybug? Steve didn’t like ladybugs. “I made a lasagna.”

Bucky sniffed the air. “Is that's what's burning?”

He gently moved Steve aside so he could get into the kitchen, where there was black smoke pouring out of the oven and the refrigerator was looking notably shinier than all of the other appliances. It was a good refrigerator too-- stainless steel, two doored, attached freezer drawer…

Bucky coughed, waving a hot pad in front of his face as he pulled the burned hunk of lasagna out of the oven. “Stevie, what the *fuck*? Why didn’t you set a timer?”
Steve walked into the room, feeling a little ditsy. “I did set a timer, you were just so late that it didn’t matter and the lasagna burned anyways!”

“Stevie, you could have just taken it out and let it cool. And why didn't you tell me you were cooking? I would've been back sooner.”

Steve blinked hard. The lights were beginning to feel a little too bright. “…”

“You shouldn't have been cooking anyways, in your state.”

“In my state? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I'm not too fucking short to cook—”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Not that. I meant your state as in high as balls.”

Steve shifted, showing Bucky the small plastic box on his arm. “I can’t get high anymore, Tony gave me this. Something something blood toxicity. It's like a heroin patch, but with caffeine.”

Bucky strode over to him in three steps, gingerly touching Steve's arm to examine the device. “You mean a caffeine patch, but with heroin?”

“Ya.”

Bucky let out a breath, straightening up. “We have to get you to Tony. Why are you fully armed?”

Even as he asked, he took the machine gun away. Steve pouted. “You were late to dinner.”

“So you were going to rampage the city until you found me?”

Pretty much. “No.”

“No?”

“I had a plan.”

Bucky unceremoniously patted Steve down, retrieving the two handguns. “Yeah? What was your plan?”

“I can't tell you. It's highly classified.”

Bucky tried to walk him to the elevator, but when Steve was stumbling too much he ending up throwing him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Steve let himself hang there limply until they got to the workshop.

Bucky dropped Steve over the couch as soon as they entered the workshop. “Tony, you have to fix this.”

Steve fumbled his way into a sitting position, making eye contact with Butterfingers across the room. “01000111 01100101 01110100 00100000 01110000 01101001 01111010 01111010 01100001.”

“I'd gladly— um. Steve? Did you just say something to my robot in binary code?”

Steve crossed his arms. “I did no such thing.”

“How the fuck do you even know how to— nevermind. Is it safe to assume that something is wrong with the anti-drug strap?”
“Clearly,” Bucky said, gesturing to Steve like he was all the evidence needed. “He’s high.”

“I’m not!”

Across the room, Butterfingers had gotten ahold of a StarkPad and was hopefully following Steve’s binary coded command: *get pizza.* Steve looked away, hoping not to draw attention to it.

“All right Steve, we totally believe you. Why don’t you climb onto one of my workbenches and I’ll see, okay?”

Steve grumbled, but let Bucky help him over. As Tony stuck him with a needle and ran a few tests, Bucky made himself ‘useful’ and finished disarming Steve. He started with all of his pockets and secret compartments in his clothes, but once he’d finished that another pat down indicated more. Bucky raised Steve’s shirt and swore. “Seriously Stevie?”

“Fuck you,” Steve said automatically.

There were at least two knives physically taped to Steve’s back, and Bucky ripped the tape off without preamble. “Ow!”

“You’re the one who put them there,” Bucky reminded. “You brought this upon yourself.”

“The results are in!” Tony announced so loudly that Butterfingers dropped the StarkPad. “Steve is, in fact, high!”

____________________________________

It turned out that there had been a minor issue with the device, so that instead of giving Steve a regulated amount of diluted drugs, it had started pumping Steve full of them. The issue was fixed, and Steve was allowed to go back to his apartment under the watchful eye of Bucky.

“I’m fine,” he reassured once they’d gotten back. “You don’t have to stare at me for the rest of the night. Don’t worry Bucky, I won’t try to burn the building down if you blink.”

“There is absolutely no evidence to prove that,” Bucky said in a monotone. Steve winced when he walked over and started hacking the charred remains of lasagna from the pan.

“I’m sorry,” Steve admitted. “I didn’t mean—”

“No, you didn’t,” Bucky agreed. “It’s alright. Thanks for trying to cook. It looks like it could have been good.” Bucky hit something hard, and carefully dug out an entire spoon that had been embedded in the lasagna. “Well. Thanks for trying to cook.”

Steve leaned heavily on the counter, watching him. “The spoon just fell in. I didn’t put it in on purpose.”

“Sure. I believe you.”

Steve grumbled and walked around the counter, thumping his head against Bucky’s back. “You should. I’m fucking honest.”
“Alright, Stevie. Whatever you say.”

*I love you,* Steve thought miserably. Instead of saying it out loud, he just leaned harder against Bucky, like with enough physical contact Bucky would be able to read his thoughts. Hopefully, he could.

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**Chapter End Notes**

I feel like despite the cussing and addiction rehab, this was a very sweet and wholesome chapter! Here’s what happened:
- Steve and Bucky went to visit Peter (who has been doing Spiderman things with the new Stark-made suit, even though he lies to Aunt May about it)
- Steve spent some quality time with Natasha eating chocolate and picking out dresses
- Steve shot up (for shame) and got the anti-drug box of shame
- Said box of shame didn’t work all that great and accidentally got Steve high again

In case you missed it, when the WS stuff happened and Steve went to find Zola, he’d left a note for Peter telling him to go home to Aunt May. That’s why Peter has been gone for a few chapters. Unfortunately, the part of the story with Peter as a main character is mostly over, but if someone has a suggestion for how he could fit into the Age of Ultron storyline I’d be excited to hear!

Another thing that you may have noticed is that I have changed the estimated chapter count on this story from 35 to 45. Right now we are at 30. There’s definitely room for it to go up again in the future.

In the next chapter, there will be a bit more with some of the other characters, especially Nat. And then after that-- something happens! Dun dun! My lips are sealed.

As per usual, please comment and let me know what you think, and seriously, if anyone has any ideas with Peter, let me know! I’m just getting ready to start writing Ultron stuff so now is the time!
We've got a super special bonus chapter! Just a short little thing, but still valid as heck. Special thanks to @nightmaresinwinah for the long, in depth comment/analysis, it made my day :). Bonus special thanks to anyone else who comments, because again, I absolutely love them and they motivate me to write.

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky

Stevie was a goddamned house-cat.

Stevie. Was a god-damned. House-cat. He was small. He was soft. And all he ever fucking did was sleep. Every night, it seemed, like clockwork, Steve was in bed, sleeping, for hours and hours and hours, usually at least five. It was insane, it was... unnatural.

Of course, Bucky knew that he used to be like that too. Sleeping. Regularly. But there were lots of things he used to do, like gelling back his hair until it got sticky and stiff, and looking at his naked body in the mirror with interest, and dancing with girls while Steve smiled like the girls smelled bad. Bucky, that Bucky, used to do a lot of things. This Bucky does a lot of things too, but they are very different sorts of things.

This Bucky had been laying in bed for approximately 43 minutes. Stevie had been laying on top of him for approximately 42 minutes. Stevie had been asleep for approximately 41 minutes.

Bucky was not sure how he did that.

Stevie was currently nuzzled into his chest like a big fucking house-cat, drooling slightly on Bucky's giant floppy T-shirt. Bucky wished he minded. He did not— not in the slightest.

Stevie was blond like an exotic Peruvian alpaca. Stevie was small, like one of those phones that flip open, or a switchblade— not like one of the three switchblades Bucky was hiding on his person, but like one of those switchblades one would use to gut a fish instead of a human.

Stevie had a lot of switchblades.

Bucky had a lot of what Sam calls "intrusive thoughts". They are basically things that sound appealing to Bucky, but only in theory. For example. Bucky wants Steve to use him as a target and throw all of his knives at him at the same time. And they will hit Bucky. Multiple lacerations. Fascinating.
Steve looks so good throwing knives. It’s one of Bucky's favorite Steve things to watch, right behind him flipping and snapping someone’s neck at the same time, and him drooling all over Bucky's shirt. There is a reason Bucky has not moved for 43 minutes.

The thing is, Bucky does not want to be stabbed multiple times by knives, even if Steve is the one throwing them. It is an intrusive thought.

Other intrusive thoughts include:

— The feeling that Bucky used to get in Brooklyn when he was on the Coney Island Ferris Wheel, and all he wanted to do was throw himself from the very top and see how long it would take to fall.

— The feeling that Bucky still got sometimes, where he just really, really wants to eat his body weight in freshly baked pastries.

— The desire to lick Steve's ear whenever it was within licking distance.

— The desire to go into a Hydra base, say "Honey, I’m home!" And immediately drop his weapons and surrender.

And, of course.

— The primordial urge to hurl himself into space whenever Steve does that thing. Where he looks at Bucky. And smiles.

Goddamnit.

Bucky hates it. Bucky hates everything. The old Bucky never once wanted to stick his dick anywhere near a member of the same gender— he hardly wanted to stick his dick anywhere near a member of any gender, for that fact. He just wanted to dance. Granted, he did not just dance. But.

He had sex. With girls. He masturbated. With himself. And Stevie, once, because Bucky had just watched Steve decapitate a nazi with nothing but an all American piece of glorified tin foil and Bucky was horny as all fuck, oh God, motherfucking dicktwigs. Bucky had been so horny. Steve was fine with it too— he may have actually gotten off first, which, alrighty then. Bucky did not mind. But actually, legitimately, did not mind.

The fact that Bucky got off right after seeing Steve go all oh in the face was a pure coincidence.

Stevie— still laying on Bucky's chest, like a fucking dog, or something equally unnecessary and cute— groans and shifts himself. He does not rub against Bucky.

(He has in the past. He has not rubbed off against Bucky, but he has rubbed against him. It is. An experience.

Bucky likes it quite a lot.)

He does not rub against Bucky.

His nose twitches; he rubs his cheek against the oversized shirt, half of his face covered by the
material. He is frowning. He always frowns in his sleep, but not as much as he frowns in real life. He frowns. He rubs against Bucky (and there it is). He sighs, and relaxes inwards.

Bucky waits to see if there is more, before eventually letting out his breath. Stevie. Is tiny. Bucky worries about rolling over and crushing him. It is not a genuine worry— Stevie could handle it. Stevie would shove him off.

"Hey, lard-ass, some of us are trying to sleep? Why are you on the floor? I don’t know, maybe because your ass is so fat it has its own gravitational pull. No, you can’t come back up."

Then Bucky would climb back up, Stevie would fussily rearrange them, and they’d fall back asleep. Stevie would fall back asleep. And maybe Bucky. Maybe.

Bucky rolls over carefully, trying to be as gentle as cyber-humanly possible to lower Steve onto the bed beside him. Stevie rolled his hips, and if Bucky could still get hard on a regular basis, he’d be there right now.

Steve shifts when Bucky gets off the bed. His bird-boned legs kick out, bending to curl up a bit more. It shows more of his boxer briefs, which are slightly loose in a way that makes Bucky want to look up the leg holes and hello intrusive thoughts, it’s nice to see you again.

Stevie’s good enough to paint a portrait of. Unfortunately, Bucky cannot paint. He does however, have the newest generation StarkPhone which includes a very big screen that he is able to navigate on to get to, yes, the camera. The shot must be composed.

There is a blanket covering part of Stevie's legs. Bucky carefully tugs it down.

He takes the picture. It is not the first picture.

Stevie does not know about them.

Bucky takes another picture.

Oops he thinks. Deary me.

He is a horrible person.

Stevie groans, rocks his hips, and begins drooling on the pillow.

Bucky is a really, really horrible person.

He presses record .

Chapter End Notes

....

I love this chapter.

Let me know what you thought in the comments, and the next chapter will be posted on
Saturday!
Natasha took Steve out for the day to play spy. Their cover was a twenty-some couple spending the afternoon together, and their destinations included a soup and sandwich shop, a bookstore, and Central Park. Steve wore his one (1) civilian disguise of the pink sweater and thick framed glasses, while Natasha went with disguise #75A, which included a wide brimmed hat, cropped blue jeans, and heels, because she was a bitch. They held hands as they walked but as their cover called for a long-established relationship, no pda was required.

Steve still didn’t feel quite right in his skin but the blood toxicity device was covered by his sleeve and Natasha was interesting enough to distract him. Bucky was back at the Tower baking red-velvet-somethings with Bruce, and Steve's phone was in his front pocket so he'd know if anything went down. His civvies didn't allow for many weapons, so he only had five knives on him, but. He should be able to relax.

Natasha pursed her mauve tinted lips when they get to the lunch place. “Hmm.”

Steve bumped into her side casually, the way he did when Bucky started losing time. “What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. Just the soup of the day.”

Steve followed her gaze to the flyer taped to the window, advertising the public screening of *Catwoman: The Movie*. It showed the main heroin wearing a skintight black leotard with 6 inch heels, posed so the audience could fully appreciate her perky ass.

“What's wrong with chicken noodle?” Steve asked, adjusting his grip on her hand.

Natasha came back into reality, offering him a pressed-lip smile, the fake one. “Nothing. Sometimes there's just more skin than I'd like.”

They went in and ordered, and when the waitress came back with their hipster drinks (lavender lemonade with wheatgrass infusions) she tilts her head at Steve, asking “You look familiar. Do I know you?”

Steve can't help but just his chin out a little in challenge before remembering he's supposed to be under cover. “Um. Uh, no, I don't think so.”

The waitress shrugs and leaves. When she’s gone Natasha reaches out, takes his hand over the table, and with a casual smile says “That was pathetic. Now she's suspicious.”

“You mom's suspicious,” Steve replied immediately. Natasha pulled his hand to her lips, gently kissing each knuckle while subtly digging her red nails into his skin. Steve grimaced.

The lemonade is horrendous and Steve drinks his entire glass and half of Natasha's. The food is amazing and Natasha spends most of the time picking garlic herb fries off of Steve's plate.

When the bill comes, Steve raises his eyebrows at Natasha. She smiles pleasantly at him, making no move for it. Finally, Steve sighs and picks it up, and Natasha let's out a casual laugh, prettier than her real one.
The waitress laughs too. “Wow, you too are so cute.”

Natasha beams. “We play this game every time we go out. He always pretends not to like it, but he never lets me pay the bill. My Henry’s a real gentleman.”

Steve wrinkles his nose at the cover name but tries to pass it off with a smile. “What can I say? I just love my girl.”

Natasha's eyes don't flash with anger-- she was far too good for that-- but her gaze does feel slightly venomous for calling her a girl. The waitress doesn’t notice.

They hold hands again on the way to the bookstore, but this time Steve’s more aware. They walk closer, bumping into each other occasionally.

Steve watches their intertwined hands, Natasha with her longer fingers and red painted nails and Steve with his own nimble fingers, lightly calloused. The grip was comfortable. Steve liked Natasha, liked being around her, liked kissing her, and he waited to see if he felt anything at the contact. He looked at her face and felt... love, he supposed. There was no want, though. He didn't want her. He loved her, and wanted her to be happy, and wanted to be her friend, but didn't actually want her. They kissed to pass the time, they held hands because human contact was nice, they jomed and smiled because they loved, but they were not in love. Steve loved her, but he didn't want her.

It was hard, especially because Steve knew that if it was still the 40's, they'd probably get married. The worst part was that they wouldn't just get married, they'd get married and they'd be happy.

And then someone like Bucky would come along and that content happiness would fall apart because the truth was, Steve never wanted Natasha, but he wanted Bucky like he wanted air. Natasha's touch was good, but Bucky's touch was fueling.

Steve watched Natasha as she walked, tall and confident, but her eyes caught on the other girls on the street. Looking up, and down, and wetting her lips a little, standing a little straighter, face twitching back into an even expression.

She didn't look at the men. Not in the same way, at least. But they looked at her.

The bookstore was a little room hallowed out of the corner of a bigger building, with a hand painted sign and so many shelves there was hardly room. Natasha went one way, on a mission, and Steve browsed the shelves, slowing when he found the comics. Only one copy of Captain America, good riddance.

He picked up one of the other comics, some sort of batman story. Batman stood at about 6'6", so muscular he could have flexed and shredded his clothes just like that.

Steve's blood ran cold when a hand was placed on his shoulder. Red hair was brushed away from pale skin as Natasha peered around him to get a look at the comic. "Oh."

She wasn't looking at Batman; she was looking at the woman hanging off of his arm, all sharp curves and no internal organs. Long legs, deep cleavage.

Steve craned his neck to kiss her cheek lightly, and she laughed, like she was startled. Not her real laugh.

Steve put the comic back. "Find anything?"
Natasha lifted the book in her hand with a slight smirk. "A new novel for the flight to LA. Maybe I'll ask Mary if she wants to read it when I'm done? She always forgets to bring good books on these work trips."

Steve takes too long to respond, trying to decode her words. Mary? Work? But then he notices the saleswoman a few steps away, pretending not to be listening in, and tries for a smile. "That's a good idea."

Natasha lets him take the book from her hand to read the title. "The Viking Billionaire's Virgin Bride?"

She shrugs. "It's the third book in the Viking Billionaire series. Remember, you got me the first two on our anniversary a few years ago?" She smirks again, playful, teasing. Red lips.

(Who else does Steve know with red lips?)

"If I remember right, you liked those books too."

Steve rolls his eyes, detangling himself from her to go to the cash register. "Whatever."

"You're buying it for me?" Natasha asked, humbly surprised. (It was an act.)

"Yeah, yeah, don't act so surprised. We'll call this an early anniversary gift."

Natasha kissed his cheek and the cashier beamed at them. "Aww! Cash or credit?"

"Cash" Steve says at the same time as Natasha says "Thanks. It'll be five years in August."

As the cashier rings them up she frowns at Natasha a little. "You look really familiar."

Natasha returns the expression, then points. "Did you go to NYU?"

"Yeah, class of 09."

"Me too!" Natasha laughs. "Wow, small world."

"Seriously!" The girl squinted a little for. "Is it... Bailey?"

"Candace," Natasha corrected without a stop. "So you got it close!"

The girl laughed good naturedly and finished ringing them up. It was only once they were back outside, with Steve holding the book in one hand and swinging Natasha's hand in the other, that he raised his eyebrows at her.

She shrugged, but she couldn't hide the proud little smile that was starting to show. "Now she won't be wondering who I am for the next week."

Steve shook his head, but he was smiling a bit too. "How'd you know she went to NYU?"

"Her bag. It had the year on it too. Too easy."
"Wow."

The park was warm and inviting, and they people-watched while talking quietly about body positioning and maintaining covers. Steve paid attention, but in the back of his mind he couldn't help imagining being at the park with Bucky. Bucky used to be like a cat, and whenever Brooklyn got warm enough he'd make a point of laying out in a sunbeam for a nap. It didn't matter where, as long as he had enough room to stretch out and there was no threat of being stepped on. Steve wondered if this Bucky would ever do that.

Maybe if he was hit over the head hard enough.

When they got back, Steve made a beeline for his sketchbook, ignoring Bucky's murmured greeting. Bucky was in the reading nook, but judging by the fact that there were fresh dishes in the sink and Bucky had responded to him at all, Steve guessed Bucky hadn't been reading long. With his sketchbook in hand, Steve crawled over a few pillows until he could lean against Bucky's legs. Bucky shifted a little in surprise, but otherwise stayed still.

Steve drew out the scene he'd been imagining the entire walk home. A park; Bucky on his back, lounging with his sergeant's cap over his face but not covering his smirking mouth; sunbeams that came down around Buck as if they were sent by God himself; Steve sitting to the side, sketchbook in hand, leaning against Bucky's legs. He drew Bucky's smirking lips in detail, but didn't bother with the lines of his own face.

The book really must not have been good, because Bucky was watching over Steve's shoulder. "What happened to your face," he asked in a monotone.

"Nothin'," Steve bit back, "What happened to yours?"

Bucky pinched his cheek, and Steve couldn't see as he slapped Bucky's hand away, but he knew his Bucky was grinning. "Aww, Stevie."

Steve ignored him. Bucky decided to make his presence known by looping one leg over Steve's shoulder, almost kicking the sketchbook out the way. Steve shoved at it, but once he regained his grip on the book he didn't push the leg away. Instead he curled a hand around it and bit Bucky's leg through his jeans.

"It hurts," Bucky said, trying hard to sound genuine. Ass. "No, really. I'm in so much pain."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Your mom's in pain."

Bucky gave him a noogie, rubbing his knuckles into Steve's skull and messing up his hair until Steve managed to grab his wrist and shove it away, Bucky's leg still over his chest. In retribution for the noogie Steve pulled Bucky's hand over and gnawed on it valiantly. The positioning made it so Bucky was gradually curling around Steve more and more, and Steve was pretty sure neither of them had any problems with that.

Bucky laughed a little breathlessly. "Woah, Tiger. Someone's in a bitey mood."

"Yeah, your mom."

This time Bucky pulled away his hand so he could whap Steve on the side of the head. "Hey, actually quit it."
Steve nodded and Bucky gave him his hand back so Steve could continue nomming.

After a few seconds of this Bucky let out a breathy little laugh. "You're so weird."

"I'm not denying it." Steve slobbered a little bit, and only then did Bucky make a face, pull his hand back, and wipe it on his pants.

"Jeez, Stevie. You know those jokes I made about you being a dog weren't serious."

"Oh, fuck off."

Steve's hair was extra mussed and fluffy from the noogie, so Bucky took it as his job to thread his fingers through and detangle it. Steve let him, letting his head go limp and roll with the motions of Bucky's hands.

"Will you quit that?" Bucky whispered after a few moments of putting up with Steve's noodle neck.

"Quit what?" Steve teased.

"You're obnoxious."

"You love me."

Bucky paused. Steve closed his mouth, trying not to let the regret show on his face. They've said that to each other a million times; why did Bucky stop this time?

Steve tilted his head as far back as he could, making eye contact with Bucky, who was leaning over him. Steve blinked. Bucky blinked.

"Shut up, punk," Bucky mumbled, pressing a quick kiss to Steve's nose. Steve scrunched up his face at that, but couldn't hide his smile.

"Jerk."

-----------------

The bedroom was lit only by a light glow coming from the window, reflecting off the two bodies who laid curled together. It was serene, relaxed, peaceful--

“Steve?” Natasha said quietly.

“Hmm?”

“I think I'm gay.”

Steve froze. He let that digest for a few moments: Natasha, gay. Or lesbian. Whatever. He licked his lips, which suddenly felt much drier. “Okay.”
Natasha shifted slightly next to him, just enough to ruffle the sheets. “I don’t know if… I’m allowed to be gay.”

Is anyone? “I think you are. When you have the power to kick the entire world’s ass, I think you can be whatever you want to be.”

Natasha snorted. “Is that your strategy?”

“It’s supposed to be. Somewhere along the line I got caught up with caring about people and emotions and shit, but yeah, I think so. How gay exactly are you?”

She rolled onto her side and with a grunt Steve did too, so he could look her in the eyes. She was smiling lazily. “I don’t know. I was trained to be ever changing. I think that fluidity has gone to affect other parts of my life, so I can’t say, but girls are just…” she sighed dreamily. “I like them a lot.”

“Sounds pretty gay.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

“Does that mean we can’t make out anymore?”

Natasha giggled, rolling over on top of Steve and wrapping her arms around his neck, their lips meeting together smoothly in an easy, relaxing kiss. Her waist was smooth and small in his hands, and for a few moments he could imagine how easy it would be to fall in love with her.

She was muscular, yes, but mostly her body was soft and smooth, lithe like a panther but even more graceful than that. As nice as her waist was, Steve found himself wishing it was a bit thicker, the muscles more prominent. His body didn't mind the gentle curves and soft physique, but his mind ached for a taller, heavier body. She was beautiful and clean and felt about as perfect as a human woman could get. It probably wasn't right that Steve still wished for a bigger, grubbier form on top of his.

Either way, he sighed into the kiss, appreciating the sweetness of it all. Natasha was an amazing kisser.

When he finally pushed her up gently so she was hovering over them, she smiled, one of the smiles that he knew was very real because it was with her lips and eyes. “What would you say if I told you that I'm 100% straight and have been lying to you this whole time to get platonic kisses?” He asked quietly.

She giggled, a deeper noise than most girls made. “If you were anyone else, I wouldn't be surprised. But I've seen the way you look at Bucky; I'd tell you you're a liar.”

“I am a liar,” Steve said easily. “I can be honest with you right now if you want?”

“Please.”

“What do you want to know?”

She didn't even hesitate. “Did you think of him when we were kissing?”

“A little.”

She snickered. Steve wondered, if the lights of the room were still on, if she would still laugh as easily. “What would you say if I suggested we have sex right now?”
Steve imagined it. He imagined lipstick smears and gross squelching noises, the word ‘moist’ and trying to figure out what the hell he was supposed to do with a pair of boobs.

Natasha actually laughed at his face. ‘I’d probably say ‘ew’,” Steve admitted honestly. “I am going to give that a hard pass, no pun intended because I've never been so soft in my entire life. Do you wanna feel?’”

“I wanna feel.”

“Actually I changed my mind--”

Natasha’s hand snuck down and she gave a quick squeeze over his flaccid penis, pressing her lips together to try and hide her laughter. “She’s so scared!”

“Well excuse me if I have very strong opinions. I know what you've been doing Nat, trying to romance me, and I'm perfectly fine with it, including the making out because kissing is just really nice, but for the love of God, please don’t ever try to have sex with me. She will actually climb back inside of my body in fear and none of us want that.”

Natasha smiled and rolled back over, no longer hovering over him. “No, not at all. And for the record, I don’t want to sleep with you either.”

“Great, so let’s not.”

“Agreed. I however, do not mind the kisses, so I am fine with continuing.”

“Great. Please excuse me if I take out all my sexual frustration regarding Bucky on you.”

“As long as you'll excuse me doing the same about Maria Hill with you.”

Steve smirked, raising an eyebrow.

Natasha sighed nostalgically. “Have you ever seen her in the shooting range?”

“Yeah, she’s terrifying.”

Natasha looked like she was about to swoon. “She is, isn’t she.”

————

“I’m taking the Avengers away from SHIELD,” Tony said calmly.

They were in the workshop, only Steve was actually sober, for once. Tony tinkered, doing what he called “mindless electro-engineering” while Steve lounged on the couch, his sketchbook in his lap. His oil pastels were on one of the tables across the room, and Steve was doing a color study. He drew Tony, the way his face looked now with hair and beard slightly overgrown, leaning over a project with a calm expression but a bright glimmer in his eyes. The actual study was where DUM-E came in; every time Steve needed a new color, he told DUM-E whether he needed a light or a dark, and the bot whirred over to grab him one. So far, Tony had blue skin shaded with red to give him deep purple eyebags, and hair that was a mixture of dark greens and black. Steve highlighted his cheeks with a yellow.

“What do you mean, you’re taking the Avengers away from SHIELD?” Steve asked, not looking
up. “Are the Avengers even still a thing? I thought we broke up. Like a boyband.”

Tony scoffed. “I wish. But no, if my monthly expenses relating to the top few floors mean anything, then no, the Avengers are still a thing. SHIELD’s not though-- the infrastructure is crumbling, yada yada. I give Fury about a month before he books it to somewhere no one with a small army and a need for vengeance can find him. I already know I’ll be hiring Maria Hill to work for the Avengers. We'll create a separate organization, get new recruits, start new training, the whole nine yards. I made upgrades to your shield, by the way. Super strong magnets. Stabilizers for when you or Winter Wonderland frisbee it. It’s whatever.”

Steve rolled his eyes at Tony fishing for compliments. “It probably sucks.”

“Oh, for sure.”

“I bet I’ll hate it.”

“Without a doubt.”

“Thanks, Tony.”

Tony cracked a smile, ducking his face to try and hide it. “It’s what I do.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve been working on a new base of operations. Any requests?”

That was a surprise. “Another tower?”

“Nope,” Tony said, popping the p. “A compound, with different areas for living quarters, debriefings, training, mini-golf, you name it. I’m already building a top of the line jungle gym for the kid, better punching bags for the terminator, and better labspace for Bruce. What do you want? A mini-trampoline? Something as proportionally small as you are?”

“How about a good roof to run around on?” Steve offered. “Maybe some balconies. Something challenging enough for me and Buck. And I resent that comment.”

“Done. And I resent you.”

“Good to know. I’m not concerned.” Steve glanced up. “DUM-E, can I get a color for his eyes?”

DUM-E rolled over to Steve, whirring in a circle before offering Steve the pastel. It was pure white.

“Alright,” Steve said, “I guess we’ll use this for the whites of his eyes.”

“No, please, make them completely white. I want to be soulless.”

“Maybe I’ll get a red, or just color them all black. I’ll title the piece ‘The Merchant Of Death’.”

“Now we’re talking.”

Steve finished his drawing, and once Tony was done with his tinkering, they went to the training facility to test the shield’s new abilities. True to Tony’s word, the shield flew faster and smoother than before, bouncing off walls when he hit them at one angle and burrowing itself into them when thrown at a different angle. When the shield buried itself in one of the walls, Tony had Steve raise his arm and touch his last two fingers to his thumb, flicking his wrist, and the shield flew back, latching onto his arm with nearly enough force to dislocate it.

“You have to turn your body with it,” Tony suggested. “When you catch it with your right arm, step back with your right leg. That way the momentum doesn’t fuck up your arm.”
Steve did it again, this time stepping back like Tony said. It was still a lot of force, but it didn’t jolt his shoulder this time.

“So, you’re not opposed to doing Avengers stuff again?” Tony asked, playing at casual.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Why, do you have something in mind?”

Tony hesitated. “I got a call from Thor.”

Steve glanced up, stopping all of his motions. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. It was… he basically told me that Loki had left his scepter here, and his scepter is… bad news. All of the chitauri tech is, but his scepter is especially bad news. Thor thinks that someone has it and has been using it to try and give people superpowers.”

Steve straightened. “Would that work?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. It’s the same sort of stuff as the tesseract, so I’d say the chances are pretty high. Look, I… I’ve been working on some projects. I’ve known that this sort of thing would happen for a while now, and that soon, the Avengers on our own won’t be enough. But in order for it to work, we need to get the scepter.”

Steve could feel the serum pumping in his veins, could almost hear it chanting *fight fight fight fight* like it heard the opportunity and knew that there would be a chance to spill blood. The serum was never meant to make him a better person, after all— it was only meant to make him a better soldier.

And Steve knew that this wasn’t an opportunity he could turn down.

“I’m in,” he said without further consideration. The righteousness fluttered in his chest. “Now what’s this project you've been working on?”

The smile that appeared slowly on Stark’s face was thin and sly, more excited than anything else. “I call it Ultron.”

Chapter End Notes

Look at this, a sweet chapter with no angst for once. Too bad this won't last.

In this chapter:
- Natasha and Steve pretended to be real people
- Steve and Bucky sat and read and bit each other (my favorite scene from this chapter)
- Steve and Tony mucked around and talked about Future Plans (ULTRON)

And, oh yes, how could I forget:
- Natasha's a homo

I'm really curious about what you guys think about some of the new realizations in the chapter (cough cough Ultron and lesbian Natasha), and if you were surprised by any, especially the latter.
And, for an additional question: which versions of Peter are your favorite to read? Ones where he's innocent or ones where he's competent? What pairings do you like? Thoughts of him with older characters? Your responses won't affect this book at all (I swear on my life), BUT if I write a Peter fic later on I want to know what version of his character is preferred.

Thanks for reading, and the next chapter will be posted Saturday!
Venezuela

Chapter Notes

Everything hurts.

In case you're reading this in the future, the Avengers Endgame trailer came out today and in other, non related news, im in agony.

To try and make it go away, I'm going to do what I always do and try and drown out the pain in writing / cute fics. As such, I will be posted an early double update-- two chapters today instead of 1 tomorrow. They aren't the fluffiest chapters, but the angst is minimal and the chapter after this one will have cuddles.

Casual reminder that this fic DOES have a happy ending. I s2g.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Five Months Later

Venezuela was, in fact, not a just rainforest. It turned out that people actually lived there, in cities no less. At least, that’s what he was able to assume from looking at the country from the windows of the helicarrier.

“This is it,” Tony was saying, “I’m sure.”

Steve probably would’ve felt better about that if Tony hadn’t been ‘sure’ the last three times. He’d suspected a building in Taiwan, then an oil rig off the coast of Florida, and then an underground bunker in Chicago, but all of them were busts. All of them did have illegal activity going on, and two out of three had been Hydra strongholds— fucking termites, the lot of them— but none had any sort of illegal scepter-related human experimentation.

They were tired. The game was getting old; yet the serum in Steve’s veins still pumped firmly, so he could feel his own hummingbird heartbeat with just the slightest touch to his chest. It was a game, but at the very least it was a game Steve knew how to play.

In the five months since their work had restarted, all of their suits had gotten official Stark makeovers and upgrades. Tony’s own armor had undergone a few notable changes, and at that moment it was standing opened like the empty shell of a bug, ready to close around Tony at a moments notice.

“Here’s the drill,” Tony explained, still messing with controls at the front of the quinjet. They’d already gone over the details, but they’d found that mission briefings done right before landing, with reviews over the basic information and their jobs, was more beneficial than what might be expected.

“There was an explosion of blue energy in one of the buildings at the end of the street we’re landing on. Venezuela is currently experiencing a drastic change in government and an economic crisis, so my guess is that their regulations have been thrown out. It probably wouldn’t be hard for Hydra to
use that to their advantage.”

Clint hissed through his teeth. He was standing in front of one of the holographic controls on the side of the ship, monitoring the readings from the area around them. “There’s still energy emitting from the nearby area. Whatever caused the explosion must have been pretty powerful. And… great. Guys, they know we’re coming, their radio feeds are going crazy.”

Bucky sighed. He was sat next to Steve, and had been spending the last half hour thoroughly disemboweling a spare jacket. As it turned out, Steve wasn’t the only one who’s serum made him finicky.

“Great. So much for a subtle, nondestructive mission.”

“Pepper’s going to love this,” Tony agreed. “Short stack?”

Steve ignored the name. “Okay guys, here’s the plan. We’re doing divide and conquer, to some degree. Banner, take the radiation scanner and go along the outskirts of the street, and try to find the building they’re using. Tony, use the suit to get to any authorities and civilians and try to get them to stay out of the way. Natasha and I are on ground duty, and Clint and Bucky, you two are sniping.”

As he was talking, the quintet had landed and the hatch had begun to lower. Steve stood, and was immediately pulled back by Bucky, who latched the shield onto the magnetic gauntlet on the left sleeve of Steve’s new uniform. “I won’t need this when sniping,” Bucky announced, leaving no room for complaints.

“I hate you, you fucking lugnut.”

“Mm-hmm, you too Sweetie. Try not to get stabbed in the face.”

“Why? Because it’d make me hideously disfigured?”

“No, because the disfiguration might fix that honker of yours and make you semi appealing. Remember, your greatest weapon against your enemies is your own ugliness.”

Natasha hummed quietly. “I love romance.”

That comment was the one to make Bucky go a little pink in the cheeks, and Steve carefully bumped into him, reminding him of his presence. “Don’t worry Buck, it’ll be a quick mission. I’d give it half an hour, tops.”

“Please, someone knock on wood,” Clint begged, which resulted in Natasha promptly rapping her knuckles on his head. “Hey!”

From the opened hatch, they could already see the commotion outside. They’d parked in the middle of one of the biggest streets in the area, which was luckily already closed from the explosion. Not that they could tell; the lack of cars was made up for with the swarms of people, including an impressive amount of people in military uniforms.

“Did we just invade a developing country?” Clint asked to no one in particular.

“No,” Steve answered automatically, already mentally going through his own uniform and weapon checks. “They have Hydra activity; they asked us to be here.”

“Now that’s a spin,” Bucky said blandly.

And with that, they did.

The civilians did a lovely job dispersing once they saw what the Avengers were packing. It was almost as if they’d had practice running from crazy people with guns. Steve had actually done his research before this mission, and was at least semi-aware of some of the shit that had been going down the past few years in Venezuela, particularly the 800% inflation and widespread protests-turned-riots.

There were two teams of soldiers. The first were dressed in camo-green, with black helmets and vests, defensively angry and pointed their guns at whoever might be a potential target, including some of the still scattering civilians. The second team of soldiers wore dark red uniforms and moved with more order than the first team. They arrived from the far end of the street. It was pretty easy to figure out who was who: the green soldiers were from the government, and the red were from the Hydra lab. Easy.

Steve and Natasha marched together, weapons drawn, moving along the side of the street while Tony distracted the Green soldiers. The Red’s we’re still too far away to start an immediate defense.

Natasha tapped on her comm. “I would like to put out a blanket reminder to everyone that these are people, and people who might have information. Lethal shots are not advised unless necessary.”

“Cough cough Steve,” Bucky said on the comms. His voice was lower and grungier than normal, but he was still joking. It gave Steve hope that Bucky could manage to balance his two main personalities more easily.

In the scepter-searching months, Bucky’s disassociation became more intense. Sam wasn’t allowed to say for sure, but he thought that it looked like some form of Dissociative Identity Disorder. It was obviously a unique case, but Bucky’s personalities were more of a spectrum than most cases, which Sam chalked up to Bucky’s healing factor. It meant that it was possible for Bucky to find a line to walk, a place where he could be comfortable in between his different states of being. Steve tried not to get too excited about the prospect. Luckily for him, he tended to like all of Bucky’s states. They were all still Bucky, with all of his memories of the past years with Steve. As long as Bucky remained Bucky, Steve couldn’t complain.

Steve smiled even as he drew three knives in his right hand. The knives had the same style of electromagnets attached to them as the shield did, making it so he could call them back to him after throwing them. It had been horrible learning to use them, and Steve was now sporting a few more scars than before, but he did learn how to use them.

He and Natasha sped up to a light jog, getting closer to the Red Soldiers. The street was pretty, with more greenery than could ever be sustained in New York. There were colorful skyscrapers a little ways to either side, easily accessible but in no one’s way. Steve noticed more color in general than in America, especially with the one story houses with red roofs. The green mountains to their backs were so close they looked like great green waves, ready to crash over the city and take the land back.
It made Steve feel a little smug, even though he knew not everyone in the city was asshole military or bitchy Hydra wannabes.

He and Natasha sped up to a run, and the commands flipped through Steve’s mind like lines of code.

**Non-lethal therefore careful with throwing knives. Soldiers are wearing bulletproof vests, kill shots are from side (without limb interference), and face. Potential kill shots are groin, femoral arteries. Safe spots are limbs, especially knees as will restrict movement. Arm injuries make firing weaponry more difficult. Outnumbered therefore go faster, harder, more confusing.**

Steve began sprinting, shield lifted to deflect the first few bullets. They intercepted the first few soldiers, who very clearly were not used to this type of combat. Natasha leapt up and tackled one soldier with her legs around his neck, landing and rolling under another soldier smoothly, kicking out his legs and zapping him effectively with her widow’s bites. Steve couldn’t continue watching because by that point, there were soldiers on him too. A bullet whizzed so close to his ear that he could feel the wind it caused, and he kicked a soldier at his side, spinning and implanting a knife in the back of his thigh. Another one raised their gun— idiot, don’t use long-range weapons at a short distance, who were these amateurs?— and Steve kicked it away. He threw the shield and his him directly in the neck, *oops.* His other two knives were thrown, and he called the shield back to his arms.

“Fuck!” Tony yelled into the comms. “The freaking police don’t speak English!”

“If that not obvious?” Clint snarked. When Steve looked up, he could just see where Clint was shooting from, but he couldn’t see Bucky.

“It *was* , but they also don’t speak French, or Japanese, or Urdu—”

“We get it, you speak a lot of languages!” Bruce complained loudly. “Tony, that is not our biggest problem right now!”

“Bruce, report!”

“I was, uh, chased? By some of the locals? I honestly have no idea what’s going on, I’m just trying to get to the buildings without being detected.”

“Can someone remind me why we didn’t park the damn plane closer?”

Five soldiers went down in rapid succession in front of Steve. Not arrows. Nice, Bucky.

“There wasn’t a landing spot! I’m sorry for giving a shit about this cities infrastructure, unlike *some* people—”

“Hey, watch it, that was one time!”

“It was all of Harlem !”

“Tony!” Natasha snapped. “The police! You need to get them to either help us or get out!”

“I’m trying, but they refuse to reason with me! I’ve been yelling at them in French for the past two minutes and they just keep shooting me!”

“Why French?”
“It’s a Romance language,” Tony defended. “There have to be at least a few cognates!”

There was a light crinkling sound, and then a new voice spoke up. “Stark, do you have any cash on you.”

“Woah, the Terminator lives. And yeah, I’ve got a little—”

“Bribe the police.”

“Would that work?”

Steve had to tune out because one of the Red Soldiers had stopped fighting them and started harassing a few civilians. Steve ducked the one he had just been fighting, grabbed another soldier’s gun and used it as leverage to flip them, and stabbed another in the knee before spiriting over. He threw the shield and it hit the soldier in the back hard enough to make him fall forwards, almost taking a college-aged girl with him. He rolled before getting up, and flexed his hands, letting them light up in blue energy.

Steve took his time walking over. “Natasha, I think they sent the idiots out first. There’s a soldier further back here with what looks like modified widow’s bites.”

“Oh thank God, guns just get so old after a while.”

“Update,” Tony chimed in, “The police all just left. Like. All of them. I tried to tell them to stay here and help take out the Hydra guys, but they didn’t understand. They knew what the money was for though.”

“Stevie,” Bucky said, making Steve instantly tune in. He spoke in heavily accented Spanish, like he was repeating what someone else was saying. “¿Que avion? No veo uno.”

“What plane? I don’t see one,” Steve translated with a slight laugh. The soldier with the widow’s bites started towards him, and Steve happily drew more knives, continuing to talk even as the guy swung and he dodged, going for a jab of his own. “Well, we didn’t need their help. They’d just get in the way.” The guy ducked his jab and Steve spun to the other side, implanting a knife in the guy’s arm and kicking him back. Before he could, one of the widow’s bites hit his arm, and Steve’s nose was filled with the unpleasant smell of his own flesh burning. Then the pain was over and the guy was on the ground, and Steve manually retrieved his knife, twisting it painfully as he pulled it out of the guy’s arm. He was struggling to get up, so Steve slammed his foot down on his chest, causing his head to snap back against the concrete.

The girl that the soldier had been giving a hard time stormed over to Steve, and before he realized what she was doing she grabbed his arm and flipping him. Steve landed with a grunt on the pavement, and fumbled to turn his comms off as the girl wedged a stick under his chin, thick enough to do some very real damage. His arm had hit the concrete hard, sending little aches spiraling around the area where the plastic no-drug box was. “<What the fuck are you doing?>” The girl yelled in Spanish so fast it made Steve’s ears hurt. “<I swear to fucking God, if you ball suckers make me late to class again I will personally find you and flay the lot of you alive, you motherfucking—>”

Steve thrust up and wrapped his leg around the stick, yanking it to the side and snapping himself up to his feet forcefully enough she stumbled back. She yanked the stick back and swung it like a bat, almost hitting him in the head before he caught it in his hand. “We’re here to help—”

“<You— dick— sucking— mother— fucking— constipated— ass—> gringos!” she accused, punctuating each word with another swing that Steve did his best to block. His hands kept jerking,
wanting to grab a weapon to defend himself with, but she was a civilian. Stabbing civilians was not very good for his image as an Avenger.

“We’re on the same side!” Steve tried defending in English. He could understand the Spanish, but his head was spinning too fast to be able to come up with words of his own in it. Finally Steve grabbed the stick and broke it in half over his leg, only to receive an instant punch in the face. “What the fuck! Why did Hydra hire grown men when they could have just paid you?”

He blocked another punch, and she successfully kicked him in the balls. Luckily it didn’t hurt. “Ha! Jokes on you, bitch, I’m wearing a cup!”

“I’ll shove the cup up your ass!” She threatened in surprisingly good English, kicking again hard enough to cause some actual discomfort.

Luckily for Steve, at the exact moment the entire street blew up.

Well, not the entire street. He felt the vibrations in the concrete a moment before, but was already moving too fast for them to process in his mind before there was a BOOM and he was thrown forwards, half-tackling the girl as he went. Chunks of pavement flew around them as they skidded into the barrier on the side of the road. Steve instinctually raised the shield over them, catching a few strays pieces of cement.

They both struggled to catch their breaths in tandem, but before Steve was even sure the explosion was over there was a sharp pain in his jaw and he fumbled backwards. The girl scurried away from him, yelling “Fucking creep!”

“Hey, fuck you!” Steve said without menace. At least the girl was finally getting out of there. And he hadn’t even stabbed her; what a successful side quest. He fumbled to turn on his comms, saying “It’s Steve, I’m fine, Natasha, come in?”

“I’d rather pull out,” she replied immediately. There was some spitting in the background, like she’d gotten a mouthful of dirt.

“Ha ha. Someone should give you a comedy show.”

“Agreed. Now what the fuck just happened?”

Steve’s visibility was still shot, the dust and grime filling the air making it impossible to see too far in either direction. “Snipers?”

“There was an explosion,” Clint said helpfully.

“You’re a genius,” Natasha mocked.

“No, I think it was a bomb. It looked like it was planted in the street. Aka, there are booby traps, aka, whatever in that lab is worth stealing.”

“Lovely. Bruce, have you found anything?”

A moment, then two. Steve tried to catch his breath despite the sediments filling the air. He covered his mouth with his hand; he’d lived too long to die of black lung disease.

“I’m lost,” Bruce finally admitted. “I had to hide from the civilians and now I’m hiding but I can’t even see the street from here.”
“Nice,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. It would have sounded more ridiculous if Steve hadn’t had any interactions with the locals himself, and yeah, he could see why Bruce would run. “You guys finish up out here,” Steve ordered, making his way slowly through the rubble, away from the huge crater that had opened up in the middle of the road. “I’ll try to find the base.”

“I’m going too,” Tony announced.

“No. You’re too loud.”

“Au contraire, Microchip. I’m just loud enough. We don’t know what building it is. I’ll bust in with my brute strength and devilishly good looks, and you can sneak in a back entrance. Uh, no pun intended.”

“Besides, we all know Steve is a bottom.”

“Literally how the fuck is that relevant?” Steve snapped, which only made Natasha snicker. “Fine, Tony, but everyone else stay outside until further notice. The more soldiers we can draw out, the better.”

It was a dead end.

Steve found the source of the explosion five minor fights and a bullet straight through his arm later, only to find not a scepter, but a giant tank of glowing blue eels. It was attached to some sort of electrical converter, and the lab was clearly Hydra, so the entire situation was clearly nefarious as fuck, but by the time Steve had actually found the tanks, it had been a lot of work for very little payoff.

Everything was made five times worse by the facts that his cell signal was blocked in the building (i.e. no comms) and one of the baddies turned out to actually have a functioning brain, and instead of fighting Steve, had managed to lock Steve in a supply closet and run for it. One very, very improvised bomb later (fun fact: urine is very rich in nitrogen), and Steve managed to get out of the building, only to be immediately bombarded with noise from the comms.

“There’s nothing in building 2! Rogers, come in!”

“For fucks sake, this mission is a shit show. Why couldn’t you-know-who have shoved his godly you-know-what up his ass after invaded New York, is that really too much to ask for? That’s it, I’m retiring.”

“Do it, you won’t.”

“You know what Natasha—”

“This is Rogers,” Steve announced, and immediately the others shut up. “I found the source of the explosion. It was fucking electric eels.” That was immediately followed by a series of collective groans. “My signal was blocked in the building; report?”

“Romanoff, Barton, and Banner accounted for,” Natasha answered immediately, her tone having
flipped from jackass to spy effortlessly. “Bucky last checked in a minute or so ago, and Tony thought it’d be a good idea to step out of his suit and he got attacked, so he’s currently bleeding out, but it’s not really a big deal. His big head’s got enough blood to last him a while.”

“Funny,” Tony grunted, sounding pained. “You’re fired.”

“Oh.”

Steve was about to reply when a new voice came in; Bucky, in clear, but shaky Russian. “<The Asset has been damaged beyond functionality. Requesting assistance.>”

Steve felt his heart sink. He’d seen Bucky take a bullet without hardly blinking; damaged beyond functionality? “<Location,>” he barked.

“In the bushes. South side of the third building.”


A pause. “<Medium high. Medical threat is primary threat.>”

Steve couldn’t help it. “<Hang in there buddy, we’re on our way.>”

“<Confirm>.”

Tony’s voice crackled onto the comms. “Well, this was a bust. What do you say we blow this popsicle stand?”

Clint grunted. “No, really, I’d prefer to stay a while. Maybe chat with some of the horrible Hydra death guards.”

“That level of sarcasm was unnecessary. Steve, the quick jet will be there in a moment; everyone else set a loose perimeter around Bucker-oni. Oh, and by the way, I’m fine.”

“No one was worried.”

Steve skidded around the side of the building and forced himself to a stop, looking around. He saw the bushes, but didn’t see…

“In the bushes, right side,” Bucky said in quiet Russian. Steve ran over and carefully dragged him out so he could see the injury. No head damage, which was a relief; Bucky was just reverting back to the Asset as a defense mechanism. But Steve wasn’t reassured when he saw the wound.

In the nicest, cleanest terms that Steve could use, Bucky was… holding his organs. In his arms.

He smiled lazily at Steve. “<Several sharp lacerations to the abdomen. Internal organs are… becoming more external.>”

Someone cussed on the comms, apparently having heard that. Steve quickly knelt over Bucky, assessing the damage as best as he could. “Okay. Okay. I don’t know what the fuck to do. I’m going to…” He forced the emotional side of his brain to turn off altogether, a feat that was made ridiculously easy by the serum. Okay. Okay.

**Organs still in order. Hardly out of chest cavity. Problems with leaving organs exposed: risk of infection, altered healing factor, dehydration, bleeding out. Problems with putting organs back in place: displacement, internal bleeding, risk of infection, altered healing factor…**
“Fuck this shit,” Steve muttered, “We’re shoving them back in.”

Tony’s voice on the comms: “We’re what now?”

Steve carefully moved Bucky’s arms, and on the bright side, it didn’t seem like any of the organs had actually been punctured. It was great news; that day was full of spectacular news.

**Emotional cortex shutting down.**

Steve carefully nudged, prodded and pushed Bucky’s organs back into place inside him. They looked much goopier than he thought they should, but hey, at least they were in place. Sort of.

Was this something that could be solved with an ace bandage? Oh, fuck it, everything could be solved with an ace bandage.

“Arch,” Steve ordered, because even though Bucky was literally turning inside out, the Asset followed orders. Bucky arched.

Steve carefully put the remaining skin back in place (somewhere in the back of the mind, there was a repeated echo of *ew ew ew ew*) and then proceeded to wrap the bandage around his waist. The bandage held his organs in. Bucky’s internal organs being on the inside was a good thing.

Before he knew it, there was a stretcher and a few helpful Avengers beside him, who helped carefully place Bucky onto the stretcher. Bucky bit halfway through his lip, but he made few sounds of pain, so out of it that his own foggy head made him more docile than decades of training ever could.

It took ten minutes (ten minutes too long) to get Bucky back to the compound (yay super fast quinjets). From there, Helen Cho took over, and Steve did his best not to vomit all over himself.

Clint’s hand was on his back. Clint looked worried. “Hey, it’s going to be okay. She’s the best of the best, and besides, he’s got a healing factor. It’ll be fine.” He looked to Steve. “It’ll be fine, okay?”

Steve turned to him. “There is blood under my fingernails. I’m going to… pull them out?” Pause, no, that wasn’t right. “Cut them off,” he corrected.

“Steve… that’s really weird.”

Steve smiled hazily. “Confirm.”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter:
-Steve and Bucky being lightly affectionate on the helicarrier
-Venezuela fight

To clarify, in case you missed it, they’re looking for Loki’s scepter, which is why they thought that base would have it (because of the blue explosion). The next chapter is posted!
An undisclosed amount of hours later, Bucky was out of surgery and semi-stable. Helen Cho came out to talk to the Avengers who happened to be in the waiting room at that time, and let them know. She also let them know that Bucky would remain in what was basically a drug induced coma for the next 48 hours.

Steve was okay. Steve was logical.

Clint and Natasha followed him up to his apartment, and Natasha immediately collapsed on the couch while Clint pretended he wasn’t following Steve around. Steve let him, up until he got to the bathroom, when he told Clint that no, he was not allowed to join him. Steve did some light scrub-a-dub-dubbing at his fingernails, and then a little bit of chopping until all of the whites of them were gone. He took a shower.

Post-Mission Reset Routine: tend to injuries, hydration, shower, nourishment, rest.

It was hard to open the shampoo bottle without nails, but he persisted. Fifteen minutes later, the body was significantly less gross, so Steve tended to other duties. When he looked in the mirror, he found that part of his arm had some lovely second degree burns on it. It was from the widow’s bite, he recalled. He wondered if Natasha’s could do that amount of damage. If not, Tony needed to make some adjustments.

Steve prodded at one of the blisters, before dressing the wound and letting it be.

Other injuries:

He’d been shot, Steve recalled vaguely. That was highly problematic. His lack of attentiveness to the wound was also highly problematic; he hadn’t made an effort to stop using that arm.

Adrenaline, a voice at the back of his mind echoed, what a drug. Did you know you can get high off of Epipens?

Yes, Steve did know that. No, he’d never experienced it firsthand before; Epipens were ridiculously fucking expensive.

Steve dressed and walked out into the main room, announcing plainly “I have been shot; I’m going to ask Helen Cho about it.”

Natasha and Clint both looked up. “What?”
In answer, Steve raised his arm. He then stuck his finger through the hole in his arm. “Yes.”

Luckily, Helen Cho had the power of God and maybe dark magic on her side, and she was able to use a machine that went badabadabada to make his skin magically regrow. She told him to drink some water and eat a good meal, by which she meant drink some water and eat a good meal, or I’ll kick your pasty white ass.

Steve followed the instructions.

It was not hard to go to sleep. Sleep was necessary for healing processes. In fact, Steve slept longer than he had for a long, long time: 8 and a half hours. Unprecedented.

Natasha was already awake when he came out, but Clint was snoring, half hanging off of the couch. Steve’s emotional cortex was going back online, which was highly problematic. There was still a long time until Bucky would wake up, and there were no immediate threats, so it was an ideal time to process important emotions. Logic could override emotion, but only temporary; the emotion, much like a bullet wound, would eventually demand attention.

“Hey Steve,” Natasha said plainly. Her hair was perfectly styled except for a single piece, and Steve was never, ever going to tell her about it. She was wearing Bucky’s clothes.

Fuck you, Steve thought without much emotion.

His emotional cortex pushed against him, needy as fuck. Ugh.

Steve took the cup of coffee that Natasha handed him, even though he didn’t normally drink the stuff, and sipped it. Hmm. It appeared as though his taste buds were partially offline. At least it was warm.

“Natasha,” Steve said formally, “Would now be an appropriate time to clear my tear ducts?”

Natasha sipped from her mug. “Safety is in check. No impending plans. I would say yes, now is an appropriate time.” Sometimes Steve forgot that Natasha was emotionally stunted too. “My ducts feel quite heavy as well. Do you mind if I join you?”

“No. Should we go somewhere else so we don’t bother Clint?”

“No, he won’t wake up for anything less than a natural disaster.”

“Oh, alright then. So now?”

She took one last sip of her coffee before setting it down with finality.

Steve looked into the back of his mind. Hello?

Fuckyoufuckyoufuckyoufuckyou

Hey, do you want to come out for a little while?

You fucking twink oh my God I hate you so much

You could come to the surface and express yourself.

Bucky is in the hOSPITAL—

The emotional cortex went online, and Steve immediately collapsed. He started leaking from the
face. “B-B-Bucky got hurt and I c-c-couldn’t do anything about it.”

There we go. Look at those emotions.

Natasha slid down next to him. He saw no evidence of tears, but she looked pinker and puffer than usual.

Steve sniffled. “That fight… that fight sucked. Oh my— oh my—”

You’re doing great. Keep going.

“B-B-Bucky…”

Almost there.

Steve sniffed hard. “He could have… died. He could have died!”

Fucking boom, waterworks bitches.

Steve full on ugly sobbed into Natasha’s shoulder, stuttering and getting her shirt soaking wet with his tears and snot. Natasha shook lightly, like a small cat in the rain.

The crying session didn’t last long, even though Steve tried to make it longer. He only contained so much emotion, and he was still primarily ruled by logic. Bucky was stable; crying was an extra reaction to the adrenaline rush, nothing more.

When he finally pulled away, Natasha showed no signs of tears besides looking even puffier in the eyes than before. “What do we do now?” She asked quietly. “Kill something?”

“I don’t know what we could kill.” Steve glanced into the living room, but immediately dismissed that idea. “Should we take a bubble bath or something?”

“I hate baths.”

“Me too.”

“Then why would we take a bubble bath?”

“It just seemed like the thing to do.” Steve hesitated, still trying to blink the extra moisture from his eyes. “Friday? What are we supposed to do next?”

“My research shows that an effective method for self care may be hydration, especially with a warm liquid such as hot chocolate.”

Natasha delicately sniffled. “I hate hot chocolate.”

“I hate you,” Steve said, the emotional cortex still in control, that sassy little diva.

“I hate you too.”

Then they hugged each other and shook for a little longer.
Pancakes were an effective method of self care, especially when Natasha tricked Clint into thinking she was too emotionally vulnerable to make them herself.

If Steve’s Emotional Cortex was still online, he would have moaned at the taste of the syrupy, soft fluffy goo. Unfortunately it had been put away again, so Steve just ate the pancakes like a normal fucking person.

The rest of the day was painfully boring. Steve went and sat with Bucky for a while, eventually zoning out so entirely that he had to check the time when he came back to himself. After that, he and Natasha took laps around the compound, both dressed in their sleek black Avengers™ off-duty uniforms. The interns near the lower levels seemed slightly intimidated, which made Steve’s emotional cortex do a happy dance even as his stony exterior didn’t crack.

Finally, they got bored enough to go to Steve’s apartment and video chat Peter. As soon as Peter answered, Steve calmly explained “We are emotionally compromised and cannot properly converse at this time.”

“But we can listen,” Natasha finished for him.

So they listened. Peter got an A in his advanced chemistry class; nice. Peter liked one of his classmates; nice. Peter was offered drugs by a friend; not nice.

“Drugs are bad,” Natasha said, as if reading from a script.

“Very bad,” Steve agreed. “And they’ll kill you.”

“But Mister Steve Rogers Nomad Sir, you used to do drugs.”

“Yes,” Steve agreed, “But I’m immortal. I’ll live longer than anyone else on the planet.”

Natasha cocked her head. “How can you be sure? How do you know you won’t die at forty?”

“Because I’m already 95 and if I show signs of dying early then I will just make sure I kill everyone else first.”

“Well that’s not healthy.”

Steve shrugged, like what can you do?

The next day, Steve's mental capacity grew closer to equilibrium, which made for a lot of sighing and watching of sad movies. When that got old, he went to the medical ward and snuck into the room where Tony was sleeping under heavy sedation. Tony’s injuries were much less deadly than Bucky’s, but he would take considerably longer to heal.

Steve watched him doze. Tony really was a great guy; he’d done a lot for Steve. He was a gift, a
blessing. Steve truly appreciated him.

Steve sighed. Then he took Tony’s hand and used his fingerprints to take the plastic anti-drug box off his arm, and kissed Tony on the cheek.

Half an hour later Steve was stoned out of his mind but generally loving life.

——————

Steve was already waiting in the room when Helen Cho came in to take Bucky off the coma medication. She warned that it would still likely be a few hours before he woke up, so Steve settled in for the long haul.

Another two hours later, Bucky was slowly blinking awake, silent as ever. Steve shoved his worry down his throat and forced himself to smile. “Hey, Buck. How’ya feeling?”

Bucky took a few moments to process, blinking and frowning. “<Functional?>” He said in Russian, like he wasn’t sure if it was true or not.

Steve shoved his worries a little farther down. “<Yeah. Confirm.>”

Bucky sighed, his entire body relaxing. “<Confirm.>” he hesitated, then carefully moved over on the bed, patting the newly opened space. Steve grinned and climbed up, exceptionally careful not to touch any tubes or so much as breathe on Bucky’s injured stomach.

Steve reached over him to press the *Call Doctor* button. “<I missed you. You were out of it for a while.>”

“<I was,>” Bucky repeated, like this was new information he was trying to store away. “<We were… fighting? Did we find the scepter?>”

“<We didn’t even get close>,” Steve replied cheerily. “<But evacuation was successful. No serious injuries besides you and some glorified scratch marks on Tony. He’s in the room next door, the big baby.>”

Bucky smirked tiredly. “<That’s no way to talk about your captain.>”

“<Hey, watch it pal. I’m the only Captain here. Your stupid comic book doesn’t count.>”

Bucky kept smiling hazily, before apparently realizing something and frowning slightly. “<Why are we talking in Russian?>”

“<That’s just what came out when you started talking. Do you want to try English?>”

Bucky opened his mouth, like he wanted to try, but then his eyes widened and he closed his mouth again. “<I… I can’t.>”

“<It’s okay.>” Steve soothed, rubbing his shoulder. “<I can speak Russian with you all week if you want.>”
Bucky looked up at him. “<What if it takes longer? What if I’ve completely forgotten?>”

Steve considered this. “<Then I’ll teach you English. Or we’ll just keep talking in Russian. But in the past you always end up remembering.>”

This, luckily, seemed to soothe him. Bucky settled down again, nudging himself closer to Steve. Steve was sitting up more than Bucky was, so his arm could be around Bucky’s shoulders, and Bucky had to look up and to the side to see him. The hospital bed wasn’t made for two people, but it felt perfectly natural. Bucky adjusted his arm to wrap around Steve, and Steve realized with a thrill that it was his metal arm. There was still a layer of clothing between them, and Bucky was pretty stuck in the Asset mindset, so it shouldn’t have been a surprise, but apparently Steve didn’t care. Bucky was touching him with the metal arm and it wasn’t a big deal: nothing else mattered.

… At least for a few moments.

Then Helen Cho entered the room and Bucky’s grip went so tight around Steve’s waist he wheezed for breath, feeling like his rib cage was moments from snapping in two. Bucky flailed backwards, and his heart rate monitor started beeping more frantically as he panicked, all wide eyes and spastic motions.

Despite his utter inability to breath, Steve pushed gently on Bucky’s chest, forcing him back on the bed. He shot Doctor Cho a dirty look and forced himself to climb on top of Bucky, hyper aware of Bucky’s injured abdomen even as his own breath was cut off even more. Steve’s knees straddled Bucky’s waist and his hands straddled Bucky’s head, doing his best to block everything else out. “Bucky, look at me. <Look at me.>”

Bucky was breathing hard, but his arm slacked around Steve’s waist, hitting him with a wave of fresh oxygen that made Steve feel like he’d just been hung upside down and then righted abruptly. Bucky squirmed underneath him, and Steve adjusted his calf to be over Bucky’s thigh, pinning him down more.

“<Steviewehavetogoweheavetogoweheavetogetoutofherethey’llhurtyouthey’lltakeyou—>”

“Bucky!” Steve snapped, aggressive and looming like an angry dog. “<She is an ally, she healed you.>”

That didn’t make anything better. “<An ally? Healed? What was my injury, Stevie, what happened?>”

“<You were stabbed.>” Steve said as simply and gently as possible. “<Doctor Cho healed you.>”

Bucky had stopped squirming by that point, so Steve leaned back a little. Bucky craned his head to the side to see the doctor, and immediately started thrashing again.

Steve pushed forwards again, bracketing Bucky’s face with his elbows. He twisted around, trying to figure out what part set Bucky off, but it was an easy guess. “Cho, the lab coat! Take it off!”

She hesitated, like she wanted to argue, but then she gave in and just took it off, folding it carefully. “Bucky? I am here to help. I just need to check your vitals and your healing. I don’t even need any tools, just my gloves.”

Despite his current aversion to English, Bucky thrashed and howled at the word ‘gloves’, almost bucking Steve off.

“He’ll rip his stitches!” Cho warned.

Immediately Bucky stopped, like someone had literally frozen him. Every muscle in his body was tense, and his breathing, though consistent, was harsh. He leaned his head back as far as he could, looking at the ceiling and blinking away wetness from his eyes.

Steve adjusted his position over Bucky, no longer pinning him down with anything but his presence. With his elbows on either side of Bucky’s head, their faces were only inches apart.

Steve stroked Bucky’s sweaty hair in what he hoped was a calming, relaxing manner. “Shhh… it’s okay. I’m here. You’re safe. I’ve got you Buck, I’ve got you.”

Behind him, Steve could hear Helen Cho working quickly. She checked the monitor and scribbled some things down, then hurried over to the side of the bed that Bucky would have the most trouble seeing. Steve mentally flinched at the sound of bandages being removed, but he forced himself to stay strong, still using his small frame to loom over Bucky, like he could use all 5’6” of himself to shield Bucky from any danger that could ever touch him. Steve would. He always would. Anything, anything… anything for Bucky.

Steve continued stroking his hair, and even felt himself smiling down. Bucky. Bucky. “<You were injured on the field, and even though you’d gone back to being the Asset, you still called for me. I was able to find you and bring you to safety,> dorogoy. <I’ve been keeping you safe, I’ll always keep you safe.>” There was a tearing noise in the background and Bucky winced, rolling his head to the side in agony, but his eyes refocused on Steve soon enough, desperately. Steve kept smiling. It wasn’t his normal smile; it was his Bucky smile. “<I promise nothing will ever happen to you again. I will always protect you with my everything. Do you believe me,> dorogoy?”

A ripple passed through Bucky, a wave of tensing and untensing all the way down to his feet. Steve just kept petting him, using his own bird body to protect all of Bucky.

“Da ,” Bucky muttered, quiet and low. “Da.” There was a noise behind them and Bucky arched in pain, a new glisten of sweat appearing on his forehead, and he gasped like he was just coming up for air. “Stevie, Stevie. Da. Yes.”

He winced painfully, and Steve was vaguely aware of Doctor Cho standing and moving away. “He is healing as planned. Be careful with his stitches.”

Steve nodded idly and listened for the door to close before climbing off of Bucky and curling up to his side, his chin on Bucky’s shoulder and one leg draped over Bucky’s thighs. Bucky’s arm was back around his waist, but just holding him now, not squeezing.


Chapter End Notes

In this chapter:
-Steve and Natasha’s emotional cortexes break
-Pancakes are a good self care tool
-Steve and Bucky Hospital room cuddles
Need more fluff? The following chapters are especially soft and warm:
-Court and Courtship (includes first Avengers Party)
-Pin The Tail (second Avengers party, WITH the pin the tail on the donkey scene and Christmas celebrations)
-A Big Pink Sky (after they have the extremis fight and Steve is sitting on the back of an ambulance)
-Lesbians??? (Road tripping with Peter and lesbians)
-Fever Baths and First Aid (after Peter gets hurt)
And of course
-The Snek Chapter (THE SNEK CHAPTER)

All of the chapter titles were chosen to make navigating and rereading favorites easier, so if there's something else that you think will help make you feel better, take advantage of the full page index!

IMPORTANT! I am writing a fic for a Christmas Steggy gift exchange and I need a beta! Duties include: plot discussion and help planning, and basic editing. Let me know in the comments if you're interested! Plot of fic below:

The fic is set in modern times, when Steve is grieving over the loss of Peggy and Bucky, when Peggy finds him. She's very much alive, but he's the only one who can see her, and she can do things that she couldn't before. Together they have to infiltrate shield and lead a strike team in order to try and take down Hydra's unknown Asset that has recently killed the VP.

Thanks for reading, and please comment if you have any thoughts / would like to beta for me!
What He's Not

Chapter Notes

The Avenger's Compound:
When Bucky was released from the medical wing, they walked across the compound to get to their quarters. The compound was a large area of land surrounded by green grass, with a few small warehouses dotting around, all connected by roads and paths for the golf carts that passed through. There was one large facility that everything connected to, housing weapons storage, the training gym, laboratories, design facilities, and places where the staff could eat and sleep. Some lived off campus, but others stayed on. SHIELD was, as Tony had estimated, gone within a few months, and though Fury had disappeared, Hill took over training at the compound.

The top level of the compound, however, was just for the Avengers. Nearly half of the rooms were empty, and Tony refused to explain why, but the Avengers occupied the other rooms. Steve and Bucky's was one of the bigger ones, even though it only had a bathroom off to the side and one large
room containing their bed, a few pieces of simple furniture and a small couch. It had seemed like a
dowgrade at the time, but Tony was insistent that with the compound being partially cut off from
society in the way that it was, they needed to have an emphasis on the lounge area instead of their
own separate quarters, especially for the Avengers that had individual apartments. Clint had seemed
particularly relieved about that. He’d been jumpy ever since SHIELD disbanded, going on weeklong
trips every month to undisclosed locations. “I have some loose ends to tie up,” Clint explained
unforthcomingly when Steve asked. “From things that I was involved in before SHIELD. Don’t
worry about it.”

They got to the commons, and the new AI unlocked the door for them without having to be asked.
Jarvis was still apart of Tony's workshop and suits, but since Tony was trying to create his Ultron-
thing he’d decided to create a more limited AI for the compound.

Steve helped Bucky inside, making sure he got over to the couch safely before going to the kitchen.
He got out a monster energy drink and a glass of orange juice, giving the orange juice to Bucky and
keeping the energy drink for himself. “Is it still feeling alright?”

Bucky grunted. “Yeah. It hurts, but <I don’t feel like I’ve torn anything.>”

Steve sipped his drink. “That’s good.” He didn’t mention that Bucky had switched to Russian mid
sentence; Bucky had been doing that all week, usually not even noticing when he did. “Is there
anything I can get you?”

“Mm. Yeah.” Bucky gestured Steve over and as soon as Steve was within reaching distance,
grabbed him around the wrist and pulled him closer. “Stevie. I need you to do me a favor.”

Steve had to physically hold himself from saying anything, everything, whatever you want. “Ugh.
You’re so needy.”

Bucky smiled up at him like he’d heard what Steve had been thinking and not what he actually said.
“Help me with my weapons?”

Steve let out a sudden laugh. “You were just in the hospital for almost a week, and you’re still
armed?”

Bucky shrugged, pouting. “I was just trying to be on the safe side. And I need help because I am
still horribly injured; as you mentioned, I was just in the hospital.”

“You big baby. Alright, what do you have on you?”

It was an absolute chore not to stare at Bucky’s lips as he talked. Ever since he got off the drugs,
Steve had started feeling a lot more things that before, which lead to a few uncomfortable situations,
including one in which Steve got a boner when they were cuddling together and Bucky almost
sprained something laughing.

Bucky batted his eyes innocently. “A handgun and five knives. Gun on ankle holster. Bonus
magazine in pants pocket. Knives in pants, and, uh, one taped to my back.”

“Jesus,” Steve muttered. Bucky had been in hospital clothes the first day he’d been awake, but once
it was announced he’d have to stay for observation Steve had brought him real clothes. He hadn’t
expected him to arm himself to the teeth.

Still, he wasn’t necessarily complaining as he knelt by the couch, getting the gun and ankle holster
off first, and setting them and the ‘bonus magazine’— for fuck’s sake— on the table. Then started
the process of patting Bucky’s legs down for knives. He carefully pulled them out and then not so
carefully chucked them behind him at the Knife Wall, pleased with himself as he heard the little thumps that meant the were embedded into the wood.

“You’re horny,” Bucky noted.

Steve looked up, feeling caught out. “Am not!”

“Yes, you are. You’ve got that look on your face. And you’re blushing.”

“I do not blush,” Steve insisted. He dug his hand under Bucky’s back and into his shirt, peeling off the tape and retrieving the knife.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Maybe not physically, but emotionally.”

“Oh, so you’re saying that right now I’m emotionally blushing? Is that really what you want to go with?”

Steve was expecting the slap to the back of the head. He pulled out the last knife, twirling it around his fingers theatrically. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he warned. “I’m armed and dangerous.”

The metal arm came practically out of nowhere, twisting Steve’s wrist and disarming him in one quick move. “Dangerous, maybe,” he mumbled. “But you’re not. Armed. Anymore.” He winced as Steve pressed another knife to his side (because obviously, Steve was carrying too). “Point taken.”

“Point taken,” Steve said, poking the top of the knife against Bucky’s skin again, teasing. “Pun.”

“Yes, yes, please <stab me. Clearly I deserve it.>”

Steve leaned closer, unable to contain his grin. “<You do.>”

Their lips were only a few inches apart. Steve’s eyes fought the good fight for a few moments, just barely managing to stay on Bucky’s eyes before surrendering to fall on his lips again. There were so close. It wouldn’t be hard, not at all. One second. One quick move. And then they’d be kissing.

Bucky must have realized this too, because he sucked in a breath and turned his head away. Steve dropped his eyes to the ground.

They’d talked about this after Steve came out for real. All of the other Avengers already knew that he was gay, but it was nice to say it out loud, and it had given them permission to tease him about it, though Steve was still unsure if that last part was a good thing or not. Bucky had known that Steve was gay ever since Brooklyn, but this time was different. Bucky struggled with it, and after a few days of avoiding Steve Steve finally found him and insisted he told him what was going on. Finally, Steve managed to get Bucky to get angry enough to tell him what it was.

“You— I— the others think that I’m like that too, but I’m not! And I’m— I’m not gay, Stevie. And I. We just. That thing , that we’ve been doing?” He said ‘thing’ like it was a dirty word; like kisses between the two of them were somehow blasphemous. “We have to stop. I… I have to. I’m sorry.”

That was a few months before, and they hadn’t kissed since.

It was a very inconvenient time for Steve to get the feeling in his dick back.

Steve cleared his throat. “Did I get them all?”

Bucky shifted subtly, getting more comfortable on the couch. It just so happened that that meant shifting away from Steve. “Yeah. Except for <the one you’re> still holding. Against my side.”
“<You’re obnoxious>,” Steve declared, though he did remove the knife, twirling it around his fingers one more time before stashing it. He made his voice go low, almost a whisper when he said “<You know, there’s a lot of people out there who would love to have my dagger against them>.”

Bucky, for all his talk of straightness, leaned closer almost subconsciously. “<Yeah? Where are they? Are they lined up outside, just waiting for a piece of you?>”

“<They are,>” Steve said, scooting closer on his knees and laying his head on the couch. Bucky started petting him immediately. “<They’ve got selfie sticks and condoms at the ready,>”

“Hmm. It makes you wonder what exactly you mean by ‘your dagger’.>”

Steve cackled. “That’s for me to know and you to find out. Or, actually, for everyone outside to find out. You get to stay here and suck your own dick while I go entertain the masses.”

Bucky laughed, but quickly stopped, putting a protective hand on his stomach. “I would, but unfortunately I am horribly injured. I actually just got out of the hospital.”

“Oh, did you just get out of the hospital?”

“Yes, I just got out of the hospital.”

“You just got out of the hospital? Really?”

“Yes, that is true. I just got out of the hospital.”

“Just got out of the hospital,” Steve said, looking away contemplatively. “Huh.” Bucky pulled on his hair a bit, and Steve returned his attention to him, giving him the most sincere look he could manage. “Sorry, I just was surprised. I don’t think you mentioned that you were in the hospital before.”

“<Really. Now isn’t that strange>.>”


“You’re the strangest,” Bucky said, pulling on Steve’s hair again.

“I am,” Steve conceded, hoping Bucky would keep pulling on his hair. Unfortunately, he ended up letting go, gently massaging the area he’d been pulling, which was almost as good. “<You’re also the strangest, though. Maybe you’re not as strange—>”

“No, no one can be as strange as you, not even a fucked up ex-brainwashed assassin. I think it’s your serum.>”

Steve propped himself up on his arms. The serum had felt different in recent months, and he’d found himself more and more interested in talking about it. “<Yeah? What about it?>”

“You own self-righteousness doubled and squared and now you’re just really angry all the time.”

He’d started playing with Steve’s hair again, making his insides go all mushy. “Uh-huh.”

Bucky tugged on his hair again, more purposely this time, and Steve let himself be guided so the top of his head rested against Bucky’s rib cage. “<Yeah, that’s right. The great Steve Rogers, deadly assassin, turns to Jello with a little playing with his hair.>”
Without moving his head, Steve flicked open a knife and thrust it against the wall.

“You missed.”

Steve looked up, almost making Bucky’s hand fall off. “No I didn’t?”

“I was just curious if that would wake you up.”

Steve groaned, burying his face back into the folds of Bucky's shirt. “I hate you.”

“No you. Don’t.”

Steve stuck his middle finger up, but nuzzled closer.

“-----------

“It’s the same set of problems,” Tony complained, pacing in between the robots in various stages of
disassembly scattered around the workshop. He ducked on of his bots’ claws, stepping over a pool of
steaming oil on the floor. “Every time. Every single time. None of the metals are working. I’ve been
trying to create that nanotechnology thing we had talked about, but it’s all dead ends. Jarvis works
twenty four seven on trying to find answers, but he’s not finding any. Steve, I need your dumb
normal human brain to help me out here. What does it need to be made out of? How will I get it to
actually think? And then, how do I power it? Solar panels? Kinetic energy converter? Arc reactor?”

Steve was in his favorite position in Tony’s workshop, that being, of course, the Steve-shaped dent
in the couch. This workshop was bigger and more advanced than the old one, but some things never
changed. “First of all, I resent that comment. If anything, I’m much smarter than the average human.”

“What’s the square root of 9975?”

“I don’t know, like a little under 100. 99, or something.”

“99 and 87 hundredths,” Tony said immediately, grabbing a wrench and banging it against one of
the robot’s heads. The metal immediately crumpled. “Jarvis, this is no good. If these do what we
want them to, then this metal will compromise them instantly. What options had we considered?”

“If I recall correctly,” Jarvis answered from the ceiling, and Steve found himself looking up even
though he knew he wouldn’t see anything, “You had decided that would be the best option in
regards to weight and efficiency. And, if the Sentries do as intended, then they will alert civilians to
potentially hazardous zones. I fail to understand why the structural integrity is an issue; the pressure
tests we took earlier all came back quite positively.”

Tony huffed, tapping a pencil against the table rapidly. “What if the people we’re trying to protect
get pissed off? Steve, do you agree that the Venezuelan locals didn’t necessarily appreciate our
intervention?”

“Yeah, they weren’t crazy about us,” Steve agreed. Just the reminder was enough to make him close
his legs. “If people might try to attack the Sentries, they need to be stronger.”
Tony nodded, making the random hand gesture that apparently meant *Jarvis, wrote that down.*
“Okay, back to the other problem. Steve, have you solved those problems yet?”

Steve rolled those eyes. Tony’s brain was usually a bit all over the place, but it was much worse when he was in his creator mindset. He tended to ask twenty questions at once, and expect other people to catch all of them and answer them back in the same order. Luckily, Steve was good at multitasking. “I don’t know what the Vision armor should be made out of, but if you’re still considered nanotech you should talk to Doctor Cho. She could help you, maybe make some sort of cradle with metal bits. And I don’t know what to power it by, but arch reactors seem to work well. And… what was your other question?”

Tony went up to one of the human sized bots, looked it in the eyes, and pulled out all of the wires that made up its brain in one hard yank. “How do I make the Vision Amour think?”

“Well, how’d you make Jarvis think?”

“I gave him the ability to write his own code,” Tony answered, like that was just that simple. “But I want Vision to be able to do more than that. I want him it to… be able to actually *think.* Not just in codes, but in an even more organic way. Maybe I need to make him a brain? I’ll talk to Helen about it when I get the chance.”

Steve shrugged. “Sounds like it could work. Sort of.”

“Amazing. I always appreciate your words of encouragement.”

Steve smiled lazily. “I do try.”

“Oh! And I forgot!” Tony marched over to Steve, and before Steve could object Tony was strapping the plastic box to his arm again. He squeezed the sides and the needle plunged back in. The device locked to Tony’s fingerprints. “Remind me never to fall unconscious around you ever again.”

Steve ran his hands over the box again, sighing. He’d always planned on putting it back on, but he’d liked not having it. “The hole from the needle had just healed.”

“Never get any piercings,” Tony advised. “You’ll take them out for two seconds and they’d close up.”

“Oh darn, there go my plans. What would I get anyways?”

Tony leaned his entire body— legs, head and all— to the side, considering deeply. “A tongue piercing. Or… an eyebrow piercing.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Don’t lie, you would.”

Steve tilted his chin up pointedly, letting Tony know he was going to say something stupid for the sake of arguing. “I would *not.* Piercings are for *girls.*”

“Oh my God, grandpa, can’t we have one thanksgiving without you telling us how to live our lives?”

“I’m joking.” Steve leaned back on the couch, looking down at his body and seriously considering. “What do you think about nipple piercings?”
“I refuse to say anything without an attorney present.”

“What would you say if I told you my nipples are pierced?”

Tony didn’t even look up from what he was doing. “I would tell you that you’re lying; I watch you shower and I know for a fact that you don’t have any piercings.”

Steve narrowed his eyes. “I think you’re kidding, but I’m scared to ask.”

“Probably smart. Right Jarvis?”

“Indeed.”

“What about vibranium?” Tony asked, already jumping back to their earlier conversation with no transition. “I don’t know where we’d get any of it. Rogers, would you mind if I melted down your shield to make a robot Superman to save the world?”

At that point, DUM-E rolled over and Steve let himself get distracted, scratching the robot like he would a dog. “I would definitely mind. Don’t do it, Tony.”

“You’re no fun.”

Post-fight, post-injury, and post-recovery, they all tried to get back into normal routines.

The first night Steve and Bucky spent back in their normal bed, Bucky’s hand crawled it’s way up Steve’s arm, smoothing circles into his skin. “You put the anti-drug box back on,” he observed, because of course Bucky had noticed it being off.

“Yeah yeah, no need getting all high and mighty. I stopped with the drugs, you know that. I just wanted a teensy eensie little bit of weed, alright? Sue me.”

“I’m going to sue you.”

“And besides, you had gotten yourself stabbed, so I was bored. And Tony was unconscious, so it was easy. I mean, what’s the point in even making locks if you don’t want them to be picked? Not taking it off would be missing an opportunity.”

Bucky kicked him under the covers in response, and Steve kicked him back. Soon they were in an all out kick war, and neither could quite remember why.

Most days, the team ate breakfast in the commons, even if no one talked. It was part of the routine, and if they all just went to their separate parts of the commons then at least they were together. After that, Steve would go running with Natasha, watching the workers mow the huge green lawn while the air was still chilled. After that would be free time, spent desperately trying to make something that resembled art, or reading, or watching crappy tv with Clint, who apparently was also a connoisseur of crappy tv. They shamelessly binge Keeping Up With The Kardashians, both loudly expressing their opinions on it for any poor passing Avenger to hear.
Afterwards was lunch with Bucky, and then going down to the lab. Steve would sometimes be an active participant in helping Tony plan, or talk through problems, or just help hold something up, and other times he would plant himself on the couch and happily waste time on his phone, or playing fetch with DUM-E.

Then came more training— there was always more training, more and more and more training, and this particular brand of Hell was birthed from the minds of both Stark and Hill. It was more tactical training, which included weapons work and field skills. The challenges they faced would get harder, meaning that all of the Avengers needed to get better.

After that came what Steve liked to call “scare the interns hour”, which was the allotted time used for the specific purpose of, indeed, scaring the interns. Long term workers grew used to the superheroes rather quickly, but temporary residential interns seldom stayed long enough to develop a tolerance. Steve found it especially enjoyable to go up to an intern, peer over their shoulder, and go “Oh my God, you’re Hydra!” It was fun watching all eyes turn, and the poor intern almost wet themselves trying to explain.

Once, when Peter was visiting, Steve got him to attach webbing to his feet and back and lower him down to where some people were working. He waited until he was right behind someone’s ear to say “Why hello there” and revel in their shrieks.

After intern hour was dinner, and from then on came domestic duties. Domestic duties included but were not limited to; helping keep the living area clean; paying attention to Bucky; watching the news with the team; mocking the team for various different things they couldn’t control; and on more than one occasion, going downstairs for late night target practice. After more than one incident, a rule was put in place banning any and all target practice in the commons. There was a training facility for that specific purpose, and if that was too far away then Tony had put up a wooden board in their apartment to use as a Knife Wall anyways.

The nights however, were all Bucky’s. It was hard for them to sleep more than six hours or so, which meant they often went to bed later than the others. After everyone headed up the stairs to their individual rooms, Steve and Bucky followed suit, even crawling under the covers, though they didn’t intend to sleep for a few more hours.

Even after Bucky’s “I’m not like you” talk, they still cuddled. Steve had avoided it for a few days, which had resulted in Bucky confronting him all shaky and apologetic, and needless to say, Steve didn’t make that mistake again. It was a good thing; Steve had been getting desperate in those few days, and was tempted to shoot up to see just how loud his anti-drug box’s alarm could get.

Sometimes they both read. Sometimes Bucky read, and Steve lay in his lap, staring into nothingness. Sometimes, on the nights that Bucky didn’t sleep, Steve would try to stay awake in solidarity. It worked for only as long as Bucky stayed distracted with a book or his phone, but as soon as he realized what Steve was doing he’d start kneading him like a loaf of bread, paying special attention to his shoulders and scalp. “Go to sleep, Stevie,” he’d murmur, “It's bedtime. You need your rest.”

“You need your rest.”

“I’ll sleep after you do.”

“Hey Buck? How come you can lie to me, but I can’t lie to you?”

Bucky kept kneading him, considering. “You lie to me,” he finally decided. “Right?”

Then Steve would sigh, snuggling in closer. He loved, loved, loved Bucky. He would become a
lump of dough for him to knead, if he wanted; he would go to sleep if he wanted; he would be whatever he wanted.

“No,” Steve lied. “I only ever tell the truth.”

Bucky snorted, like he knew what Steve was doing, and then refocused his attention on Steve's hair.

Steve loved those nights. He also loved Bucky, even if Bucky didn’t love him in the same way. Regardless, Steve would stay with him. Steve would stay with him through anything, relationship or no. He'd always assumed that he and Bucky would grow up to be confirmed bachelors together, and though everything else has changed, that didn’t have to. The world had tried to rip them apart so many times. Steve would not let something as small as not returning feelings pull them apart again.

To the end of the line, he thought. And then some.

And back.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter:
- Steve and Bucky experimented with knife play (AKA the scene where they were talking and messing around in their new quarters)
- Steve and Tony hung out in the workshop (+ piercings talk)
- Steve's daily routine at the new compound was introduced

Please comment and let me know what you think!
The water was like liquid fire on Steve's skin. It was far too hot, and when he stood the wrong way it burned his face. Still, he wasn't going to lower it. The burning hurt, but at least it felt like something.

Bucky and Natasha had been talking, which was never good. What with Bucky's rising anxiety in recent months, they’d done a full weakness assessment. The results were not exactly encouraging, and they agreed that the threat they had to address primarily was the Asset. Bucky's multiple personalities were on a spectrum, with Brooklyn Bucky on one side and the Asset on the other. The Asset was different than the Winter Soldier; the Winter Soldier could communicate and exist, while the Asset could only follow orders. The Asset was the result of trigger words. The Winter Soldier was the result of years of torture. The Winter Soldier was, for lack of better words, Broken Bucky.

Steve didn’t have DID, but he had changed throughout the years. He had once been Brooklyn Steve, and Captain Steve, and Nomad Steve. Now he was something else, but if the most human version of Bucky was Broken Bucky, then the most human version of Steve was Broken Steve.

The Winter Soldier was not a problem, but the Asset was, and Natasha and Bucky agreed that they must eliminate him. That meant eliminating the trigger words.

Supposedly, Natasha had once done that to herself on a much smaller scale. She knew the process, and even as she told them how it would go, she was still lying to them. There was something she wouldn't tell them, but she was honest when she said that it was necessary, so like an idiot Steve agreed.

The first day, Steve held Bucky close for full minutes until Natasha declared it was time. Then he let go, letting Bucky go into the Hulk’s containment chamber. They stood close together, separated only by the glass, and Natasha didn’t even need a microphone when she started speaking.


“Stevie,” Bucky said, pressing his hands against the glass. “Make her stop, Stevie, make her stop--”


“No! <No, stop, please, stop, stop, no!>”

“<One. Freight car.>”

Bucky’s body shut down without a fight, and his eyes glazed over. “<Ready to comply.>”

Steve couldn't smell it from outside the chamber, but he knew that while the words were being spoken, the smell of chocolate chip cookies had been pumped into the chamber. The goal was to desensitize him to the words, which would hopefully be helped by pleasant smells and sensory input.

Bucky looked completely dead to the world, and it nearly tore Steve's heart in two. Still, Steve forced himself to smile, pressing his hands against the glass. “Hey, Buck? How do you feel?”

Bucky didn’t respond for a few moments. When he did, he just repeated the same words as before.
"<Ready to comply.>"

"<You're mother used to bake cookies.>" Steve said, switching to Russian. He assumed the Asset could understand all the languages that Bucky did, since Bucky had learned most of them as the Asset, but there may be less resistance with Russian. "<Rebecca loved the chocolate chip cookies, but you always liked the more difficult ones to make. Do you remember those macaroons she would make? She made them just for you; no one else liked them. But you loved them. Can you see them in your mind? They were all white, except for the lemon ones that looked a little yellow. Do you know what I'm talking about?>"

There wasn't even a flicker of recognition in the Asset's eyes. "<Ready to comply.>"

Steve turned to Natasha. "Now what? Should I go in there and try my resets?"

She frowned, looking at Bucky contemplatively. "No. Keep talking. If it doesn't help, then we'll leave him in there to tire himself out. He should get frustrated enough to exhaust himself."

"Or he'll preserve his energy," Steve offered. "He has no orders."

"Exactly. It will drive him mad."

"Natasha, madness is not what we're going for here--"

She grabbed him firmly by the shoulders, stopping him in his tracks. "Steve, do you trust me? Then shut the fuck up. I know what's going on."

"Do you?" He countered.

"Yes. Now tell him some nice stories about Brooklyn or I'm kicking you out."

He huffed, yanking himself away.

He ended up standing in front of the tank, telling stories. The Asset got tired of staring after a while, apparently realizing he was in hostile territory (AKA not Hydra) and started inspecting his space. As time passed, Steve ended up sitting with his back to the glass containment cell.

Finally, Natasha sent him in. Bucky was completely unarmed, and Steve went in with just the shield and the corresponding arm gauntlets. "Bucky. It's me. It's Steve."

Bucky regarded him coolly.

Steve took a step forwards, keeping the shield at his side, like he wasn't planning on striking. Shield, balls, knee, he reminded himself, shield, balls, knee.

"It's me, Steve," Steve continued. The Asset didn't respond, just continued watching him. "I'm your friend. I'm your fri--"

Steve threw the shield, running and sliding, but before he could Bucky's hand was around his throat, catching him and slamming him against the wall. Steve choked, flailing and grabbing at his hand uselessly.

"5-4-9--," Steve choked out, "8-5-8--"

Bucky squeezed, and Steve's air was completely cut off. His vision went spotty.

All Steve wanted to do was defend himself. He would grab a knife, rip it out and stab it into his
thigh, but, but…

He forced himself to fight against it. He could defend himself, technically, but it was Bucky. He didn't want to hurt him.

So instead, Steve went limp in his grasp, tilting his head back and putting one hand up in surrender, the other gripping the hand as it slowly crushed his windpipe. “I'm… not going to fight you,” he said, using his valuable breath. “Because… I'm with you… to the end of the line.” Bucky shifted, and Steve could see the slight confusion popping up on his face. “Say it,” Steve commanded. “I'm with you, to the end of the line.”

“And back,” Bucky repeated, low and gravelly. He let go, and Steve dropped to the floor, gasping for breath.

Bucky stumbled away, hands immediately going to tangle in his hair before pulling back, like he thought he'd be reprimanded. He started pacing, the frustration apparent in his entire body. Finally, he froze, turning just enough to see Steve, and then the entire demeanor broke. “Stevie?”

Steve opened his arms, but when Bucky ran to him he didn’t hug him. He simply sunk down to his level, gripping his face in his hands. “Stevie. Stevie. Stevie, what'd I do to you. What happened. You can't… you can't let it happen again, we can't do this again.”

Steve, breath now caught, smiled against him. He nuzzled against Bucky's shoulder, and quiet enough that it would take a moment to understand, rattled off “<Longing rusted seventeen daybreak furnace nine benign homecoming one freight car.>”

Bucky stiffened, and though Steve’s smile didn’t fall, it turned sad. He raised his forearm, and the shield flew over, snapping into place loudly.

Bucky fell backwards in a delayed reaction, then quickly scrambled to his feet. “<Ready to comply.>”

“<You look like a flightless bird when you dance and you're the only person I've ever loved.>” Steve said in the same fast Russian as before, except much louder this time; there was nothing to hide. “<You used to chop potatoes real small and put them in water with cabbage and call it soup and I'd always eat it. You would sleep with my feet in between your calves because I always got too cold at night and my circulation was rotten. You kissed a girl named Dot because you thought her lips would taste like cherries and you weren't wrong.>”

Bucky looked off balanced, but his hands twitched. Steve stood but ignored the nervous twitching, speaking fast. “<32557038, that's your serial number, and 54985870 is mine. 5-4-9-8-->”

Bucky patted himself down, and when he found no weapons, he kicked Steve in the stomach hard enough to send him flying across the room and slamming into the wall with a bruising impact. Steve fell to the ground and Bucky was there in seconds, grabbing at his pants and pulling out a knife far too quickly. He thrust it forwards but Steve dodged, barely, slamming the shield up against his arm and forcing him to release the knife. Steve threw it across the room and grabbed Bucky's face to look at him. “To the end of the line,” he commanded. “The end. Of. The line.”

Then he kicked up, hitting Bucky in the balls, and reached around to press on a particularly bad pressure point on his neck. Bucky tried to yank away and Steve stuck a damp finger in his ear, giving him a wet willy.

Bucky resurfaced soon after, looking drained and again apologetic. This time, Steve gave him a few
minutes to relax before repeating the words again and watching him tense up once more.

They kept going. They had to keep going. Every time that Bucky came back, they had to say the triggers again and again. Again and again. Soon, Natasha started repeating them on a loop to the room, leaving Steve to try to recite his lines over them.

Steve could justify it. He could justify the anxiety, he could justify the fear, he could justify the worry. He could even justify when Bucky started shivering and whining, when his words became a mixture of Russian and a few other languages, some of which Steve couldn’t pick out, and others that he wasn’t even sure were real. Steve could justify the shaking and the sweating and the tears that fell without Bucky’s permission as the words “<Longing rusted seventeen daybreak furnace nine benign homecoming one freight car>” played over and over, until they no longer had any meaning at all.

But what Steve couldn’t justify was when Bucky started screaming. He was in that horrible place between Asset and Soldier where he felt things, where the torment processed as pain, but he couldn’t communicate. He curled up in a ball on the other side of the containment chamber and started screaming, so loud that the words were almost able to be drowned out. Almost.

Steve walked over, exhausted, but still willing to go on. For the past half hour he'd been reciting the words it'll help Bucky it'll help Bucky over and over again, repeating it like a mantra, like a promise, like a prayer. But when he got closer, and Bucky's screams turned to sobs, and his limbs that had been lashing out at random suddenly lashed out with a purpose, and he started tearing at his arm, metal nails ripping against skin, and then fists pounding against thighs, and he started screaming again-- that, Steve could not justify.

“Natasha!” He yelled. “Turn it off!”

Immediately, the words stopped. It was as if Natasha had already been hovering over the controls, ready, just waiting for the signal. Steve should have sent it earlier. This shouldn't have been allowed to go on for so long. It shouldn't have. How could Steve justify any of this?

Bucky's screams died down when he realized the tormenting words were no longer being spoken, but none of the other things he was doing stopped. He sobbed loudly, scraping his fingernails harshly against his arm again.

Steve found himself on his knees, carefully pulling Bucky's arms away from each other. “Shh, shh, it's okay Bucky, I'm here. It's Steve, remember? 5-4-9-8-5-8-7-0. Your Stevie. Hey, do you remember Peter? You basically adopted him. Well, I guess I did too. He's got spider powers, so he climbs on buildings and shoots webs and gets himself in all sorts of trouble. It's me. Your Stevie. I'm right here, Buck, right here. I've got you.”

Bucky struggled against his hold weakly, but not even the metal arm could break Steve's resolve right now. Steve ended up sitting against the wall, pulling Bucky closer, and Bucky went obediently, no longer lashing out violently against himself or fighting anything. He went placid, falling into Steve's lap with his hands restrained in front of him, his bent knees tightening to make him as small as possible. Steve adjusted his grip so he was holding Bucky's wrists with only one hand, petting his hair with the other.

It was a long few minutes until Bucky stopped shaking. When Natasha eventually came in, Steve stopped petting him and instead used his hand to shield Bucky's eyes. The three of them had agreed beforehand that while getting rid of the triggers, it was best that Bucky not see her. They'd known
Bucky whined against his hand, but didn't do anything more than marginally struggle. Natasha set a box beside Steve and left wordlessly. They exchanged a quick desperate look, and then she was gone and Steve could move his hand.

They were both exhausted, but Bucky was clearly infinitely worse. His head lulled to the side, eyes going blurry even as Steve told him to stay awake. He remained placid, however, not fighting, not doing anything really, besides whining and groaning and crying.

Steve went through the box, going in the predetermined order. He first locked the magnetic cuffs onto Bucky's wrists, keeping them in front of Bucky. There was still significant damage Bucky could do even when locked like that, but it would somewhat limit his options.

Next, Steve got out food, and forced Bucky to sit up and eat. He'd been going without food for a few days to weaken him, which had definitely worked, but the goal wasn’t to kill him. Instead, they had to break him-- the Asset, that was, at least Steve hoped. Though there was a real possibility they could break Bucky too.

After they both ate and hydrated, Steve let Bucky lay down by the wall, and locked his wrist cuffs to it. Another precaution. There was no way Steve would be able to stay awake, and while Bucky would definitely sleep too, there was still the very real chance of him waking up and going full Asset again. Steve couldn't help Bucky if he was murdered in his sleep.

Finally, finally, Steve was able to pull out a blanket and pillow, and curl up with Bucky. He used a damp rag to wipe the tears and snot from his face, rubbing circles on his arm, gently massaging by the metal juncture. Steve still didn’t know if Bucky had come back or if he was laying with the Asset, but either way, the trigger training had to have been working on some regards. Steve had to believe it.

So, with Bucky in his arms and the knowledge that he may have just ruined everything in his heart, Steve slept.

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Steve woke to Bucky squirming.

He wanted to comfort him, wanted to wrap his arms around him and promise everything would be alright, but he knew that may not help, especially if Bucky was still the Asset. Instead, Steve pulled away, carefully disentangling them. “Bucky? You with me?”

Bucky's face was hidden, and Steve felt his own body instinctively get in a defensive stance. If he was the Asset, then it could be a trick. He could be trying to get Steve vulnerable for attack.

But, when Steve heard him speak, he knew he was no longer dealing with the Asset. “S-Stevie? Are you… I feel…” he sniffled miserably. “I need to piss.”

Steve exhaled slowly. Oh no. Not this. Steve would take the Asset over this any day, because Bucky's tone, the way he talked, the accent in his voice…
“Bucky, sit up,” Steve ordered, still going no no no internally. Not this. Not this.

Bucky sniffed again and struggled to his knees, stumbling once but catching himself before he could fall on his face. He turned, the chain connecting his cuffs to the wall pulling taut as he huffed and looked up at Steve through clouded eyes. “Stevie… what happened? I was… and then… where are we? What's going on? Were we… on a mission? Natasha, I remember Nat-- but--”

“It's okay,” Steve comforted, suppressing the urge to sigh in relief. He was dealing with Brooklyn Bucky, which was generally horrible, but at least he still had memories of the past few years. It would have been Hell to wake him up only to find Bucky asking about his mama or the Howlies. “It's okay,” Steve promised. “We're getting rid of the trigger words, remember? It's been really hard, but we'll be done soon. Then we can go back to our apartment, alright?”


“Alright,” Steve said, reaching in the box and pulling out an empty carton. “Here you go.”

Bucky stared at the carton like it was a death sentence, but after a moment he nodded, desperate enough to take it.

“Friday,” Steve said, looking up at the ceiling, “Is Natasha awake?”

“She is indeed. Natasha has requested I inform you she is ready to proceed.”

“Alright. We'll just finish up with a few things, and then we can… continue.” Steve had to physically force the word out. He felt ill.

Bucky was done with the carton then, and after offering him some hand sanitizer, Steve used it too. He used the sanitizer as well. It felt incredibly wrong, having to pee in a carton but still caring about hygiene, but, well. They didn’t shower, or brush their teeth, or use deodorant or anything else that they probably should have done, but they might as well wash their hands after peeing.

After that, Steve opened water bottles for the both of them, and a protein bar for himself. Bucky looked at the bar desperately, but Steve wasn’t supposed to give him one. Hunger equaled desperation and desperation equaled results. It was sick, but it was what they had to work with.

Steve hadn’t even unlocked the cuffs when Natasha's voice came over the speakers. “<Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car.>”

Instead of stiffening, Bucky burst into sobs.

Steve dared, for a moment, to hope. But as he watched Bucky, he could see that he had still turned into the Asset, just a much worse, broken version of him. As a test, Steve drew a knife and pushed it in between two plates of the metal arm, something that in combat would be absolutely problematic. Bucky just let him, crying harder.

“This is bad,” Steve muttered.

Bucky looked up, hurriedly trying to collect himself, but failing. “<R-ready to comply.>”

“<Stand up.>”

Instead, Bucky burrowed down, crying harder.
There was a noise at the other side of the room and Steve listened to Natasha’s heels as she clicked over. “What do you think?”

“I think it worked,” she said breezily, but when he looked at her she didn’t appear relieved. “The goal was to get rid of the trigger words. I think we’ve accomplished it.”

Steve wasn’t so sure. “<Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car.>”

Bucky started crying even harder, sobbing so loud they had to speak up to be heard over him. “This doesn’t feel like an improvement.”

“He’s not attacking you. And you gave him a command, which he, clearly, isn’t following. Trust me, it’s an improvement. <Longing rusted seventeen daybreak furnace nine benign homecoming one freight car.>”

Bucky lifted his tear-streaked face, starting to say a broken up “<R-r-ready to—>” But stopped when Natasha offered him a handkerchief. He blew his nose loudly, and went back to weeping into his arm.

“Part of the goal was to get rid of the Asset,” Steve reminded her. “He’s still the Asset.”

She shrugged with one shoulder. “We’re not done. And this isn’t ideal, but it may still be better. If we’re right in the middle of a fight and someone says those words, is it better for him to turn against us or to collapse in a fit of tears?”

“To turn against us,” Steve answered immediately. “He could get hurt if he’s too busy crying to notice someone stabbing him.” He gestured to the knife that was still wedged in between Bucky’s arm plates.

“He could kill all of us.”

“Or you could just let me handle it and I would use his anti-triggers to get him to come back.”

“Those anti-triggers don’t work anymore. Go ahead, try them.”

Steve gave her an unsure look, but knelt beside Bucky, yanking the knife out of his arm and sheathing it. He undid his metal cuffs, pulling Bucky up to standing. “5-4-9-8-5-8-7-0,” he said simply, giving him a wet willie and slamming his foot onto the underside of Bucky’s knee. Bucky fell forwards, catching himself on his arms just before he could smash his face in, and collapsing the rest of the way. He continued to cry, completely unaffected.

“They don’t work,” Natasha concluded.

Steve could feel panic rise up within him. “So what do we do now? How do we get Bucky back?”

“We flush him out,” Natasha said, like it was that simple. She put the cuffs and anything that was still out back into the box, handing it to Steve before crouching next to Bucky. “<Soldat, listen close. We are leaving you here. You can come out when you return back to your normal state. You understand this is not your normal state.>”

He nodded, just barely, his face still buried in his arms.

“<Good. We will leave you unrestrained, but if you try to hurt yourself you will have to be restrained. Do you understand>”
“<I understand,>” he muttered in heavy Russian. It was a stronger accent than his normal Russian, Steve realized. Brooklyn Bucky’s third or fourth language was Russian, but Russian was the Asset’s native language.

“<Good.>”

Bucky lifted his face, just enough to make eye contact with Natasha. “<Energy levels low. Sustenance required. Sustenance permitted?>”

Natasha stroked the side of his face, right along his hairline. It was the first affectionate gesture she’d made since they started. “<No. Not until you return to your initial state. But you did a good job asking; you should always ask. You are a person.>”

He made a face, and hid in his arms once more.

Natasha stood up. “Steve?”

“Alright,” Steve said quietly, still watching Bucky. “Hey Buck? I’ll stay close. I promise. You’ll be okay. We’re almost done.”

If Bucky heard him, Steve didn’t know. All he knew was that the Asset was crying again.

They exited the chamber, leaving Bucky there. “I’m guessing you want to take first watch?” Natasha guessed.

Steve was already sitting down, getting ready for the long haul. “Yeah. I’ll call you if anything happens.”

“See that you do. Friday is continuing to monitor him; if she thinks that Bucky is going to have problems with hunger or anything else, she’ll tell you.”

Steve nodded. He could already feel that empty feeling return. The wait was about to begin again, and the serum was preparing to bunk down and put him into a living purgatory for the next few hours.

“And Steve? It’ll be okay.”

“I know,” Steve uttered softly.

“Okay.”

Steve didn’t hear the rest of what she said, and when his eyes refocused she was gone.

He sighed, leaned on his elbows, and looked into the tank. It could be made soundproof, but right now it wasn’t, so Steve could already hear the echo of “<Longing. Rusted. Seventeen. Daybreak…>”

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He’d hoped that, at the most, Bucky would cry more. He’d hoped that he’d panic a little, and then
be done. He’d hoped that this time around, it would be alright.

He was wrong.

It was arguably much better, this time around, but it still felt like Hell on earth. Bucky cried for the first few times, but it seemed as though the words kept on piling up, trapping him underneath their weight. After the first repetition, Bucky had his first panic attack. Friday was monitoring his heart rate and would alert Steve if it got too high, but Steve also knew that Bucky had his own serum that would be working to keep that from happening. If Bucky never had a heart attack before from his extensive torture, then it wasn’t probable that it would happen this time. Steve wasn’t in denial, he knew what they were putting him through was torture, but at least this time, Bucky had a say in it. It had been partially his idea, even. That didn’t make it much better.

Bucky would have a panic attack, and then calm down. Steady his breathes. Wipe the tears off of his face. Then the voice would start up again, “<Longing. Rusted—” and it’d all go downhill again. Another attack.

Somewhere around the second hour mark, Steve watched Bucky’s nails extend out of their metal casings, and he said aloud “Friday, please call Natasha over” just in time to watch Bucky slice his nails against his skin. Steve almost cried out.

Natasha arrived within the minute, and they waited until Bucky had calmed down to go in together. They had to restrain him with his arms apart and attached to the wall. Bucky didn’t even out up a fight; too exhausted to even hold his head up all the way.

“Friday, stop,” Natasha ordered. “Steve?”

“How?” Steve retrieved a water bottle and two protein bars. They undid the cuff on his flesh arm and let him feed himself slowly, talking to him in part to try and make the process easier and in part to try to help him stay away. Steve told him the story of the time Bucky made him ride the Cyclone on Coney Island and Steve ended up hurling over the side. By the end of it, Bucky was panting, still exhausted but no longer in danger of passing out. “Let’s give it a half hour,” Steve recommended to Natasha. “We’ll give the food a little time to digest, and give the rest of him a break. Then we’ll keep going.”

Bucky looked away when he said that, unable to handle it. Natasha nodded in agreement. “Alright. Do you want me to stay?”

“I think we’ve got it from here.”

“Alright.” Natasha looked Bucky over, looking for one of the first times like she might not actually trust him. “Keep his wrist locked.”

“Yes ma’am.”

As soon as Natasha had left, Steve was crawling over to be closer to Bucky. He was still the Asset, so he didn’t remember Steve, but in the past 24 hours Steve and Natasha had managed to do something incredible: they had made the Asset a human. He was unsure about Steve, yes, but as soon as Steve touched him the Asset leaned in for more contact. Steve ended up tucking himself against Bucky’s side, resting his head against Bucky’s chest. He could feel the metal arm around his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Buck.”

Minutes passed. Five, maybe ten. Maybe fifteen. Maybe more. They only had thirty. Maybe it was a full twenty-five minutes before Bucky replied, not that Steve had been expecting him to at all.
“Stevie?”

Steve turned, looking him in the eyes. It was… not Brooklyn Bucky, but the Winter Soldier. Steve could have cried, right there, right then. “I’m here, Buck. I’m always here.”


Steve leaned up, kissing the side of his arm. The metal plates were cold beneath his lips, and when he removed his mouth they shifted uncomfortably. The one benefit of the Asset was that he let Steve touch the arm without problem; it was still a foreign object to Bucky and a painful reminder to Winter.

“You’re doing a lot better,” Steve promised. He closed his eyes, burying his face in Bucky’s shirt. “It won’t be long now. I promise.” I love you.


Natasha came in soon after that, and Steve had to take Bucky’s arm and lock it back in place. Bucky didn’t fight it.

“I’m sorry. But it won’t be long,” he promised.

Bucky nodded, but didn’t respond.

They left the room and Natasha sat with him as they listened to the words being repeated again. Bucky closed his eyes, tilting his head back and breathing harder like just the sound of the words was enough to empty the air from the room.

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It finally ended that night.

They’d given Bucky another break, but this time Steve had been kept out. “The more we let him relax, the harder it might get,” Natasha explained. “We’re so close.”

This break was shorter. They didn’t say anything when it ended, just let Friday repeat the words again. “<Longing rusted seventeen daybreak furnace nine benign homecoming one freight car.>”

They waited. And waited.

Then, from the inside, “Stevie?”

Steve was on his feet before the word had even processed. He was inside the tank and in front of Bucky so fast he couldn’t remember running, just knew that he had. “Yeah? Buck?”

“I’m here. I’m…” Bucky let out one last, miserable sob. “I’m here. He’s gone. He’s… tired. He left.
I’m here.”

Steve just had enough time to uncuff him before Bucky collapsed.

———

They got Bucky conscious enough to go up to their apartment and collapse again on his bed. Steve had to wake him again when he came back a few minutes later with a protein shake. It was four times the average person’s caloric intake, which was probably still less than he needed, but it was a start. Whenever Bucky’s eyes started drooping, Steve had to shove him to keep him from falling asleep. Steve hadn’t even set down the empty glass before Bucky passed out.

Steve was halfway there himself. He got himself a shake too, not sure if he could handle any food but wanting to make Bucky proud anyways, and managed a three minute shower without falling asleep. Bucky was, strangely enough, snoring-- he only snored when he was Brooklyn Bucky. It was too loud for missions as the Asset/Soldier.

Bucky was still grimy from the day, so Steve probably got dirty again just by going to bed. Not that he cared. In the contest between cuddles and cleanliness, cuddles would always win.

Chapter End Notes

What a fun, wholesome, completely angst-less chapter just in time for festivus!

Please comment and let me know what you think!
The Security Breach

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day, Steve had spent about ten minutes coaxing Bucky to leave the room before he finally agreed. They went to the communal kitchen and got food, and were just about to sit down when Natasha came in, wearing a warm robe and already holding a mug of coffee. “Hey guys.

Natasha!” Steve yelled, but it was too late. Bucky dropped his plate and it smashed against the ground, shards of glass and food scattering across the floor.

Bucky looked down at the mess, blinking like his addled brain couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Then, like a pavlovian response, a single tear darted down his cheek.

Tony and Clint were already sitting at the table. “Well,” Tony said dryly. “That’s certainly… better than turning into a murder bot.”

Steve set his own plate on the table before crouching next to Bucky. “Hey Buck? Do you remember who I am?”

Bucky looked up at him with big, wet eyes, and completely emotionless, stated: “I used to have a mom.”

The entire room went silent.

“…You did,” Steve agreed. Bucky had gone back to staring at the floor like he could see right through it, all the way back to the 30’s.

“I saw her grave,” Bucky said in that same empty tone. “Well. Tile. She was. In a mausoleum. They spread. Her ashes. Rebecca did. And. The other one. She had. Another son. I have. A little brother. That I. Never met.”

Steve tried to ignore the words. He couldn't focus on it right now. “Yeah, Buck? That’s nice. What’s his name?”


“It ‘was’ his name?”

Clint had been the one to ask. Bucky looked up at him, still a blank slate. He wasn’t even crying anymore. “It was. Because. He died. Ten years ago. Of. Old age.” He sniffled, though his eyes remained dry. “My little brother died of old age.”

Steve rubbed his back soothingly. “You never told me that.”

The Asset shook his head. “He didn’t tell you a lot of things. He doesn’t tell you a lot of things. He keeps secrets. Lies. Pictures. He…” his face paled and he stumbled forwards in pain.

“Bucky? What’s wrong?”

The arm shuddered, the panels all shaking and readjusting. The Bucky sunk into himself, relaxing and pushing himself to his feet smoothly. “Nothing. I’m going to my room.”
It was… Winter. Winter had taken over the body. Steve’s frown deepened. “You said— lies? What lies?”

“No lies. I’m going to the room.”

“But— Bucky, what about breakfast?”


He left before Steve could come up with a response.

———————

Steve ate breakfast, and then because there was no way he was eating if Bucky didn’t have to, brought a freshly stocked plate into their room. But Bucky was nowhere to be found.

“Friday, where’s Bucky?”

“It appears that he went into the closet.”

Steve set the food down and opened the folding closet doors. There on the floor, covered in laundry, was Bucky. His eyes were wide open, but he remained unmoving. “What’cha doin’?” Steve asked, half casual and half concerned.


“You didn’t eat.”

“I don’t need to.”

“Yes you do, dickweed. Come on, get up. Shower and eat, then you can become a closet hobo.” Steve crouched lower, looking at him conspiratorially. “You know, I’d join you, but I already came out of the closet.”

Bucky laughed breathing, not really smiling. “You could come. Back in with me. I wouldn’t hold it against you.”

Steve rolled his eyes, still smiling. “Maybe I will. But first, you need to get up.”

The color seemed to drain from Bucky’s face. “Come on, Stevie. Cuddle with me.”

“Nice diversion. Up and at ‘em, slowass. The sun is out, the sky is blue, and you smell like shit.”

“At least I don’t. Look like shit. Like you do.”

“Ha! If you weren’t feeling bad, I’d kick your ass.”

Steve couldn’t help but grinning. “I can’t say I don’t relate. I’ll turn on the shower for you.”

Bucky was a little off for the rest of the week. Natasha would come in at random and say the triggers, which would sometimes confuse Bucky and leave him disoriented, and would other times make him inexplicably sad. Either way, after hearing the triggers Bucky was in no shape to fight.

Upon hearing the triggers, he always reverted back to the Asset, even if it was only momentarily. The shift was clear to see, at least for Steve, who was so used to all of Bucky’s mannerisms.

Bucky had been triggered one day, and was still coming out of it when they left their room to see that some of the others were watching something on tv. “Is it anything interesting?” Steve asked.

Bruce and Clint were lounging on the couch, with Clint wearing oversized sweats and Bruce wearing a full plaid pajama set, complete with a matching shirt, pants, and slippers. His glasses slid down his nose when he craned his neck to see them. “We’re watching a documentary on the Kennedy Assassination.”

“We should’ve invited you,” Clint realized. “What with you two being our resident assassins.”

Bucky didn’t respond, just continued moping his way to the kitchen, but Steve stopped to talk. “Yeah, or Natasha.”

“Oh, we invited Natasha. Busy. Sit?”

Steve glanced into the kitchen, where Bucky appeared to be making some sort of comfort food. “Buck? Make me some?”

He grunted, which was just about as much language they could expect from Bucky for that day. Steve shrugged and sat, leaning against the couch. He had to move his head to an uncomfortable angle to avoid touching Clint, but Clint just gently pushed it so his head was resting against Clint’s knee. “Thanks,” Steve muttered, already relaxing against him.

Clint hummed something, but didn’t move his hand away. Instead, he gently messed with Steve’s hair, petting it. Steve did his best not to completely creen into the touch, but it was hard. He tilted his head back, looking up at Clint. “You’d be a good dad,” he muttered. “Good at petting.”

Clint’s eyes brightened, but he just snorted. “Yeah. Or a good dog owner.”

“You could do both,” Steve suggested quickly, still grinning.

“It’s not a bad idea.” Clint leaned back, leaving it at that, and Steve sighed, relaxing a little more against the couch. Clint did seem like he’d make a great dad. He’d probably love it, too. Being a superhero meant a lot of little privileges, but then a few big conflicts. If Clint wanted a family, he should be able to have a family.

But then again, it’d be too dangerous. Maybe family musings were interesting to think about, but they weren’t realistic. Who could say that Clint would be a good father or husband anyways? He’s never seemed all that interested in Natasha, or the people he’d dance with when they went out.
Who’s to say Clint was romantically driven at all?

In the past few months, Tony’s plan to get them to spend more time together had worked. Steve had spent more time with the team as a whole, but he’d also gotten a lot closer with Clint. He still wasn’t that close, but he had high hopes for the future.

It was a little hard for Steve to think with Clint’s hand in his hair like that. Any other time, Steve would have no strange feelings, but right now, sitting at his feet, receiving positive physical affection, all sorts of hormones ran through Steve’s body, going yes, yes, this is good. He let his eyes flutter closed, enjoying the sensation.

He was vaguely aware of Bucky coming closer, and Bruce jerking when he realized Bucky was right behind him. “Jesus! Don’t do that!”

“Confirm,” the Asset replied in a monotone. He sat down next to Steve, not touching him. Steve could hear a little bit of Winter in his voice when he asked “Steve. <Why are you making that face. Are you about to come in your pants?>”

Steve let out an undignified snort, sneakily just opening one eye to peer at him. “<No, dick face. I was just resting my eyes.>” He snuggled back against the couch, trying for a pleased expression. Normally, he would have said ‘Your mom is about to come in her pants’, but the past week had made it clear that the Asset has some minor family issues, and it is probably for the best not to bring up moms of any kind.

“You know, I feel really left out when you talk in other languages around me,” Bruce said quietly, like he wasn’t sure if he actually wanted them to hear or not.

“Oh, we’re sorry Bruce. Bucky asked me if I was about to cum in my pants and I told him I already did.”

He didn’t have to look back to know what face Bruce was making. “Oh. I’m glad I asked.”

“Actually, that’s not exactly what Steve said,” Clint interpreted, switching from a petting motion to a scrunching motion that made Steve squeeze his eyes and press his lips together to contain a moan. “The last part was different.”

“<Shut up, I’m trying to listen,>” the Asset commanded.

Steve kicked him lightly, not opening his eyes. “Bossy.”

Even so, Steve quieted, listening to the documentary. They started talking about the angle that the bullets came from, and he could hear Bucky let out a little noise. “That’s not right. The bullets came from too far to the side to be from a window of that building; and besides, those windows don’t open.”

Bruce, behind him: “Then where do you suggest the bullets came from?”

“They ricocheted. The windowsills of that building were solid metal. All it would take is the right angle.”

Clint’s hand slowed, and Steve batted at it. It sped back up to acceptable petting speed. “That shot is practically impossible. Especially with a moving target.”

Steve was more invested in the petting than the conversation, but he still asked “What kind of motivation?”


Steve opened his eyes and carefully moved his legs to rest them on Bucky’s lap. When Bucky didn’t seem to notice, he gently tapped him on the chin with his foot. “Hey. It’s okay. Clearly, whoever it was that made that shot was successful. No hallucinations.”

“Wait,” Bruce interrupted, “Are you saying that Bucky killed Kennedy?”

“No,” Bucky said, in a monotone. “To share that kind of information would be against protocols. Extremely ill-advised; result in immediate recalibration.”

“He just knows the exact angle and way the shot was made,” Steve explained. “And what would happen if— whoever took the shot— were to miss. It’s all very theoretical.”

“Yes. Very theoretical.”

After that, Bucky moved Steve’s legs off of his lap and scooted close to him, manhandling him until he was sitting up straight, and then leaning his head heavily on Steve’s shoulder. They continued watching the documentary— Clint stopped petting Steve, which was unfortunate— and every few minutes Bucky would quietly mutter something about the assassination, correcting the narration and commenting little things like “It was hot as balls that day” and “what’s the difference between Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy? Mrs. Kennedy knows to stay out of other people’s goddamn business.”

Ultron failed. Tony had tried to put it’s consciousness into a small robot he’d fashioned from a toaster, with the idea that a little angry toaster insistent on saving the world would be hilarious. It didn’t work; the consciousness was too expansive to fit into the mainframe. Tony had coded it meticulously, and Jarvis had diverted most of his artificial attention to the project, making the storage needs insanely high.

“It’s the material,” Tony said for the twentieth time in half as many minutes. “We need something more advanced. Jarvis, are you sure—”

“Yes sir,” Jarvis interrupted. “I am quite sure that that is not an option. The cost of the raw materials necessary to produce enough vibranium would be exorbitant, and it is not guaranteed to work.”

Tony huffed. “This sucks. It’s hellish. All I wanted was to save the world from total domination, and now—”

He was cut off by the alarms going off.

Steve jumped up from his spot on the couch, knocking into DUM-E. Lights appeared from the ceiling, flashing red: INTRUDER ALERT, INTRUDER ALERT.

“Fuck!” Steve yelled. He raised his arm and the shield flew over from one of the worktables,
slamming against his arm and attaching to the gauntlet. “They’re coming for Bucky, I knew this would happen! Tony, get the suit.”

“Steve—”

“Tony, get the fucking suit!”

“They may not be here for Bucky,” Tony warned. “You don’t know—!”

“I don’t care! I told him I’m not letting it happen again, and I was serious. Suit!”

Steve burst through the workshop door before Tony could object. Bucky had been in the commons, last he’d checked. Passed out after another triggering.

There were stairs and halls to get there, but Steve knew a faster way. The window folded open for him and he threw himself out, catching onto the bar underneath the upper floor balcony and using his momentum to swing himself up, going heels-over-head 270 degrees. He landed on the balcony with only a slight stumble, and was running again.

He sprinted to one of the walls, jumping at the last moment and smearing his feet on it, giving himself just enough power to catch onto the ledge and pull himself up. From there, he was able to climb up two more balconies and then sprint across the white panel roof.

He could feel his heart beating in his head. Bucky could be dead asleep, and wake to the sound of a dozen Hydra agents smashing through the windows. He fell asleep as the Asset— would he be tearful and useless, like he’d been sometimes as hearing the trigger words? Or would something else happen? Would seeing his former masters make the Asset revert all the way back?

Steve couldn’t let that happen. They wanted Bucky, but they couldn’t have him.

Steve leapt and landed on a part of the wall sloping downwards, and he slid down it so fast the world blurred. He landed with a roll and before he was even on his feet again, he’d leapt.

He was on the roof of the part of the compound containing the commons, now. He knew which window he’d go through; Clint’s. From there, he could be quick— shield knife catch throw dodge punch knife—

A shimmer in the corner of his vision caught his eye, and Steve stopped so fast he fell. He caught himself in a roll, silently coming to a kneel behind a vent opening and peering around it.

Bucky was on his stomach on the other side of the roof, sniper rifle posed and ready to shoot. Immediately, Steve relaxed, though marginally. There was still a threat, even if at the moment, Bucky was still safe.

He came in from the side, frowning when he saw Bucky’s expression. He was scowling, and his trigger finger slackened, though he continued peering through the scope. “Not a threat. Stevie, on my right.”

Steve hadn’t made his presence known to Bucky, but he wasn’t surprised that he knew he was there. Steve carefully walked behind him, crouching to see over the edge without completely giving away their position.

There was an insignia burned into the grass. “For fuck’s sake.” Steve adjusted the shield, and then pulled himself over the side of the wall, falling and landing with a roll so the shield would absorb the impact. He strolled forwards, looking around until he saw the figure just a few feet away, his back to
him. Steve got his attention by chucking a knife at his back. The knife stuck directly in the center of his back armor, but didn't go through. The man (6’4”) turned.

“Aye! Comrade Steven, it is good to see you! I come bearing news!”

Steve moved closer wearily. “Yeah? You--”

Before he could finish, there was a burst of wind and a whirl of repulsors as Tony, encased in the iron man suit, lowered himself to the ground. “Hey, point break. Is it just you, or are there freaky Hydra agents too?”

Thor looked around, relaxed as if this was just another day. “It appears as though it is just me. Hello Tony, how have you been?”

“Great. New compound, as you can see. And you?”

“My brother is in prison and my mother was brutally murdered. So, normal. Do you know the whereabouts of the Hawk-man, and the Poison Girl?”

“We’re here,” Natasha said, coming around the corner.

“Wonderful. Is there somewhere we may convene? I have news to share with you.”

They were in the commons, and Steve was already sitting while the others gathered provisions. Steve watched Bucky's mannerisms, the way he shifted and moved. It was less robotic and more like a homeless person, moving silently as to evade detection.

Steve gestured for him to come over to where he was sitting, pulling him onto his lap. “Hey, Buck. I missed you.”

Bucky squirmed on his lap. The size difference between their two bodies was blatant and just on the edge of obnoxious, but Steve didn't mind, even as his legs were slightly crushed. Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky's waist, linking his fingers together.

“You saw me earlier,” Bucky murmured, voice low. He leaned back against Steve, breathing out slowly.

“I did,” Steve agreed. “But that was the Asset. Right now, Winter's in control, right?”

Bucky shivered. “You can tell the difference?”

“Of course. I'm right, aren’t I?”

Bucky exhaled. “You are. And. I missed you too.”

Steve leaned against him, itching his nose on Bucky's shoulder blade. “What's it like?”

“I. It.” Bucky takes a deep, shuddery breath. “We all exist, but it's not like… it not like in books. It's
not like there's a control panel. Or anything. We just. Exist. And we are active at different times, but usually, unless it's the Asset, the others of us are always watching. James is quiet. I'm. Becoming friends with him. I think. But it's hard. Me and the Asset are different from him. I'm the one. In charge. But. It used to just be James, so he complains. He's a little bitch.”

Steve chuckled. “Yeah?” His voice came out infinitely softer than intended. “Tell me more.”

“Oh. Kay. Um. So. The Asset's a big baby. I mean, he's not, but he is. Sam says he was created to deal with the bad stuff. And then… when the bad stuff didn’t go away, I was created to deal with the everyday bad stuff, and he stuck with the worst of it. So he can handle anything. He will put up with anything. But he always complains. He whines all the time. Internally. He’s the only one of us who didn’t get to be human. I think after the trigger word removal. He started experiencing something like emotions. So he’s been. Practicing. Getting sad for himself. Crying about our Mom belatedly. It’s. Bad. He wants more control. He needs to go.”

It felt like Bucky’s words contradicted themselves. He talked about the Asset like an annoying little brother, but at the same time he seemed insistent on getting rid of him.

Normally, silence would be enough to make someone explain themselves, but that wasn’t usually the case with Bucky. Steve wondered if that had to do with his personalities: he had so much going on mentally that it maybe it was never quiet for him.

“Yeah?” Steve prodded. “Why does he need to go?”

“He’s… sick. Miserable. Takes over all control. Still allied with some of Hydra’s ideals. Even without the trigger words. He could get… confused. Turn on you.”

“He’s a part of you,” Steve pointed out gently.

“Yes. But. So is the arm. Doesn’t mean it's good. Or. Safe.”

“Let’s move to the couches,” Tony suggested, and everyone started coming over. Steve sighed, pressing his head against Bucky’s back.

“I. I’m worried.” Bucky admitted. “Thor is. And. The trigger words. I should go to the containment chamber.”

Steve was tired. He was so, so, tired. He wanted heroin. Fuck, he wanted weed. Weed and heroin. Not necessarily in that order.

“It’d probably be best if you stayed and heard. I could do something to help keep you grounded? You’d let me know if you feel yourself slipping?”

Bucky nodded, which was a relief. Steve didn’t want to have to listen to whatever it was Thor had to say without Bucky there. He had no real problem with Thor, but the last time he’d seen him had been in the Battle of New York.

As the others got comfortable on the couches, Steve carefully manhandled Bucky to sit on the ground in between his legs. He wrapped his legs around him, locking his ankles around Bucky’s waist like a seatbelt. Bucky sighed, leaning his head against Steve’s thigh. Steve pulled him even closer, leaning over him and wrapping around him like a squid pulling in prey. Unlike actual prey, Bucky didn’t try to get away— instead, he brought his arms around Steve’s legs, gripping onto his ankles like he didn’t want his seatbelt to fall off.

Thor sat on the couch opposite of them with a dramatic huff, like an old person whose bones were
settling. He manspreaded, leaning back before leaning his elbows on his knees, looking at each of them individually. “Well. I am glad to say that you all seem well. And the team is still together— I must say, I am surprised, but it is not a bad surprise. When I called Tony, I had feared he may have to work alone. I am pleased that that is not the case.” He exhaled, sitting up and looking them over once again. “I understand you have not yet found the scepter.”

Clint sighed. “Not for lack of trying.”

“Yes, you have done me and all of Asgard a great service. But hopefully, you won’t need to anymore. I have reason to believe that I know where the scepter is, and I am going to help you in retrieving it.”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter:
- Bucky cried about his little brother
- They talked about the Kennedy Assassination
- Thor visited
Steve was crouched in the snow, his body aware of the cold around him, but completely disinterested. He ran his fingers through the fresh powder, wondering what a normal person would feel. He feels the softness of the crystals, the ice turning to water and gliding down his fingertips. The cold, yes, but it’s not cold enough to be a deterrent. Steve could sleep in the snow, he decided, and then almost laughed. He could indeed—in fact, he already had. If he let himself think about it, he could remember the events vividly.

The plane, flying up in the air, sheets of ice slashing across the exterior, making it hard to see but not impossible. The ground below, arctic tundra whizzing by too fast to really see as he pushed the throttle lever as far as it would go. In the back of the plane, explosives. In the front of the plane, nothing.


A boy, 5’6”, with a shield on his back and exactly one knife left on his person. A boy, 5’6”, breathing so hard he felt like his lungs were collapsing in on themselves.

A radio: “Captain Rogers, come in. Come in Captain. Tell us your coordinates. Tell us your—”

Turned off.

Breathing, breathing, breathing, breathing, I can’t breathe I can’t breathe I can’t breathe

To the end of the end of the end of the end of the—

Faster faster faster faster louder louder louder louder New York New York New York New York New—

He’s deaddeadddeaddeaddeaddeaddeaddeaddead

End of the end of the end of the end of the

Deaddeadddeaddead

End of the end of the

He’s deaddeadddeaddead

End of the

I want to be deaddeadddeaddead

End of the
It was a violent death.

The plane was loud, the motors screaming as they were pushed to their max. The ice ripped at the plane, and already, Steve could feel the cold. It seeped in through every fissure and crack in the plane and assaulted every fissure and crack of Steve’s sweaty, bloodstained, clothes. He’d been wearing them for a few days, and they stuck to him, refusing to let him escape the cold. There was no escape. There was no escape.

It was so loud. So loud that even when Steve started screaming, he couldn’t hear himself. The conditions ripped his body apart: even if he somehow survived the crash, he would be deaf; he would have frostbite; he would be mute. Death was not a quick thing, it was a slow process, taking his body from him while his mind watched in horror. Steve choked on his own hyperventilation, slamming his fists against the controls until the pain shot up his wrists.

The ground was so close. Only a few moments now. A few more moments until he plunged into the ice; until the plane exploded; until Steve’s body was frozen and then ripped into a million pieces, becoming shark chum or a feast for whatever wild creature found him first. The thought was ridiculous; there were no wild creatures here. Not in the heart of the Arctic, where there was nothing, nothing, nothing but ice and cold and soon, a hole in the ice a mile deep, a grave.

Only a few seconds.

Til the end of the line. The end of the line. The end of the line.

It was supposed to be reassuring. I’ll be by your side no matter what. It was a promise, and they’d broken it.

Bucky didn’t make it until the end of the line, but here Steve was. Here he was. The end of the line. The end of the line.

So with that, he turned off the engines of the plane, relishing in the way the engine noises stopped. In a life made up of bad, this could be the one last good thing. Quiet. Peace.

Steve glanced out the front window, immediately feeling the terror welling back up as he saw just how close the ground was. They were in a nose dive, and now that the engines were off it was gravity and momentum that would be Steve’s killers.

With one last look out the window— his last look outside, his last time seeing the snow, the sun— Steve moved into the back of the plane, laying down. If things were different— if the serum had worked, perhaps, and he’d grown into a beefcake— then he may have laid down on his back, closed his eyes, and accepted his fate.

But he wasn’t that man. That man that he was supposed to be did not exist. Captain-My-Ass— Steve was simply Steve. Stevie Rogers. Bloody mouthed, black eyed Steve Rogers, and he may have consented to his fate but that consent was very different from acceptance. So Steve didn’t lay down on his back. Instead, he curled up in a ball.

How ironic. He came into this world in the fetal position, and he would leave this world in the fetal
position. And as his nails poked holes in his skin, and as the nothing plane with its nothing passenger shot down to the earth, and as there was no sounds, or smells, or anything—

—Steve kept his eyes open.

He kept his eyes open. He stared at his arm, at his nails cutting notches into it. And his last thought was one of absolute lunacy:

He wondered if, in the afterlife, he and Bucky would finally get their dance.

And then he died.

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“Steve?”

Steve straightened quickly, brushing the snow off of his hands like he’d just done a bad thing. “Peter,” he greeted, smiling before he could make himself stop. “Hey. How’re you?”

“I’m fine, are you doing okay though? You look a little upset.”

Steve rolled his eyes, scoffing. “As if. I’m fine, it’s just the cold. You just took that big Engineering test, right? How’d they go?

Peter was quick to accept the excuse, and immediately went in to telling Steve about it. They started walking, with Peter talking and Steve trying his best to listen, nodding in all the right spots even as he couldn’t take his eyes off the snow.

Such a pretty thing, snow. A good weapon too, if you know how to use it. Other people seemed to have this idea that snow was innocent, but Steve knew better. Snow was powerful, aggressive, and claiming. Steve didn’t die in the snow, but it still owned him. Him and Bucky both. They may have been frozen in ice, but it was the snow, the soft layer over the arctic shelf, and the smooth pillow at the bottom of the ravine, that did them in. They may have escaped, but they left parts behind. The graves were still full, even if they’d managed to keep their bodies when they left.

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“Peter!”

The name came off the lips of multiple people in the room, all of them loud and excited. Steve rolled his eyes, scowling. “What am I? Chopped liver?”

“If you were chopped liver you’d at least be useful,” Natasha retorted without hesitation, making Steve grin to himself. They’d been working on plans for the big base break in, and for once everyone had strong opinions about the plan, forcing Steve to moderate and then argue when they disagreed with his ideas. He was the officially-unofficial Captain of the team, or at least the head of tactical planning. Tony was already in charge of the finances and some of the logistics of running the Avengers™, so he’d declared Steve was the one in charge of missions, for the sake of dividing up power. It usually worked well, but with this mission in particular, everyone had different strategies they wanted to do. Clint and Bucky had both been in favor of early surveillance, but Thor had insisted the security was too good and that they’d be found out before they even found anything. Steve wanted to surround the building and try to remain undercover until they all at least got inside, but Natasha thought that if the security was that good, all of them going inside the fortress would be
a liability. The arguments were often, but not too dramatic, which Steve appreciated. Even if Natasha had been bitching at him for being useless for the past week.

Steve and Peter stripped off their winter gear, with Peter already starting into banter with Clint. Natasha, Clint, and Thor were already in the room, and when Steve looked up he saw Bucky perching on one of the walls. The commons was designed to be a large, open area with a high ceiling, and a staircase that lead to the bedrooms, which were spotted along the balcony. The ceiling had been built specifically to have exposed beams and other handholds and potential perches for their bird-and-spider-themed residents who needed to perch. Bucky never climbed all the way up, but he had found himself liking to lay on one of the ledges on the far wall, another modification to make their commons like a subtle jungle gym. The ledge was hardly big enough for someone Bucky’s size, but Bucky was just stubborn enough to lay there anyways.

Bucky scowled at Steve from across the room, and Steve knew without having to ask that it was because of his thin winter clothes. Steve made a face back at him; he would wear what he wanted, and if Bucky had a problem with it he could suck his dick.

“How’s being a vigilante going?” Natasha asked Peter, teasing.

Peter straightened dramatically. “Excuse you, I am a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, not a vigilante. But it’s going really well!”

Natasha smiled, snakelike. “Have you gotten any cool scars since last time?”

“No!” Peter seemed genuinely upset by that. “There were a few that I thought would scar, but they didn’t. I don’t even have a mark; it’s so unfair. But look, I took pictures!”

He sat on the couch next to where Natasha was lounging, and Steve followed, leaning over the back of the couch to see his phone screen. He held it up, proudly displaying a picture of his calf with three large welts on it. Steve looked closer; they weren’t welts, necessarily, but more like scarred over indents. He blinked.

“Peter. Are those bullet holes?”

“Uh, no, they’re bullet wounds. They’d already closed up.”

Steve nodded, pursing his lips. “Follow up question. Did you go to the hospital afterwards?”

Peter seemed distracted, looking at the screen morosely. He rubbed his calf—not like he was remembering the pain, but mourning the scars. “Huh? Oh, no. They went straight through— no bullet to get out. See, I learned some stuff from being on the run with you guys.”

“Excuse me?” Clint said from across the room. He marched over, taking the phone, and staring at the picture, his expression not so much as twitching. After a few long moments, he handed it back, and declared “Steve, you are a horrible influence.”

“Hey, Bucky was there too! Right, Buck?” Steve turned around, but Bucky just gave him the middle finger, rolling over on the tiny ledge so he was facing away from them. “Big baby,” Steve grumbled.

“He wasn’t a bad influence,” Peter insisted. “I learned a lot.”

Steve watched him carefully, noting as Peter’s eyes got big and innocent. Great, Steve thought. He’s about to do the thing.

Sure enough, Peter’s voice went up an octave as he stared at Clint with his big, sincere puppy dog
eyes. “He taught me lots of valuable life skills, like how hospitals have metal detectors so you should disarm before going inside, and how to find a safe squat, and how to fire a gun, and how you’re supposed to use a clean needle every time you do heroin to prevent—”

“Steve!”

“What?!” Steve said, raising his hands in defense. “I mean, he’s not wrong. They are valuable life skills. Are you saying that you want Peter using dirty needles to shoot us?"

“I’m saying he shouldn’t be shooting up!” Clint wasn’t genuinely mad, but his shocked and slightly scared expression didn’t seem to be faked. “Oh no. Peter, did you—”

“Nope!” Peter said cheerily. “I never took any drugs, because Mister Nomad Rogers Sir is a perfect foster daddy and I also don’t know how. I stole his cocaine a few times, but that was for his benefit, not mine.”

“Steve!”

“And besides that,” Peter continued, still beaming like a double rainbow, “I’ve only ever smoked pot, and that was just once.” He made a face. “I didn’t like it. Steve, how could you handle that? It tastes disgusting.”

“It’s not about the taste, and I don’t handle it anymore,” Steve snapped, lightly slapping him on the back of the head. “Now stop getting me in trouble. I don’t want mama bear Clint to jump me.”

“I wouldn’t jump you,” Clint said easily, taking the phone again to examine the bullet wounds closer. “I’d find a good angle and I’d shoot you. In the knee, because I’m classy like that, and then you couldn’t go out and corrupt any more kids. Peter, how long did these bullet holes take to heal?”

Peter frowned. “I don’t know, like two hours to close and then a little longer to heal, I think? I’m not positive, I passed out for most of it.”

“Steve!”

“It’s fine. My healing factor is really fast, but because it’s so fast it just makes me sick for a few hours and then super low on energy. I pass out from it all the time. At least this time I managed to get to a garbage heap— the last time, I was just in front of an alley, and I wasn’t even in my suit.”

Steve rubbed his temples. “When was last time?"

“Oh,” Peter said, still as innocent as ever, “That was after you pushed me out of the window and my web shooters went off too late. Remember, the broken leg?”

“I definitely do not.”

Peter went a little pale. “Oh, um, yeah. I broke my leg. It healed in like, five hours though, so it’s no big deal. I understand why you pushed me out of the window— even though I was just trying to help.” He said that last part a little spitefully.

Steve shook his head. “You should tell someone about this type of thing.”

“You don’t,” Peter pointed out. “You got shot in the arm on the last mission and didn’t tell anyone.”

“You what?” Bucky said from his ledge.

“He said I got pot on the last mission,” Steve said, loudly like Bucky’s hearing wasn’t superhuman.
“Pot. Don’t worry though, I threw it out.”

Bucky groaned and thumped his head against the ledge repeatedly, muttering under his breath: ‘The Asset needs regular cognitive recalibration in order to remain operational, the Asset needs regular cognitive recalibration in order to remain operational, the Asset needs—’ He thumped a little too hard and jolted back, dazed— even more so when he tumbled off the ledge and landed on the floor seven feet below.

Ice ran down Steve’s spine (the snow will take you back) and he tensed, ready to jump, but Bucky just groaned and limply thudded his head against the floor a few more times.

Steve looked back at Peter, who was biting his lip, also in that in between stage of ‘do I ignore him or help him’. He apparently decided on the former. “Anyways,” Peter said quietly. “I’ve been fighting, and I’m getting good. Let me know the next time you guys have a mission. Maybe I can, I don’t know, act as your backup, or maybe if one of you is gone I could fill in—”

“Acknowledged,” Steve said, equally distasteful of both the idea of agreeing and refusing.

“Heard,” Bucky muttered from the floor. “Understood. <Comprehended. Noted.>” He groaned into the carpet. Quietly, he started singing:

<<I could care less. The Yenisey swirls by, The North Star glimmers overhead, And the blue glint in a beloved eye Goes dark against the final dread.>>

“That’s creepy,” Peter noted, “What is he saying?”

Steve bit his lip and walked over to where Bucky was still laying, facefirst on the floor. “Hey Buck, what song is that from?”

Bucky groaned in agony, like just answering a question was more work than he could handle. “Dunno. I just remember hearing it. It’s about death.”

Steve hummed, rubbing controlled circles on Bucky’s back. Bucky was wearing his favorite maroon long sleeve shirt, and it made Steve smile. “You planning on dying on me?”

Bucky grunted. “Not. Planning on it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Can’t. Leave you alone. You’d. Jump into the Grand Canyon. As soon as I turn my back.”

Steve laughed, actually laughed. “Good to hear. And for the record, I’m not planning on dying on you either. Can’t. If I leave you, the dog catchers will get one look at that ugly mug of yours and bring you straight to the pound.”

It was Bucky’s turn to laugh, absolutely silent except for a few puffy breathes as he continued hiding his face in the carpet. He tilted his head just slightly, exposing one eye and the corner of a smile. “The shelter. Down the street. Is nice.”

“I bet it is,” Steve said, moving his hand up to stroke Bucky’s hair like he would a real dog. “Of course, they’ll have to check you out first. Make sure you’ve had your shots. Is that shelter a kill shelter?”

Bucky hesitated, but shook his head. “No. But. They neuter all strays.”
“Aww,” Steve mused, “That’s too bad. But, well, you’re as much of a stray as they come. All mangy and greasy.” He punctuated this with a ruffle to Bucky’s hair, which was in fact greasy. “Probably best to neuter you. No one needs those genetics.”

Steve felt himself hesitate, not sure how Bucky would react. They’d been mean to each other all their lives, sure—but this was something else, and if it was anyone else, they’d probably be pretty offended. But it wasn’t just anybody, it was Bucky. He looked up at Steve with a lazy smile, murmuring “You say that like you didn’t grow up in the age of Eugenics.”

Steve shivered, making the noises for extra effect. “Don’t even mention that. If I have one more person tell me that I shouldn’t pass on my DNA to future generations, I’m going to go mad. I’ll probably go around having lots of illegitimate children, just to spite them.”

“Yeah,” Bucky muttered dreamily. “Dozens of little punks like you running around and kicking people in the balls.”

“Hey. I rarely kick people in the balls.”

“Stabbing them in the back, then,” Bucky corrected, nodding like that sounded right.

“Nightmare scenario or dream come true? Scientists will never know.”

“Ugh, I hate you,” Bucky muttered even as he took Steve’s hand and pulled him down. Steve caught himself with his hands on either side of Bucky’s head, letting out a grunt at the motion. Bucky, of course, wouldn’t miss the opportunity to give Steve shit about it. “Getting old.”

“You don’t have to,” Steve muttered, looking down at Bucky intensely.

“Yeah?” Bucky replied, quiet and sacred. “Who gave you the authority to say that?”

Steve didn’t have to think about it. “Me.”

A smile grew on Bucky’s face. “Right. King of the universe. I forgot.”

Steve tapped him on the side of the head, a mock slap but without force, and with only two fingers. “Bad. I’m going to have to take you to the pound.”

“And have me neutered?” Bucky replied gleefully.

Steve laughed. “No. I will have you spayed though. Do you want to know why?”

Bucky groaned, already knowing where the joke was headed. “For fuck’s sake Stevie—”


Bucky groaned again, covering his eyes with his arm so he wouldn’t have to look at Steve’s leering
face any longer. “Because I’m a bitch.”

Steve cackled, and Bucky shoved him off, trying to hide his smile. Steve retaliated with a light kick, which was met with a shove, and just like that they were rolling on the floor, wrestling. They tumbled together, huffing out taunts and insults as they squirmed, poking and pinching and grabbing. It grew progressively more aggressive, with kicks and half-punches thrown in. Steve squeaked when Bucky kneed him in the thigh, dangerously close to his dick, and retaliated with a wet willy.

“I swear to-- fuck, stop it!”

Steve didn’t stop, and continued poking him in spots where he knew Bucky was ticklish. “What was that? You want more?”

Bucky yipped, kicking out with all of his limbs. They went rolling again, and Steve almost managed to pin him once more before Bucky shoved them hard, rolling and pinning Steve underneath him with his whole body weight. Steve groaned, eyes rolling back in his head. He could stay there for months, he could stay there for years, pinned to the floor underneath Bucky.

Bucky shifted, taking most of his weight off of Steve with an apologetic look. Steve tried to scowl at him, but it came off as fake; Bucky could see his genuineness through him. “Sorry,” Bucky muttered, carefully moving off. He half turned and Steve lunged forwards, biting down hard on his ear and catching him by surprise. Bucky let out a choked off noise as he whirled around, backhanding Steve so hard he fell, his entire cheek stinging.

They both froze. Steve held his cheek carefully, pressing his fingers against the part that hurt the most. It was… an impressive slap.

When he briefly looked up, he saw that everyone else in the room had stopped what they were doing. Peter, who had been leaning over the back of the couch watching them wrestle, was frowning.

Steve carefully peeled himself off the ground. Bucky’s eyes were wide. “Stevie. I’m so sorry, I--”

Steve kicked him in the shin, not pulling his punch. “Ow!” Bucky said, more out of surprise than pain.

Steve grinned and leapt forwards, and they went rolling once more.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, we had the...
...scene with Steve crashing the Valkyrie into the Artic
...scene with everyone doubting Steve's parenting choices????????
...scene with Steve and Bucky wrestling on the floor because they're mature 90 year olds

I have a few more chapters pre written, but I'm starting to get back into the groove of writing this book! Because of that, any encouraging comments would be great. My favorite comments, personally, are either ones where people analyze the characters/scenes, or where people share their own personal headcanons. If you did
either-- or just left a normal comment-- I'd seriously appreciate it. Anyways, thanks for reading, and I hope you're still liking the story!

And, in other news, my lovely friend @candycanedarcy is looking for a beta for the story they're working on! They are wonderful to work with, and are currently working on a vampire Darcy fic that starts during the time of the Salem witch trials, and continues through to the modern/almost modern age. Steve and Bucky will eventually be main characters as well. If anyone is interested in betaing, or knows a good way to help them find a beta, please comment and let me know!
Peter had his own room for when he stayed at the compound, but as Clint insisted they binge watch movies all night in a mess of blankets and pillows, none of them made it to their beds. Steve woke up to Peter drooling on his arm and Bucky dozing on his thighs.

It was the last day before their mission, but they treated it like any other day Peter was there. Steve gave him lessons on his motorcycle, and when the sun had risen to half mast they chased each other across the compound, jumping from roof to roof. Peter wore his spider suit, but wasn't allowed the web shooters or the mask. The idea was that they were training for when Peter didn't have those advantages, though Steve gave him a break by letting him wear the rest of the suit so he didn’t get scraped up. In return, Steve wore a special covert ops suit Stark had designed, ankle to neck of sleek black with only some light gray detailing on the chest. With the addition of combat boots and leather gloves, Steve’s uniform was almost to the same level as Peter.

A few staff members stopped to watch them. Steve could especially feel their eyes when he threw his knives, always getting close to Peter but never hitting home. Peter had gotten to a point where he could catch even the fastest ones with good enough warning, and would do that whenever possible.

In the background of Steve’s mind he was aware of the dark presence watching them, like a shadow had grown legs and dark, judgemental eyes. Bucky had gone non-verbal; apparently parts of his brain like memory were working overtime, while other parts, like whatever chunks were responsible for communication and self-maintenance, were shut off. Steve didn’t mind. He’d just shoved a plate of food under his nose for breakfast, and then bullied Bucky until he showered.

After that, they headed into town, the shadow still following them despite Peter insisting he couldn't see him. "Yeah," Steve said with an eye roll, “But that doesn’t mean he isn’t there.”

They went to the Lego store-- which Peter would have been fine staying in all day-- and then settled on a little restaurant for lunch. They hadn’t planned on stopping there, but when they got inside Bucky was already stationed at a booth.

Steve rolled his eyes and directed Peter there. Peter slid in across from Bucky, but Steve just climbed in over him, allowing himself to be bracketed in. “Hey Buck. Decided what you want yet?”

No response, besides some dubious eye movement. Steve shrugged, and when the waiter came around he ordered for the two of them.

He and Peter stuffed themselves, while Bucky hardly even looked at his fries, likely estimating the exact number of calories he needed for maximum nutritional benefit and forgoing anything over it. That meant that he was still sitting perfectly upright by the end, whereas Peter and Steve were already beginning to slump.

Steve leaned against Bucky without thinking about it, tucking his chin up so he could see his face. “Heyyyyy,” he flirted, taking Bucky's hand and placing it on his stomach. “Do you think it'll be a boy or a girl?”

“Do food babies even have genders?” Peter mused from where he was getting cuddly with the napkin holder.
Steve waited, giving Bucky a chance to respond, but when it looked like that wasn't happening he replied “Oh yeah, they do. This one feels like a boy.” He rubbed Bucky’s hand over his stomach again, but Bucky stopped the movement, fingers closing around a handful of fabric.

“Could I take any of these plates?” The waiter said, walking up to their table. His eyes immediately went to the hand fisted in Steve’s shirt.

Bucky didn’t move his hand, but he leveled a glare at the server.

Steve slapped Bucky lightly on the shoulder. “Yeah, here, we’ll get them in a pile for you.”

He and Peter did so, getting about negative ten help from Bucky. The server raised an eyebrow at him, but didn’t look away, cementing the fact that people in customer service are among the strongest of mortals.

“Thanks!” Peter called as he left.

“You’re obnoxious,” Steve said to Bucky. “If you’re going to be obnoxious and possessive then at least do it in a way that won’t have people calling abuse hotlines on you.” He helped Bucky pry his fingers off, and then slung Bucky’s arm over his shoulders. Bucky shifted, having to adjust to the position, but it only took him a moment longer than it would a normal person to get comfortable.

Steve was nestled up close to his side, and he grinned up at him. They were so close, it was almost impossible not to lean up and kiss him. Finally, Steve gave in half way and strained up, nipping his ear playfully.

Bucky made a face, and Steve gave him a big kiss on the cheek, right as the server walked by. Steve didn’t notice his face; it was getting harder and harder for him to see anything but Bucky.

When they left, it was with Bucky’s arm around him again. They walked like a couple coming home from the movies, or from dancing. Steve told him as much, eyes glinting when he asked which one of them was the girlfriend. Bucky stayed silent, but he tucked Steve a little closer, smiling at him semi-playfully.

Steve would’ve been okay with staying there forever. Maybe a little longer than forever. Okay, a lot longer than forever. Forever and a half. Forever squared.

The mountains of Sokovia were covered in snow, a perfect picture of white powder-dusted evergreens that belonged on a greeting card. From the aerial view, it was perfect. Steve knew it would be much worse up close.

The quinjet had already landed, and the hatch folded down. Steve watched the snow blow by in the gentle, swirling breeze. He was safe from it when in the quinjet, but as soon as he exited he’d be at its mercy again. He wondered what it wanted from him: his fingers, his toes, or maybe another 65 years, trapped underneath it. But Steve had friends now, people watching for him. Surely it couldn’t
happen again.

There was a pull on his harness and Steve glanced back, giving Bucky a quick once over. He was wearing his normal uniform and looking grim. Bucky pushed his shoulder gently, likely checking to make sure Steve was wearing the long johns underneath it. He wasn’t allowed to have another moment here. They had a job to do, and just the reminder of that made Steve’s body go slightly numb from the serum.

_Dutydutydutydutydutydutydutydutydutydutyduty…_

“Okay?” Bucky muttered, so low Steve was the only one who could hear it.

He nodded, giving Bucky another cursory glance. Bucky had spent the entire night vomiting in the bathroom, and when it was time to load up in the quinjet he disappeared for awhile and the Asset had come out instead, leaving Bucky even more freaked out than he’d been before.

Steve glanced around, making sure no one was watching, then grabbed onto Bucky’s uniform, hauling him in. “Hey,” he said, commanding his attention. “This is going to be okay, alright? We’re going to be okay.”

“We’re going to be okay,” Bucky repeated, void of all emotions.

“We are,” Steve insisted. “Look. We… we don’t have to keep doing this. We need to get the scepter, but then we can be done. We’ll retire, get a nice little place somewhere.”

“Some. Where.”

“Yeah.” Steve couldn’t pull his eyes away from Bucky; he shouldn’t have been there. He was hurting, clearly. “One last mission.”

“One last mission… then we can leave?” Bucky whispered, eyes darting around. The others were paying them no attention, quietly murmuring among themselves.

Steve nodded. “We’ll at least take a break. It doesn’t have to be forever. But it could.”

Bucky sighed, letting himself slump and resting his head on Steve’s shoulder. “Stevie. I’m tired.”

“Me too, Buck. But we’re almost done.”

“Almost done,” Bucky agreed. “Almost done. And then. We get out.”

“Sounds good.”


Steve shook his head. “Nah, it’s all yours today. Sniping won’t do any good here, and besides, I might end up climbing a tree. No need to have a target on my back.”

Bucky snorted, but didn’t disagree. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Steve repeated, smiling as Bucky pulled away. “You ready?”

“Ready to get it over with. Come on. Get your bike. Punk.”

Steve grinned. “Jerk.” Then he walked to the other side of the quinjet, straddling the motorcycle he’d been training with for so long, and pushing back the kickstand. Bucky climbed onto his
coinciding one, and they drove up to the exit hatch where the others were waiting. Natasha was on
her own bike, with Bruce sitting behind her, his arms tight around her waist. Tony was in his armor
already, and with a sigh Clint stepped on his feet, wrapping his arms around his waist.

“Alright. Let’s get that scepter.”

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The snow burned against his face as he pushed the bike as hard as it could go in the harsh
conditions. The stunts that Steve was about to pull were worthy of a helmet, but alas, it wasn’t worth
the decreased visibility.

The fortress came into sight, and they could already see soldiers marching forwards. They had the
home front advantage, but their white and gray body armor wouldn’t do much in the way of defense,
and their blasters wouldn't do much in the way of offense.

At Steve's side, a motorcycle roared and Steve glanced over, watching Natasha accelerate, zooming
past him. Her bike vaulted over a toppled tree and Bruce sprung into the air from the momentum,
landing as the Hulk. No, the body armor would do nothing.

Steve yanked his bike to the side, kicking up snow as he twisted his way in between trees at 40
miles per hour. There was the sound like something whizzing through the air, and Steve's armbands
hummed, alerting him that the shield was approaching. He pulled the bike into a jump, having to let
go of the handlebars and stand to catch the shield. He landed and threw it back to Bucky, running
over a soldier in the process.

They made quick work, each taking out soldiers as quickly as possible. Steve took advantage of the
motorcycle, using it to break up enemy lines and cause general chaos.

“Guys, there’s some sort of force field surrounding the base!” Tony said through the comms. “I’m
going to have to take it down before I can get in!”

Steve pawed at his ear roughly, making sure his comm was on and almost running into a tree in the
process. He yanked the motorcycle to the side, accelerating on accident and hitting a guard in a very
lethal way. “Oops. Jarvis, what’s the view from upstairs?”

Jarvis, who was currently their eye in the sky thanks to the Iron Legion, responds with some details
for how to take down the force field, but Steve can’t concentrate. An enemy truck is rolling towards
him, and without letting himself dwell on the moment he accelerates hard, slamming on the brakes
and thrust his body forwards to send the motorcycle into a spin. He lets go and goes rolling on the
ground, trying to get away as the truck explodes on impact.

“Stark, these motorcycles are a little volatile, don’t you think?”

“They get the job done!”

From nowhere Bucky appears, flying in on his motorcycle and crushing a soldier in the process. He
swerves to a stop, the engine of the motorcycle still roaring angrily, wanting to keep going. “Get on.”
Steve lets out a tired grin as he pulled himself to his feet, hurrying over. “My knight in shining armor.”

“Shut up.”

Steve climbs onto the bike backwards, his back pressing against Bucky’s. He attaches their uniforms quickly and they take off, going even faster than Steve had been going before. Steve whoops with glee before stealing one of Bucky’s guns and taking aim, one two three four five—

“Those weren’t lethal, were they?” Natasha said, her tone taking on something almost maternal. “Because I’m pretty sure we talked about that.”

They drove up over a rock ledge, flying into the air before landing hard, backs hitting each other. Steve’s legs dangled loosely, pulled by the momentum as he kept taking aim. “What? No! Those headshots were totally chill, non-lethal—”

“It’s okay if you kill on accident, but at least try, will you?” Tony requested. “Come on, we have an image to maintain.”

“Images-smimages, I don’t give a shit. Bucky, there!”

Bucky yanked the bike roughly, and they tilted precariously as they took the turn. Steve unclipped himself and wrapped him arms behind him, around Bucky’s waist, holding on for dear life until they close enough and he let go, rolling under the Jeep. He snagged onto the underside, hooking his feet up in it while his serum-enhanced mind made quick work of the grid of various panels. He used a knife to pry one open, stuffed a glowing metal ball into it, and shut it again. He then dropped, waiting for the back wheels to pass him before rolling out of the way, on his feet in seconds. Their were soldiers close to him, taken off guard by his sudden appearance, and he threw three knives before the bomb he’d planted went off and the Jeep exploded.

“Was that my bomb?” Natasha complained.

“You weren’t using it!”

“Steve, there’s a reason we don’t let you have those!”

“Oh really?” Steve asked sarcastically, gutting a soldier and kicking them backwards. “Tell me more.”

Just then, something flew at him, just a blur of blue and then a tanks worth of force. Steve flipped, landing on his feet and falling to a kneeling crouch. “What the hell?”

“I’m in!” Tony declared. “The scepter is definitely here.”

“Clint’s hit!” Natasha declared. “Can someone please deal with that bunker?”


“We’ve got an enhanced!” Bucky’s declared loudly. “He’s just a blur. He took the shield!”

The armbands on Steve’s uniform hummed, which was all the warning Steve got before he was thrown backwards, hitting a snowbank hard. He was on his stomach, the cold surrounding him, trapping him, holding him—
He pushed himself up to his hands and knees right as another snowbank collapsed on top of him, burying him. His face stung from the intense cold, which leached past his uniform to his skin, watery and chilled, his heart pounding in his ears. *The plane rattled to the side, throwing Steve back against the wall*—

No! Steve wasn’t on the plane, he was in Sokovia. He was trying to get the scepter. He was trapped, trapped, *trapped in a metal coffin plummeting for the icy coast below*—

“T’m stuck!” Steve yelled, hoping his comms still worked. He was breathing hard, but the little pocket of air he had wouldn’t last long. He made himself relax, calm down, *curl up in a ball in the back as the cold came in, the snow came in, calling him, claiming him once more. He was a body, he belonged to the cold, he would be buried and he would never decompose, no, no*—

“What, you didn’t see that coming?” Someone said into the comms, and then they went to static.

———

The snow pressed at him from all sides like an overconfident and unwanted bedmate. Steve was stuck, not truly on his stomach but on his elbows, his face only inches from the snow. He focused on his breathing. When that became too little stimulation, he focused on the buzz of static in his ear. He focused on the tremor of the ground as the fight pressed on around him, without him. He’d tried to climb out, but snow was heavy for something so delicate. He was truly trapped.

He forced his mind to wander. He thought about Brooklyn. Before and after.

*No, not before.*

He thought about Brooklyn After. He thought about the squats that he and Bucky had stayed in, trying to make a list in his mind, imagining them all. He thought about some of the squats he’d stayed at on his own. Thought about some of the drugs.

*No, NOT THAT.*

Steve pounded a fist in the snow, making a noise of frustration. Above him, the snow shifted from his movements, threatening to take away even this tiny window of air. If Steve stayed there much longer, the serum would probably take over. Survival mode.

The snow was so goddamn cold.

His mind wandered, idling down a street paved of hazy memories. Finally, he heard something happening above him, and then something was touching his back. He was pulled up by the straps of his harness, brought back into the light of the real world.

He gasped, lungs immediately trying to reclaim all the air they’d lost. He was being maneuvered in some way, but he couldn’t care about that now.

“-vie,” Someone said, close to him. “Stevie.”

“Present,” Steve muttered, his voice higher and softer than he’d intended. “I’m… I’m…”
“Fine?” Bucky suggested, sounding just a little amused.

“Peachy,” Steve agreed. They were still in the snow, but they were sitting in it now. Or… Bucky was. Steve was sitting in his lap, leaning against his chest. “I’m doing great.”

“Okay,” Bucky said, like he’d pretend to believe that. “But don’t. Do that again. It’s not funny.”

Steve was hyper aware of the cold still clinging to his suit, his face. He needed to get somewhere warm, and fast.

“Clint got hurt,” Bucky said lowly, his mouth so close to Steve’s ear that speaking up was pointless. “And Tony got the scepter. The quinjet’s here. We should be able. To leave soon.”

Steve hummed. Even his throat hurt. When the cold bit, it left marks. “‘Kay.”

He wasn’t exactly feeling up for walking, which was good because it didn’t look like Bucky was planning on letting him walk. He scooped him up like a bride on her wedding day, and Steve didn’t object, just wrapping his numb arms around Bucky’s neck, pressing his head close to his chest. “Am I your wifey?” Steve teased, his voice plain and still so goddamn quiet.

Bucky didn’t even hesitate. “Yep.” They got to the quinjet quickly, and Bucky carried him up the ramp. “I’m carrying you across the mantle now.”

Bucky settled him down on the floor. Clint was near the front, laid out on a stretcher, but if Bucky wasn’t panicking then he could wait. Bucky grabbed some blankets and brought them over, wrapping them around Steve, who accepted them greedily. “No,” Bucky mumbled in response to Steve’s teasing, “But I will make you warm.”

“Promises, promises.” Finally, Steve got his body to actually respond, and he quirked the corner of his lip up. He was shaking, he realized, still shivering like a wet cat. Bucky gave him a worried stare before finally giving in and sitting next to him, not complaining as Steve practically climbed onto his again, re-tucking the blankets around him to trap in as much of Bucky’s body heat as he could. Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve, leaning down to rest his chin on Steve’s shoulder.

He was speaking in a language of their own creation, one that only they knew. With the head on the shoulder, Bucky was telling Steve, again, that he’d been worried out of his mind. With the physical contact, Steve was telling Bucky it’s okay, I’m sorry. I’m sick. I’m upset. I need comfort.

Bucky had always been his nursemaid, when Steve was really little and sick. He’d been desperate to do anything for Steve, needing to feel helpful to force the impotence away. Right now, Bucky was taking care of Steve in the same way, and Steve was doing just what he’d done for Bucky back then; he gave him a Very Important Task that would, technically, make Steve feel better, even if it didn’t fix everything. But sitting in Bucky’s arms, Steve wasn’t so sure that it didn’t fix everything.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter:
- Peter came for a visit/walk around town
- Steve and Bucky talked about retirement plans
- Fight at Strucker's base / Steve getting lightly buried alive
- more wifey talk (my kink???)

In other news, Steve's new official song is "Boy In The Bubble" by Alec Benjamin. Part of the lyrics go:

"I said I didn’t want trouble
I’m the boy in the bubble
But then came trouble

[Pre-Chorus]
And my heart was pumping
Chest was screaming
Mind was running
Air was freezing
Put my hands up
Put my hands up
I told this kid I’m ready for a fight

[Chorus]
Punch my face
Do it ’cause I like the pain
Every time you curse my name
I know you want the satisfaction
That's not going to happen"

Everytime I hear this guy saying "punch my face/do it cause I like the pain" I'm like, oh, Steve, is that you?

Anywho.

I rewatched WS yesterday and immediately got a super desperate need for fluff, so in like, 4 or 5 chapters (I write them in advance) get ready for some INTENSE cuddling.
Steve had been ready for five minutes already when he checked in on Bucky. Bucky was in the bathroom doing his hair last time Steve checked, but it never took this long.

When Steve pushed open the door, he found Bucky still standing in front of the mirror, not curled in the corner like he’d feared. There was something different, though. Bucky had already pulled his hair back from his face, some loose strands still hanging out, and in his hand he held a little pot of black grease paint. He was applying the stuff around his eyes, like he sometimes did for missions as the Winter Soldier.

Steve stepped further into the bathroom, curling his arms around Bucky’s flesh one and clinging onto it like a tree trunk. He leaned his head around, watching Bucky apply the stuff. He switched the grease pot into his flesh hand, so he could apply the paint with his metal hand, but besides that he did nothing to acknowledge Steve’s presence.

“You feeling particularly raccoon-ish today?” Steve asked, keeping his tone light and devoid of any teasing. If Bucky felt like a raccoon, then he felt like a raccoon; there was nothing to be done about it.

Bucky grunted, but besides that he didn’t react. “I’m going to need. Time. A little. Time. If you want to go ahead. Without me.”

Steve took a moment to consider this. “Well. I guess I could… go ahead. Get the party started.” He waited, giving Bucky a chance to make a crack before continuing. “…Or I could stay here. I’m in no rush.”

“It’ll help me if you go,” Bucky admitted, still too focused on his task at hand to look at him properly. “Please.”

Steve nodded. He pressed a lingering kiss into Bucky’s bicep, then pulled back, walking away. He’d never gone to an Avengers’ party on his own, but then again, it wasn’t like he’d actually be alone. Bucky would be right behind him.

Down at the party, he immediately spotted Clint, already set up on a couch. He had a blanket wrapped loosely around him, and he was as good prey as any.

“She’s a joke, seeing as Steve was wearing huge fluffy socks and a thick black sweater. Regardless, Steve grinned. “Nope. I’m just going to leach out all of your warmth now; don’t mind me.”
Clint chuckled, wrapping his arm around Steve’s shoulder. Steve leaned in gratefully. In reality, he was plenty warm, but ever since the ice he’d felt even more desperate for touch than usual.

“How’re you healing?” Steve muttered, going limp against him.

Clint shrugged. “Fine. It took about an hour for the skin to regrow in the cradle, but that’s still really fast. It feels like normal.”

“That’s good. Can I feel?”

Clint laughed a little, but lifted his shirt. Steve pet the skin. It felt pretty normal, the only difference being a complete lack of hair.

“Ooh, lookie here,” Tony said in his trademark poking-his-nose-in-other-people’s-business tone. “Mini-Cap and Clint, gettin’ cuddly. Clint, do you have something you want to tell me?”

“Yeah,” Clint said idly, “Your fly is down.”

It wasn’t, and Tony didn't fall for it. “You know, Pepper has friends. I’m sure I could set something up, maybe dinner, say, next week?”

“No,” Clint responded without hesitation.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Why not? Come on, when was the last time you had a girlfriend?”

“Why would I need a girlfriend? I've got Steve,” Clint teased.

Just then, there was a flash of movement and a dark shape landed in front of them, hardly making any noise at all despite the height of the drop. Bucky raised to his full height, dark and menacing in his grease paint and casual black clothes, his metal hand on display. Steve tried not to gape at him.

Bucky didn’t hesitate before scooping Steve up, carrying him over to the other couch and sitting down, yanking him onto his lap. Steve made a noise of protest, but just wiggled a bit to get comfort, sitting sideways. “Tony might be right Clint,” Steve said, picking up the conversation as if nothing had happened. “Bucky and I leave tomorrow. Maybe you should get a girlfriend.”

Clint waved it away. “I appreciate your concern, but I'm really not worried. And you're still planning on leaving? Where to?”

“The bottom of the ocean,” Bucky mumbled.

“We haven't decided yet,” Steve corrected. The easy smile he'd been wearing dropped as he remembered the reason for their skipping out. “Probably somewhere real classy. A cabin with a lake view.”


Steve grinned. “We might as well. We're basically retired now, right?” He craned his head around to see Bucky's face. “We can go wherever we want.”

Bucky's eyes were wide, sincere. He mouthed something, and it took Steve a moment to realize he was saying the bottom of the ocean again. He cracked up, shoving him. “No. Not unless there's a beach hut there.”

“We'll. Build one,” Bucky murmured, too low for anyone else to hear.
Steve raised an eyebrow. “While we're at it, we should build a guest house for Clint. It sounds like he's going to be lonely without us.”

“I'm not lonely,” Clint complained.

Bucky grinned like a shark. “Two guest houses. One for Clint. One for others. <Tony, can your Iron Man suit go underwater?>”

Tony gave a curious look, and Steve translated the words into English. Tony looked offended. “Of course! The suit has gone to space, and that was about seventy upgrades ago. It could handle a little swimming.”

“<We should throw him in without the suit.>” Bucky suggested.

“Mean,” Steve chastised, poking him, even though he was grinning even wider from the comment. “Okay, so we'll get a nice little place at the bottom of the ocean. A farmhouse. What then?”

“If it’s. A farmhouse. Then it needs animals.”

“Makes sense. Which--”

“Seahorses,” Bucky answered quickly. His eyes went wide. “A lot of seahorses.”

“Sounds like an airtight plan,” Natasha praised. “No pun intended.”

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The party was similar to the first Stark party Steve had gone to, except this time he actually recognized people. All of the Avengers were present, plus some extras, including Rhodey, Maria Hill, and Peter. Steve had seen Tony pull Peter aside and make him swear up and down not to drink, so he was saved from having to do any parenting. That was ideal, because at the moment Steve didn’t think he could. The cold had crept up his veins and lodged itself in his blood, and he was too busy fending it off, cuddling with Bucky, and trying to plan their next step to focus on anything else.

Bucky managed to stay semi-verbal, but he still let Steve do most of the talking. They were planted happily on the couch, with Bucky laying down and Steve sitting up. Bucky’s head was supported by the armrest, and Steve sat close enough that Bucky could touch him aimlessly, planting a hand on his hip while the other traced around, catching hold of his belt loops. He did it casually enough that no one else really paid attention, but Steve was having a hard time paying attention to anything else. Bucky had made it clear that he didn’t want Steve like that, but it was still hard to put into operational terms in his mind. Bucky was touching him because Steve had been trapped in the snow, and Bucky was worried. Now, he was trying to ground himself. Nothing more.

They people-watched and talked to whoever came over. Natasha stuck around for a little while, watching Hill with desire clear in her eyes and then flirting with Bruce. Steve watched, and when she was done he raised an eyebrow at her, but she just returned the look, daring him to comment. He didn’t.

Peter came over at one point and talked with them, listing through different abilities he’d been working on. His training was going well.
At one point, he ducked his head a little. “Do you know where you’re leaving to yet?”

Steve had scooted back at this point, sitting back against the armrest. He’d moved to take the dominant cuddling position, letting Bucky fall back into submission. Bucky was now laying in between the couch and Steve, safe as can be, his eyes a big watery blue, surrounded in the grease paint. His hair was back in a ponytail, greasy as ever, and his shirt revealed his metal hand, though he hid it with the cushions.

Steve touched his face softly, gingerly, and Bucky creened up into his touch. He made a noise at the back of his throat, and Steve could see him slip further into his self-appointed silence.

“What was that Peter?” Steve asked, having a hard time tearing his gaze away. The room was full of people, but no one was in such sharp definition as Bucky.

“I asked, do you know where you’re leaving to yet? Because I know a nice little place in Queens…”

Bucky blinked up at him. His eyes were almost owlish, big eyes made bigger by the paint. Steve pushed aside some hair that had fallen from his ponytail.

“I wish you didn’t,” Peter admitted. “Do you have a plan for contacting people? Are you keeping your phones, or—”

*Bottom of the ocean*, Bucky mouthed. Steve poked him on the nose.

“Dunno yet,” Steve said. “I guess we should. In case there’s an emergency.”

“<That’s not retirement>,” Bucky complained.

Steve booped him again. “We can’t just let the world end because we’re tired.”

“<Why not?>”

Steve tried to come up with a good reason, but he couldn’t. “Hmm. Maybe we’ll just give Natasha our number.”

“And me,” Peter added quickly. “I need to be able to text you and give you Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man updates.”

Steve hesitated. “Peter, I…”

“Steve,” he interrupted, mocking his tone. “You said you weren’t joking about being my foster dad. I get that you have other responsibilities, but I need you. I can’t do this on my own.”

“You won’t be on your own.” Steve looked away. He couldn’t handle meeting Peter’s eyes right now, not when he was clean, sober. “I already talked to Tony. He’s your mentor, remember? He’s going to keep an eye on you, help you with the suit, with your powers. Buck and I… we don’t actually do much for you. You could be completely independent if you wanted, Tony is just a precaution, so you… so you don’t have to be.”

He didn’t have to look to know that Peter was clenching his fists. “So that’s it. You’re just… shuttling me off to Tony.”
“I’m not—”

“You are,” Peter corrected, his voice low and steely. “I’m not ready,” he muttered. “I’m not ready for you to go.”

“Peter…”

“I’m not ready,” he said again, looking up to meet Steve’s guilt-stricken gaze. “I’m still new to the superhero game. I can’t… I need more time.”

“You’ll have Tony…” Steve said again, but Peter wasn’t having it.

“I’m not ready!” He practically yelled, his voice breaking. The other party goers quieted. “I’m not. At least give me some form of communication, let me send texts, emails, something! You can’t just… you can’t just abandon me.”

Steve stared at him, his lips parted, but no words coming out. He’d forgotten about Peter. Peter, with his parents and uncle all murdered after he’d grown attachments. Peter, with his secrets he couldn’t share with Aunt May. Peter, with his heart on his sleeve.

Steve didn’t get a chance to reply, though, because just then a mechanical voice spoke up.

“Abandon you? Why, little spider, you should know better. Just look at who you’re talking to.”

The ice was back, crawling up Steve’s spine like spiders. He looked past Peter at the… the creature standing there. It was some sort of robot, a remnant of the Iron Legion, but horrifically mangled. It’s eyes glowed red. “You’re sitting across from a killer,” the creature continued, taking his sweet time. His voice went up and down with inflections, both mechanical and human at the same time. “From two killers, actually. Actually… you’re in a room full of killers. Better run.”

Steve stood. He couldn’t hear him, but he could feel Bucky’s presence behind him, tensing for a fight.

The robot stumbled, its disfigured face and broken joints making it seem almost drunk. “I was… dreaming. There was a terrible noise…and I was tangled in… in…strings. I had to kill the other guy. He was a good guy.”

“You killed someone?” Natasha asked, her voice making it seem more like she was clarifying than anything else.

“Wouldn’t have been my first call,” it said, almost managing to sound embarrassed. Almost. “But, down in the real world we’re faced with ugly choices.” He looked directly at Steve, and the ripped up faceplate made it look like it was grinning painfully. “But of course, you already know about that. Leaving your son for your friend, hmm. I’d be ashamed, but I would expect nothing less from you.”

“Alright, WALL-E,” Tony said, stepping up to Steve’s other side. They were flanking him, Steve realized; one Avenger on each side. “This has been fun, but we were actually kind of celebrating, so let’s get this over with. Who sent you?”

The robot’s eyes glowed brighter. If possible, it grinned even bigger, and he played a recording: Tony’s voice, saying “A suit of armor around the world.”

“Ultron,” Bruce realized, voice dripping with horror.

Immediately, all of Steve’s defenses went up. He and Tony had been working on Ultron for months, and they were still missing a few vital pieces before it could even be possible. This wasn’t… this
“The scepter!” Bruce realized, “Tony, I told you—”

“Ultron?” Bucky repeated dubiously, voice cracking from disuse.

Ultron’s smile turned cruel. “In the flesh. Or, no, not yet. Not this...chrysalis. But I’m ready. I’m on a mission.”

Steve didn’t want to ask. He didn’t want to ask. He didn’t want to—

“What mission?” Peter asked, his voice an octave higher.

He stood straighter, his head flopping to the other side. “World peace.”

The wall behind him exploded, other robots like Ultron crashing through, the drywall rising in a cloud of sickly smelling dust. The main Ultron bot flew forward and grabbed Steve by the shirt, dragging him into the air, and then Steve was dropped abruptly. The metal bot was slammed into the ground next to him, followed closely by Bucky’s fist. He yanked out the metal heart, and it’s eyes went dull. Bucky’s, however, were still huge and bright with fear. “Stevie. We have to go.”

Steve didn’t get a chance to respond before another bot was on him, two claws fixating in his shirt and yanking him. This time, Steve didn’t need help. He grabbed onto it’s wrist and flipped himself over, landing on it’s back with a knife in his hand. He plunged the knife in the chink in its neck, making it spark. He jumped up and wrapped his leg around its neck, falling backwards and decapitating it in one smooth motion.

“Steve!” Someone warned, and he ducked just as another bot flew by. It did 180 and threw itself at him. Steve rolled, missing it again, but this time it was expecting it. It launched itself, at least 200 pounds of metal about to crush him when it careened to the side, hitting a support beam with enough force to make it crack in half. An arrow was lodged in its chest.

Steve turned, saluting Clint. He was panicking, but he wasn’t alone in this fight. He was reminded of that when a bot flying overhead exploded into parts from a few well placed bullets. Bucky wasn’t breathing hard, but his hands were clamped tight around the handle of the gun.

In the corner of Steve’s vision, he saw Natasha disassemble another robot. Tony fought hand to hand with one, his repulsor on. Finally it exploded, and there was only one left, across the room from most of them. His head lulled on his limp neck. “That was dramatic!” He announced. “I’m sorry, I know you mean well. You just didn’t think it through. You want to protect the world, but you don’t want it to change. How is humanity saved if it's not allowed to...evolve?”

There was a flash of movement, and then Peter was on him, garrotting him with his webs and backflipping, taking Ultron with him. The robot hit the floor with so much force that he shattered into pieces.

Peter breathed hard, eyes wide as he stared at the damage. The lights flickered. No one said a thing.
In this chapter, we had:
- jealous raccoon Bucky
- Natasha in-denial Romanoff
- Father Steve
- Egomaniacal Ultron
- And flippy decapitatey spider kid

Also :) The tags have been updated :) to include minor character death :) just saying :):)

Please comment and let me know your reactions!
The Vision

Chapter Notes

TW for accidental self-injury in the form of scratches.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve worked to keep his breath silent as he climbed. They’d tracked Ultron to this warehouse, and had spread out, all coming in from separate entrances so that they might have some element of surprise. Steve and Bucky were entering through a second story window, and though that was hardly a bad climb, there were hardly any hand holds. Steve was holding on by his fingertips, and he grit his teeth harshly, trying to push through the discomfort.

After the fight at the party, Ultron had found his way into the internet, and spread from there. They were searching for almost two days before figuring out where his next move would be; here, an illegal warehouse for weapons trading off the coast of Africa.

Steve hated it. He hated, hated, hated it. They were supposed to be out; they were supposed to be retired. Bucky wasn’t getting any better. They were supposed to have left a day before, but with Ultron active, their job wasn’t yet done.

Steve was tired of fighting.

The thought made the serum heat up in his blood, and he used the extra adrenaline to pull himself through the window. Bucky was close behind him.

There was a sharp inhale on the comms, coming from Tony. “The twins are here.”


“Fuck us,” Steve grumbled.

“Stay concealed,” Natasha whispered into the comms. “Front team, moving.”

Steve moved closer, crouching by the railing. He could see five figures: Ulysses Klaue, one of his henchmen, a tall guy with blond hair, a girl with stringy brown hair, and a robot. The robot must have been Ultron, but he was much more put together now. He’d ditched the broken forms for a tall, broad-shouldered metal form, eyes still glowing red, but somehow more human now.

Klaue said something and Ultron moved too fast to see, grabbing him and making some motion with his arm. He threw Klaue backwards, screaming, and Steve realized what had happened: Ultron had chopped off his arm.

“Stark is, he's a sickness!” Ultron yelled, gesturing wildly.

“Ah, Junior,” Tony said, bringing attention to the just arrived team on the ground level. “You’re going to break your old man’s heart.”

“If I have to,” Ultron replied. The new suit allowed him to move his mouth, so he wasn’t smiling.
anymore, but something about those eyes was still menacing.

“Uh Huh. What’s the vibranium for?” Tony asked. Steve looked closer, and saw that Pietro was holding a tube of what must have been vibranium; the same material that made up the shield.

Ultron cocked his head to the side. “I'm glad you asked that, because I wanted to take this time to explain my evil plan!” He raised his hands and more of the Iron Legion appeared, like the ones from earlier. Tony, in the Iron Man suit, dodged them, headed straight for Ultron. Steve watched as Natasha dodged one, and Clint rolled to the side, an arrow piercing through one legionnaire.

Just then, Steve spotted the enhanced girl behind Natasha, raising his hands. She wasn’t preparing to strike, but Steve knew not to trust the glowing red energy curling from her fingertips.

“You get her, I’ll get the other,” Bucky commanded, and Steve nodded, not saying anything as he swung himself over the railing and jumped down, rolling to his feet. He threw the shield, which she managed to barely dodge. It was clear that while having powers, she didn’t actually have experience fighting. Her form was sloppy.

“Are we still not killing, or—?” Steve asked into the comm, a knife flipping around his fingers. He didn’t hear what was yelled in response because the girl moved, lunging for a piece of gnarled pipe like she intended to fight with it.

Steve leapt forwards, aiming a knife at her forehead and drawing another. Before it hit, a blur of blue flashed by, flipping Steve onto his ass and flinging the knife to the side. “Wanda, use your powers!” The blur said, which was actually the blonde guy when he stopped running.

“I'm trying!” Wanda snapped. They both had strong Sokovian accents. “Pietro-- watch out!”

Pietro flashed again, dodging a few bullets. They must have been from Bucky. “Use your powers,” he reminded his sister, then flashed away.

Wanda made a noise of annoyance, then set her gaze on Steve, eyes flashing with color. She raised her hands and Steve only had one moment to think about how he really shouldn't have come to work today when the shield flung at her from another direction. Her hands jumped to face height and the shield froze mid air, encased in a red glow.

Steve felt an arm wrap around his waist and haul him up, dragging him to a hallway, temporarily out of the battle. Metal fingers snapped in front of his face, and Steve blinked, looking at Bucky.

“<Hey>,” Bucky said, looking both worried and relieved. “<You froze.>”

“<They’ve got fucking superpowers!>” Steve responded, unable to hold it back. “How cool is that?”

“So cool,” Bucky replied, more placating than agreeing. “They're trying. To kill us.”

“Not really. If anything, it’s more of self defense.”

Something in the main room exploded. Steve blinked.


“I never agreed to being nonlethal.”

“Nonlethal,” Bucky repeated. He cocked his head to the side, like he was listening to someone,
even though no one was talking on the comms. “Try stabbing him in the kneecap. Make him easier to catch.”

“Will do,” Steve said. He brushed against Bucky lightly, watching him carefully. “We’re almost done. Soon, we won’t have to fight anymore.”

“You said that last mission,” Bucky grumbled.

“It just means we’re getting closer,” Steve said, trying for optimism. He imagined a world where he didn’t have to fight. It was hard to picture, but appealing regardless.

Steve didn’t end up fighting Pietro.

Bucky left the hallway first, rushing out to find the witch. Steve took a moment, pulling himself together, and then left the hallway. He immediately froze. He was no longer in the hallway, but in a snowy ravine. The corners of his vision were tinted the same red as Wanda’s magic was, and Steve told himself it wasn’t real, wasn’t real, wasn’t—

A horrible noise filled the empty evening air, the sound of a train’s whistle. Anguish filled Steve, guilt and shame and terror rushing together and swirling around him, threatening to drown him.

Steve had seen this train before.

It was different than that day, though, and not only because he was on the ground this time. There were other people around him, a small group walking. They wore thicker coats, not woolen like the type the Howlies wore, but not modern either. They were somewhere in between, like they were in the 70s or 80s. One of the men pushed his hood back and Steve froze, his heart rate speeding up. His hair was black, cut in sharp lines. The last time Steve had seen that hair was when he put a bullet through the man’s head.

The man turned, but he wasn’t Brock Rumlow. Steve didn’t recognize him. In fact, he didn’t recognize anyone. His head spun; if he was in the 80s, then none of the Avengers had been born yet. Steve automatically reached out to Bucky, but he wasn’t there.

His head throbbed. Bucky? He thought, wondering if he could summon him just by calling on him mentally. Bucky? Bucky!

“We found him!” Someone called, and Steve tripped over himself running to them. The snow pushed him back, the wind whipping around him and slashing at his skin, but he kept running. The woman who’d called out was standing by something, and Steve didn’t let himself think what it could be until he got there.

“Where is he?” He asked, skittering to a stop. “Where is he?”

In response, the woman pointed down. Steve collapsed to his knees, shoving aside snow with his bare hands. Thesnowwilltakeyoubackthesnowwilltakeyoubackthesnowwill—
He unearthed a body. Bucky’s body, starting to decompose, but still mostly preserved from the snow. Blue, unseeing eyes were open, blackened mouth gaping, skin on the corner of his face going brown and yellow and crumbling away. His hair was long, and his arm was gone, mauled off at the shoulder. He was a mixture of the Winter Soldier and Brooklyn Bucky and either way he was dead and Steve couldn’t save him and, and…

He looked around at the faces of the people. None of them wore any expressions. There were other people around him, but he was alone. He was alone. He was alone and Bucky was dead, and it was Steve’s fault. He’d have been better off without him. He’d have been better off without him. He was better off without him...

Steve was running on a rooftop, a knife in his hand and a pulsing calm in his arm, drugs just starting to kick in. Someone behind him called out, angry, yelling at him to stop, and there was nothing, no one, everyone to run from and no one to run to—

He was in the plane, in the arctic. He’d already crashed. The snow began to engulf him, and just as it filled his mouth he heard the unmistakable sound of a train whistle—

“Steve!”

Steve jolted back into reality, lashing out and punching Natasha hard in the face. She fell back, her hand reached to touch her cheek automatically, but besides the physical reactions she hardly seemed to register the punch at all. Her eyes were wide, intense. “Get up. It wasn’t real. The witch had mind control; she made us see those things. Get up.”

Steve let himself be dragged to his feet, stumbling a bit before falling in line with Natasha. “Bucky?”

“He transformed back into the Asset, but he was the first one to get out. The three of us were affected, but Clint wasn’t. The witch also got to Bruce. Tony’s dealing with him now.”

“Okay.” Steve flipped a knife around his fingers, still feeling twitchy, despite the serum coursing through his veins and forcing him to focus. None of their enemies from earlier were anywhere to be seen, but he still felt like he was going to be jumped any moment. “What does ‘got to Bruce’ mean in this context?”

“It means that the Hulk is currently destroying a city,” Natasha said, her voice completely void of emotion. “Tony says he’s got it under control.”

“Stevie?” A low, cracking voice asked. Steve whirled around to find Bucky propped against the wall, his head lulling. His arm was covered in blood.

Steve quickly moved over, ignoring his own pounding headache to focus on Bucky. “Hey. Hey, I’ve got you. What happened?”

His eyes darted around, unseeing. “The witch,” he rasped.

Steve took his right arm, which Bucky was holding limply. He was getting blood on his hands but he didn’t care. Upon closer inspection, there appeared to be slash marks running down the length of the limb, bleeding badly, but not dangerously. “She did this?” Steve confirmed.

Bucky hesitated. “No. No, I— I did. He did. They did.” He frowned. On his left hand, his metal fingernails extended and retracted with faint clicking noises. They were caked in blood.

Steve’s heart felt heavy. The remnants of his own vision were still sharp and vivid in his mind, the train, the snow, Bucky’s decomposing body. It was Steve’s fault. It was Steve’s fault.
Steve needed to leave Bucky alone. He needed to protect him. He couldn’t protect him unless he left him.

But, when he looked at Bucky, eyes pleading, Steve knew he couldn’t. He was a lot of things, some of which were even good, but he wasn’t selfless. He couldn’t be that good charitable person. He needed his Bucky.

So Steve crouched beside him, took his arm gently in his hands, and pulled out a fresh ace bandage.

The quinjet was deadly silent.

The machine wasn’t very big, but the team spread out as much as possible. Clint and Tony were tired from the battle, but otherwise were still mostly alright, with Clint flying the quinjet and Tony leaning against the wall behind him. Tony’s eyebags drooped, dark and pitiful; he’d been working on tracking Ultron for who knew how long without sleep. Not just that, but he’d also been the one solely responsible for bringing the Hulk in from his rampage.

Bruce was sitting as far as possible from everyone else, leaning against a console with a trauma blanket wrapped around him. He’d been crying for a while, shaking silently as tears rolled down his face. The others tried to give him his space, pretending not to notice, but they all noticed. Something inside Bruce had cracked.

Against the side wall, Natasha sat with her arms wrapped around her knees. She’d talked and been responsive, but it was like she didn’t really hear. Steve had tried to talk to her, but every few seconds her eyes drifted, like she was seeing something that wasn’t there. When she first got in the quinjet, she’d spent the first half hour pointing and flexing her toes unconsciously.

For once, Bucky and Steve sat apart, a few feet apart against the same wall. Bucky had let Steve bandage him, but hadn’t allowed him to touch him more than necessary. A while again, Bucky’s body had stiffened, going deathly still, and he hadn’t moved since.

Steve watched the others with a morbid curiosity. He was a wrapped in a blanket, and with the quinjet so quiet he listened to the sound of his own heart slowly beating. The need to help Bucky had forced his serum into action, slowing his heart rate to keep him from panicking. Now, it remaining there, taking its time with its thump thump thumps like it was considering just stopping. Steve had long since sheathed his knife, but he wanted to take it back out.

Up at the front of the quinjet, Tony and Clint talked quietly. Steve raised his head, trying to listen, but he couldn’t focus. “What are you talking about?”

They turned slightly, staring at Steve. “Hill wants us to stay low for a little bit,” Tony answered honestly.

“We’re going to a safe house,” Clint continued.

Steve nodded. He knew safehouses. Maybe it’d be in a city, and he could procure something to take the edge off. That sounded nice. He would really appreciate a drug-induced haze right now.
In this chapter, we had the:
- Vibranium fight
- Vision
- Quinjet Ride Of Misery

Please feel free to analyze anything in this chapter to death, as well as make theories for future chapters. There is canon divergence in this fic from the original movie!

Also, let's just sit as a group for a moment and appreciate Steve's medical skills. An ace bandage and heroin can't fix everything, you idiot. We love him regardless.
Over the course of the quinjet ride, Bucky got closer and closer until they were finally touching again. Bucky flopped into Steve's lap, curling up to make himself as small as possible.

“I'm sorry,” He whispered, staring at nothing.

Steve pet his hair gently. It was greasier than normal; Steve hoped that wherever they were going had a shower. “What for?”

Bucky shook his head. He didn't answer.

Finally, they landed and everyone dragged themselves to their feet. Natasha went over to Bruce and gave him a hand up, trying for a flirty smile. She failed miserably.

They walked down the ramp onto green, spongy grass. Even though everyone’s shoulders were still slumped and they dragged their feet, Steve could feel the tension rising as they vetted out this unfamiliar place. They were at a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by greenery but very much secluded. The most surprising part wasn’t the seclusion, however; it was the condition of the house. None of the plants were overgrown, and the house’s paint job was fresh.

As they got to the front door, Steve thought he heard a noise from inside and silently drew a knife. He’d done this dance before; it wasn’t uncommon for enemy agents to stay in safe houses that were owned by an opposing operation, especially since so many safe houses remained unused for years at a time. If there were people inside, they had to be ready to fight.

Physically, the serum pumped through Steve’s veins, churning with force and perseverance, going I'm ready I'm ready I'm ready. Mentally, Steve wasn’t ready.

They got to the door, but Clint stopped with his hand still on the doorknob. He looked behind him, eyes immediately catching on the knife in Steve's hand. “It’s not that kind of safehouse.”

Steve frowned, but sheathed the weapon.

Clint opened the door without picking the lock and let them inside, leading the way. Immediately, Steve felt his mind thrown for a roof. The hallway was decorated with little kids’ art and knick-knacks. The fact that it was decorated at all wasn’t right, but then—

“Honey, I’m home,” Clint announced with the faintest glint in his eyes. Immediately a woman appeared from the kitchen, smiling widely. She had loose brown hair and was, at the very least, eight months pregnant. “I brought company. Sorry, I didn’t call ahead.”

The woman didn’t take the time to respond before slotting herself in beside him and giving him a lingering but chaste kiss, before pulling back and smiling at them awkwardly. “Hi.”

“This is Laura,” Clint introduced, too busy beaming with pride to feel the awkwardness in the room.

Laura gave a little wave. “I already know all of your names.”

“Oh, incoming,” Clint warned, just as a little girl ran in, her arms open.
“Dad!”

He let go of Laura just in time to scoop her up, picking her up bodily in a big hug. “Hey pumpkin!”

Another kid, a boy who looked little older than the girl, ran in too, colliding into his dad’s legs. Steve had never seen Clint so excited.

“Hey Cooper!” Clint said, balancing his daughter on one hip so he could lean down to kiss his son’s head, pulling him into a hug too. “How’re you guys doing? Look at your face, oh my goodness! You’re growing up on me!”

Cooper giggled, still clinging onto his dad’s legs. “Daaaad, it’s only been three weeks.”

“Three weeks too long,” Clint corrected, finally setting the girl down with a “There you go, Lila.”

Lila turned to him, having to crane her neck to look at him even with him not fully standing yet. “Is Auntie Nat here?”

Natasha, who’d been very conveniently hiding behind Bucky’s brooding form, stepped out, a refreshed and almost genuine smile on her face. “Why don’t you hug her and find out?”

Steve stepped to the side so abruptly he hit Bucky. He carefully pushed him to the side, giving Natasha enough room for a full bear hug with Lila without getting in the way. Steve did a quick self assessment; he was currently carrying nine knives, two guns, and enough ammunition to take out a full platoon. No, he definitely did not belong here.

He made the mistake of glancing up, and found that Laura was looking at him. She was smiling pleasantly, but it was somewhat forced. He raised an eyebrow in challenge, and she held his gaze long enough to confirm she wasn’t intimidated before turning back to her… Clint. Her husband?

“The extra room is made up, and the bathrooms are all clean. Do you want to—”

“Oh!” Clint said, apparently realizing he still had duties as the ambassador between two hostile nations. “Uh, yeah. Just follow me, everyone.”

Beside him, Bucky stiffened. The words were out of Steve's mouth instantly, quiet Russian meant specifically for Bucky’s ears. “<Report>.”

“<Territory unknown>,” Bucky replied so quickly he must have been waiting for it. “<One operative, two children. Mutual alliances. Non-combatants. Immediate threats unlikely.>”

“<Analysis?>”

“<Safe>,” Bucky said, then deflated a bit. “<For short term supply and need replenishment, territory is suspected to be safe.>”

“<And what’d make you feel safer?>”

“<Perimeter check.>”

“<Go ahead. I’ll wait here for you.>”

Bucky nodded stiffly and marched back to the door. Steve forced himself not to watch him leave. Bucky was still injured, even if he hadn’t wanted Steve to touch his arm past giving him the field bandage.
Clint raised an eyebrow at the interaction, but didn’t say anything. He waved a hand, and the others followed him to a hallway, which Steve had seen holding stairs. Steve sat down on the couch resolutely.

He allowed himself to drift, so a minute later he was surprised to see Laura standing before him, offering out a mug. He took it hesitantly, looking at the watery brown liquid inside.

“Tea,” she explained, sitting next to him awkwardly. “It’s chamomile.”

“Okay,” Steve said, not sure what else was expected of him. Laura had her own mug of tea, but she didn’t take a drink from it until after watching Steve try it, like a mother making sure her kids were eating before she picked up her own fork. After that though, she relaxed, turning her gaze forwards so Steve didn’t feel it burning into the side of his face.

“You know, you’re both everything and nothing like I thought you’d be,” she said after a moment.

Steve bristled. “Clint talks about me?”

“Hmm? Oh, sometimes. But not as much as Natasha does.” She paused to take a drink from her mug. “You know, I think you’re her best friend.”

Steve very much did not like that thought, though he couldn’t pin down exactly why. “Oh. That’s… unfortunate.”

Laura snorted, but tried to cover it up with another sip. “She and Clint are close, of course. But lately they’ve been… I don’t know. Growing in different directions.”

“Like weeds,” Steve offered.

“Like sunflowers,” Laura corrected. “It’s not bad. They’re still close at their roots. But… I’m glad that she has other people too.”

Steve tried out a laugh. It didn’t even sound that forced. “Why? You planning on kidnapping Clint anytime soon?”

Laura met his gaze, sharp and unavoidable, and she placed a hand on her pregnant belly pointedly. “I just might.” Steve conceded, and she looked forwards again, rubbing her belly absently. “But not just that. It’s not healthy to rely solely on one person. Everyone needs more support than that.”

“Says the single mom,” Steve said, then immediately tried to backtrack. “I mean, not single, just—”

She waved it away, uncaring. “Clint’s not here most of the time, but I’m not alone. I have friends and neighbors who support me, and I support them in turn. I may live on a farm, but I’m not an isolationist.”

Steve flipped open a knife to twirl around his fingers before remembering, and stowing it. Cooper and Lila had both gone with their dad, but it still wasn’t appropriate. He glanced at Laura, and though she wasn’t looking at him the sly smile on her face revealed that she’d seen it.

“I hear you’re running away soon,” she said, maybe changing the conversation, or maybe just adding a new branch. “Have you decided where yet?”

Steve looked out the window behind him, checking to see if Bucky was on that side of the house. If he was, he wasn’t visible. “Somewhere quiet. Somewhere we can heal in peace.”
“I saw the way everyone looked when you came in. I don’t think you and Bucky are the only ones who need to heal.”

“The others can go on their own vacations.”

Laura tilted her head to the side. She was such a mom, it threw Steve for a loop, even though in truth, he hardly remembered his mom. It wasn’t useful information, and it wasn’t a good motivator; therefore, the serum pushed those memories into the supply closets of his brain, still there, but seldom making it to the forefront.

“The others could go on their own vacation,” Laura repeated, musing. “Or. You could just stay close. Maybe not at the compound, but within contactable range.”

“Or I could just do what I need to,” Steve snapped. “I have a duty.”

“To who? To Bucky?”

“To…” Steve hesitated, trying to find the word. “To me.”

Laura seemed sympathetic. “You also have a duty to your family. I’m not going to tell you what to do, but it sounds like if you left, you’d be leaving people without you.”

The front door opened almost silently, and Steve stood, taking that as his cue to go. “I’ll take that into note, but in the end, I’m going to do what I have to.”

“See that you do,” she said, Sarah Rogers through and through. Her lips parted in a smile. “Hi, Bucky. Have a good walk?”

“<Perimeter is secure>,” he announced with a dead look in his eyes. He blinked, and in a more normal tone, said “It was a nice walk. You have a pretty garden.”

Laura smiled wider. “I have beets coming in.”

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Steve had a nightmare for the first time in a long time. Apparently, whatever magic Wanda had used on his head was more powerful than his serum, because it didn’t fight the images off like it normally would’ve.

He dreamt of the same images from his vision, and then some. The farmhouse they slept in burned to the ground with the children still inside, and Steve did nothing to stop it. The Avengers Assembled against him. He flew a quinjet into the ocean and woke up in the year 3000.

Steve woke to a soft touch to his cheek. He blinked awake, looking around the room for the threat. Bucky only touched Steve’s cheek to wake him up when there was some sort of danger, but after a quick scan, Steve found none. He looked up at Bucky—he was laying on his chest, and had drooled a small puddle onto Bucky’s shirt—but Bucky just kept on stroking his cheek.

“You were having a nightmare,” Bucky explained into the darkness.

“Oh. Thanks.”

Bucky nodded, and kept touching his cheek. Eventually his hand moved down, petting his shoulder
The next morning, it was still early when Steve got up. Everyone was still in their rooms, but Steve could hear the creaking of floorboards and the television running downstairs to know that no one was actually sleeping.

He left Bucky in bed, giving his arm a reassuring squeeze before climbing out. Bucky didn’t say anything, apparently understanding what Steve had asked without either of them needing words.

Steve took his time walking down the hallway, watching his feet to avoid making any noises. The first bedroom was one of the kids’ rooms. The door was wide open, revealing a rumpled sleeping bag on the floor. Steve shook his head; of course Tony couldn’t let himself sleep in, of course he was already up, planning and tracking and communicating with Hill. Of course he couldn’t take proper care of himself.

The next room, on the opposite side of the hall, was the master bedroom, and though the door was closed against prying eyes, Steve could make out whispering from inside. Clint and Laura were probably also strategizing the day, except their voices were quiet and relaxed, so maybe not.

Steve peeked away, and went to the last door in the hallway. It was the room that Natasha and Bruce were staying in, and it was cracked open. Steve leaned against the wall, out of sight, and listened.

“I had friends before,” Natasha was saying, her voice quiet, almost meek. It wasn’t a normal sound for her, but it didn’t sound fake. “In the Red Room. But friends never last long there. One friend in particular, she, uh… well, we were close. She was killed. We weren’t… allowed distractions.”

Steve leaned heavier against the wall, crossing his arms. He didn’t know how he felt about Natasha sharing her secrets with Bruce. He thought back to the party; all of Natasha’s longing gazes at Hill, and then her actual flirting with Bruce.

“Bruce,” Natasha interrupted, and Steve could hear her shift closer. “You’re not a monster, okay?”

“But I am, that’s what you don’t see,” Bruce said, his voice filling with irritation. “I can’t… be that for you. I can’t… I’m not safe. Tasha, I’m a monster.”

There was a moment of silence, and Steve easily imagined the heavy eye contact that was going down. Finally, Natasha spoke up. “Bruce, there’s… something wrong with me. Biologically. It’s ingrained in me, and I’ve tried suppressing it for so long… there’s just, things that I want, that I want so bad it feels like I need…”

“Like me?” Bruce asked, his voice low. “Are you talking about me?”

She wasn’t. This wasn’t about Bruce at all. It was about Natasha, and the little girl in the red room she’d fallen in love with all those years ago. Steve shook his head; she couldn’t do this to herself.
“...Yes,” she said, the hesitation short enough to feel natural, but Steve knew better. She was lying. “I need your help. Sometimes... sometimes I just feel like I’m not a real person, like if I keep feeling this way... I feel like someone will find me out. I want to be with you.”

“Tasha, I don’t know.”

“Just think about it. Please. I... I want you.”

A few more words were said, and then Steve realized Bruce was about to leave the room so he quickly retreated. He waited until he heard Bruce going down the stairs to sneak back into the hall and enter Natasha’s room, closing the door quietly behind him.

“How’s Bucky?” Natasha asked without turning to see who it was.

Steve didn’t bother with formalities. “Natasha, you’re gay.”

She stopped moving for a moment, then quickly resumed, keeping up the spy act. “I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“It’s relevant as fuck because you were just giving the boyfriend talk to Bruce. Nat, what the hell?”

She turned, flashing him an annoyed look. “People can change,” she defended. “Not that you’d know.”

Steve smoothly ignored the dig, knowing that Natasha meant it as a diversion. “You don’t like Bruce,” he insisted, moving closer. “You don’t want to date him. Why are you lying?”

“You’re not exactly the one to be giving speeches on lying, Steve,” she snapped.

“You don’t deserve this. I know that you’re not interested in Bruce—”

“—Who’s to say I’m not?”

“—But I’m sorry about your friend,” Steve finished.

Natasha slouched. “Friends change. It’s part of growing up.”

“I’m sorry about your girlfriend,” Steve corrected, at this point ignoring most of everything Natasha was saying because it was all falsities. “I’m sorry that the girl you loved in the Red Room was killed.”

Meekly, Natasha asked “Who’s to say I loved her?”

Steve crossed his arms and gave her a look. “If you keep doing what you’re doing with Bruce, you’re going to hurt yourself.”

“I’m straight,” she insisted, tilting her chin up. “I told you earlier that I’m not, but I am. I’m sorry to confuse you.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “If you’re straight, than so am I.”

“Poor Bucky,” she commented dryly.

“Poor Hill,” Steve agreed. Natasha scowled at him. “Nat... you’re allowed to love who you want.”

She looked away, shaking her head.
They all watched Clint part with his family. He hugged them one by one, promising Laura that when he came back he'd fix the railing on the porch, and help make space for the new baby. Then he'd stay put for at least a few months, maybe a full year.

After the goodbyes, they all loaded up in the quinjet and headed to their newest destination; Helen Cho's lab. Bruce had reason to believe that Ultron was going to take the cradle to try and create a new body for himself, and they had to stop him before he got that far.

When they got there, Cho was already bleeding out on the floor, the twins were standing back, and Ultron was monologuing. Tony put an end to that with his repulsors, and the fight went from there.

Ultron ended up getting the cradle, resulting in a huge car chase around the city. Finally, it was just Steve and Ultron in a train, with Steve trying to keep Ultron distracted while the others retrieved the cradle.

“Face it,” Ultron said, voice modified and robotic. “You’re no match for me.”

Steve dodged a bolt of energy, grabbing onto the handrails and swinging. He hit Ultron in the chest with his feet, sending him backwards, but not causing much damage. “You know, you’ve probably been the worst part of my week.”

Ultron threw a chair at him, forcing him to keep moving to dodge it. Steve was tired; he was ready for this entire thing with Ultron to end. “Oh, I know,” Ultron proclaimed, “I’ve been watching, or don’t you remember? I know all about your plans to run away with Barnes.”

“So you know how annoying you’re being?” Steve threw a knife, hoping to get it to stick in the joint between Ultron’s neck and chest so he’s stop doing that annoying head swaggle, but he moved too quickly. The knife clattered to the floor, and Steve called it back to his uniform using the electromagnets.

Ultron tilted his head almost at a right angle. He was no longer fighting, just watching Steve, like he was trying to figure him out. “Retirement,” He said finally, spitting it out like it tasted bad. “God’s righteous man, pretending you could live without a war. It’s sad, isn’t it? Waiting day in and day out for things to get better… for your friend to get better. But nothing ever changes. Every day, he gets worse, and you get sicker. It’s funny; the serum was supposed to heal you, but instead, it’s poisoning you.”

Ultron probably could’ve continued, but just then he was blasted back into the wall of the train, causing the cowering civilians to cry out in fear. Steve turned, and found the twins standing behind them, both poised to attack. Wanda held her hands up, still glinting red from using her powers.

Steve just about gutted her, but he stopped himself. “Since when were you on our side?” He snapped, annoyed.

Wanda didn’t falter. “Since we found out he wanted to destroy the world.”

“That was always the plan!” Steve complained.

She shot him an irritated look. “No, the plan was to kill the Avengers. But now he’s getting carried away, and we have to stop him first.”

“And then kill us,” Steve clarified.

Pietro shrugged. “We haven’t decided yet.”
“Look at you mortals,” Ultron said, prying himself out of the wall. “Constantly fighting among
yourself. It’s time to start over. A clean slate—”

He didn’t have a chance to finish what he was saying because then Pietro was a blur of blue, forcing
the doors open in a burst of wind as Wanda used her powers to throw Ultron out of the train car.
That was one problem down, but they were still going too fast. The train was about to go off the
rails.

It flew off the rails with a shudder like an earthquake, everyone grabbing on for dear life. Over the
racket, Steve yelled “Pietro, move any civilians out of the way! Wanda, can you stop this thing?”

She looked dubious, but raised her hands.

A few minutes later, they were safe, out of the train. Clint updated Steve on the other’s status; he,
Natasha, Bruce and Tony were in the quinjet, and they had the cradle. They just needed to pick up
Steve and Bucky.

Steve didn’t have to ask where Bucky was; he could feel his glare raising goosebumps on the back
of his neck.

Steve moved to stand in front of the twins, crossing his arms. Pietro was struggle for breath, and
Wanda asked “Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine,” Pietro said, “I just need a minute.”

“I’m tempted not to give you one,” Steve said in his full fledged Captain Rogers voice. His hand
twitched, wanting to go for a knife, but he restrained himself. These people— these kids, really—
weren’t his enemy. Not anymore.

He realized, painfully, that he saw a bit of Peter in them. They were both desperate to just get it right
for once. They’d just chosen the wrong side.

Steve huffed, turning away. He scanned the nearby buildings for Bucky, but didn’t see him. “The
quinjet will be here in a minute for extraction,” he said, addressing the twins. “Do either of you have
any injuries?”

“We’re not going with you as prisoners,” Wanda bit out.

“No,” Steve agreed, “you’re going willingly. We’re going to figure out Ultron’s plan and get ready
to fight, and when we do, you need to be there.”

There was a small thump behind him, and even though it was too quiet to be a person jumping from
a few levels, Steve knew that’s what it was. “I swear to God, Stevie,” Bucky complained, marching
towards him. Even though the twins were facing Bucky they jumped, surprised by his presence.
“You can’t keep going around adopting every teenager in crisis you meet.”

He got close enough to touch, and Steve stuck his nose up at him. “Oh yeah? And who says I
can’t?”

“Me.”

“You’re not my real mom!”

In response, Bucky picked up Steve and swung him over his shoulder. Steve was laughing hard
enough that it hurt with his chest constricted so, but he still managed to wriggle around, kneeling
Bucky awkwardly in the head before falling. He grabbed onto Bucky’s waist to slow the fall, and ended up twisting him around, trying to get him to fall too. Bucky stumbled, arm whirring, but he didn’t fall. He yanked Steve to his feet roughly, and before Steve could react he pecked a quick kiss on Steve’s cheek.

Steve glanced over, taking note of the twins shared look of horror and confusion, before turning back to Bucky. “Yeah, we’re adopting them.”

“We’re not adopting them,” Bucky replied. “We already have the one.”

“The more the merrier.”

“Steve.”

They didn’t get to continue their conversation because just then, the quinjet lowered from the air. Over the comms, Clint asked “Guys? What should we do about the Maximoffs?”

“They’re on our side, Barton.”

Tony’s voice: “Are you sure?”

Steve shrugged. “Mostly. Like, 75%. Come on, we don’t have time for this. You’ve got the cradle?”

“Yep.”

Steve waved the twins over and started for the quinjet. “Let’s go. I think it’s time you formally meet the Avengers.”

Chapter End Notes

Slightly longer chapter this time to make up for the lack last week! All of the Ultron chapters are super hard to write.

In this chapter:
- They went to the safehouse (Clint is MaRiED?)
- Laura's a boss ass bitch and also a complete mom
- Steve drooled on Bucky and it was my favorite scene ever
- Ultron Cradle Fight

Also, shout out to Tolarian, who commented on the last chapter saying: "Tolarian Drake I am still hoping Steve adopts Wanda and Pietro, thus adding to his Smallest, Angriest Dad status." Yep! You called it!

I've been losing motivation to write this story lately. I still want to keep going, but encouraging comments are especially appreciated :) Thanks for reading, and I promise the next chapter will be on time!
Peter wrapped himself around Steve the moment he came in.

“I worry,” Peter admitted, the words muffled by Steve’s shoulder. “You were supposed to be back sooner. Tony gave me updates, but he never gave me details. The tower’s been so lonely, but I didn’t want to leave and miss you.”

Steve hugged him back, resting his chin on the boy’s shoulder. “We’re fine. A little banged up, a little mentally fucked, but mostly fine. We brought friends.” He pulled away, looking to where the twins had been, but they were gone.

“They ran off,” Bruce explained. “Uh. Literally.”

“I’ll explain later,” Steve promised, wrapping an arm around Peter's shoulder. “God, I'm fucking tired. I'm going to bed.”

“We've gotta examine the cradle first,” Tony said, striding past him. “Come on, short stack. To the lab!”

“Fuck ev-ery-thing,” Steve grumbled. He shoved Peter a little, but didn't let him go. “C’mon, Spiderling. We're going to the evil lair.”

He took a step forward but was immediately pulled back. He let go of Peter, letting himself bump into Bucky. He couldn't quite see it, but he could feel the metal fist pressed against his back, holding onto the harness.

Steve craned his neck back, smiling up at him. “Hey. You coming too?”

“You need to eat.”

“Tony needs me,” Steve defended. “Bring me food?”

Bucky grunted, but released him, which was as good as a yes.

In the lab, Steve flopped onto the couch, grabbing Peter and yanking him down on top of him. Peter let out a surprised laugh, then flopped all the way on Steve, shoving his head under Steve's neck. His hair was soft and clean, comfortable against his skin.

“Stark, blanket me!” Steve ordered. DUM-E promptly threw a blanket at his head.

“Are you going to actually be helpful, or are you just going to fall asleep?” Tony asked, already setting up diagnostics on the cradle.

“I'm going to be helpful,” Steve defended. “I'm also just going to be cozy. Peter, feet up.” With some wiggling, Steve managed to arrange them on the couch so that the blanket was tucked all around them. Steve had his shoulders and head exposed, but Peter was reduced to a fluff of hair poking out the top. Peter fixed the blanket so his face poked out, but if the way he was smiling meant anything, he was pretty damn comfortable.

Finally, Steve settled down. He focused back on the cradle issue, and frowned. “Tony, why isn’t Bruce helping you with this?”

“I asked him when we first started. He said he's not interested. Something something, he doesn't
want to destroy the world more than he already has, blah blah blah.”

“And clearly, he was wrong,” Steve said, pretending to be agreeable. “Your Ultron plan worked out great.”

Tony shot him an annoyed look. “Thanks. I really needed to feel more guilty.”

“I think you're doing great, Mister Stark,” Peter said, still laying on Steve's chest.

“Thanks, kid. See Steve? That’s what real support looks like.”

“Oh no, I'm so sorry. I'll just go--”

“Sit down,” Tony commanded. He pushed a holographic screen towards them, gesturing at the numbers vaguely. “The energy readings aren't right. It somehow has no energy and way too much energy at once.”

“It probably has an external power source,” Peter suggested. “Because the body’s not alive, but it needs to have something to keep it alive when it eventually is woken up. Something sustainable. Like your arc reactor.”

Tony snapped his fingers. “I like the theory, underoos. And do you know what that power source is? The gem.”

Peter frowned at Steve. “Why did he ask if he already knew the answer?”

Steve shrugged. “He likes the process. Does better thinking out loud. Also-- Tony? What body?”

Tony gestured vaguely at the cradle. “The body in there. Ultron was going to make it into his human form. Instead, we're going to make it into an Ultron-killing machine.”

“Even I knew that,” Peter complained. “Keep up.”

Steve was going to respond-- possibly by shoving Peter off the couch-- when he noticed the slightest noise, or shifting in light, or something, and turned to watch Bucky come into the workshop. On his lap, Peter complained “How the heck do you do that? I have spidey-senses, and he still surprises me.”

“Language,” Steve chastised, flicking Peter on the ear and ignoring everything else he said.

“<I brought food,>” Bucky announced in low German. It was different from the Russian he usually resorted to when English was too hard, but Steve supposed that was for Peter's benefit. Peter had, after all, been studying German in an attempt to better eavesdrop on them.

“Yum,” Steve intoned, “Gimme.”

Bucky passed over a protein shake, and Steve made a face at it before giving in to the straw. He was hungry enough that it didn't matter.

Bucky climbed on the opposite side of the small couch, sitting on the back and burrying his feet under Peter's. Seeing as Bucky didn’t ever really touch anyone besides Steve, that was a good thing. The food thing was the equivalent of a hug.

Bucky and Steve took turns quizzing Tony on the cradle and helping him talk through things, even
though Bucky only spoke in simple sentences and mostly not in English. Peter got bored of this at one point and stole Steve's protein shake, sipping it, scowling at it, and then continuing to drink it.

At one point, Tony was distracted by something so Steve checked in with Peter, messing with his hair distractedly. “You okay?” He could be affectionate, but he wasn’t usually this cuddly.

Peter mumbled something too quiet to hear. He moved his head, speaking up. “I really was worried,” he admitted. “It’s just… it just felt so shitty being here, not able to anything. It’s like, if you can do the things I can, and you don’t help… and it’s your family on the line…”

Steve felt a little sick. So Peter really did think of him as family.

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Steve didn’t remember falling asleep, just waking up. He was vaguely aware of himself swimming back to consciousness, the sounds of people arguing nearby. He blinked awake, frowning.

Peter was still laying on his chest, also dead to the world. The blanket was tucked around them cozily, and despite the arguing growing louder, Steve didn’t want to have to get up. He figured that it was the serum that woke him in the end; he could sleep for as long as his body needed, but as soon as there was a potential threat, the soldiers instincts would kick in and wake him up. Logically, that meant that Peter’s spidey-senses also should’ve woken him, but Peter was still snoring lightly. Maybe it was because he trusted Steve enough that his body genuinely believed he was safe.

Steve looked up and saw Bucky perched on the armrest like a stone gargoyle. His expression was dark and foreboding. He was watching the argument grow closer, preparing for a fight.

Finally, Steve looked up to see what the argument was about. Now that they were closer, and his attention wasn’t otherwise distracted, they were really loud.

“I told you it’d be a bad idea! Tony, why’d you do this, you just ruined—”

“We don’t know if it’s safe!”

“How are we supposed to trust—”

“I can’t believe—”

Tony was standing against a desk, literally surrounded by Bruce and the two twins. Across the room, the elevator opened and Natasha and Clint ran over. “What’s going on?”

“Tony,” Bruce said, proclaiming his name like a swear word, “Thought it’d be a good idea to make another Ultron-bot without telling us!”

“Woah!” Tony interjected. “It’s not another Ultron-bot, I created it to stop Ultron! You can’t pretend like we even stand a chance without this!”

“It’s not your decision!”

“Guys!” Clint interrupted, forcibly shoving them apart. Tony hit the back of the desk, stumbling.
“Knock it off! Tony, you used the cradle to create something? Where is it?”

Someone cleared his throat, and they all looked over. Spinning in one of the desk chairs on the other side of the room was a bald man with red and purple skin. No, not a man—he was more of an Android, with a robotic exterior but a human shape. He raised his hand, continuing to spin in perfect circles on the desk chair. “That would be me, I suppose. I am Vision. I am made from Jarvis, and Tony, and Peter, and Ultron, and Vibranium. Wakanda forever.” He made a cross with his arms and tapped it against his chest, then planted his feet on the floor to make himself keep spinning. “This is fascinating. Gravitational anomalies should have occurred by now, but I am balancing my weight with a counterweight, which allows me to spin in perfect orbits. Isn’t gravity fascinating?”

“Wait, what?” Clint asked, bow in hand. “You’re made from Peter?”

Everyone turned to look at Peter, who had woken up. He whined and hid his face under the blanket.

Tony cursed. “Some of his DNA must have gotten mixed up. Vision, do me a favor and stick to something, okay? Climb up the wall.”

Vision looked confused, but he stopped his spinning. He stood and walked in a perfectly straight line to the wall, touching it as if to climb up, and then falling on his vibranium ass. “It does not appear as though the Spider DNA has passed on. A shame. I would have very much liked to swing from building to building.”

“Yes, our savior,” Wanda said, voice dripping with sarcasm. “I’m so glad you went behind our backs to create this monster.”

“Hey,” Tony snapped, “We need him. Haven’t you been watching the news?”

Pietro, somehow, paled. “What happened?”

“We saw it,” Natasha said, stepping forwards. “Ultron took over every news station and broadcasted a coded message. He’s planning on picking Sokovia’s capital up and dropping it like an asteroid.”

“No,” Wanda said, sounding genuinely heartbroken. “He was not supposed to hurt our country. That was part of our deal! Sokovia was supposed to be safe!”

“Well clearly, you broke your deal. Maybe he’s doing it as revenge. Maybe he’s doing it to be funny. It doesn’t matter; either way, we needed reinforcements—hence, Vision—and we need to get over there. Now.” Tony stood strong, waiting for someone to object, but no one did.

“We’ll need civilian evac,” Steve spoke up glumly. Everyone turned to look at him. “Pietro, you can help with that.”

“Oh no,” Bruce interjected, “They’re not coming with us. It wasn’t a few hours ago that they were trying to kill us! If you ask me—”

“No one’s asking you,” Steve snapped. “Pietro, civilian evac. Natasha, call in reinforcements. We’ll need quintets, or…”

“The helicarrier has flying life rafts,” Natasha finished for him. “I’m on it.”

“Good. Tony, get a quinjet ready. The fastest one. We’re going to have to take out a lot of bots, and normal knives and guns aren’t going to cut it. Tony—”

“We’ll use blasters,” he finished. “And Steve, I have something special for you too. New blades
made of vibranium. It’s different from your normal fighting style, but I have a feeling you’ll figure them out.”

“I have a feeling I’ll have to,” Steve agreed. “Clint, get comms. Everyone else, suit up. We leave in five. Peter, I think it’s time you go home to Aunt May.”

“No!” Peter objected without pause. He scrambled up to his knees looking down at Steve with pleading eyes. “I can help! I have to go with you!”

“Peter, it’s not saf—”

“You said you can trust me!” Peter argued. “At the party! You said that I’m ready to be independent. You can’t take that back now that it’s inconvenient! You’re supposed to be righteous, it’s not righteous to go back on your word!”

“It’s also not righteous to bring you along to die! What if we lose, huh? What if we lose, and Ultron takes over? Who will be righteous then, huh? Who will be righteous for everyone left?”

Peter set his jaw. “We’re not going to lose.”

“Damn right ‘we’ aren’t, because you’re staying right fucking here. This is not a discussion.”

“It is a discussion! I’m going whether you like it or not! It’s not your decision to make. I’m going, I’m going, I’m going!”

“You—”

“I’m going!” Peter yelled again. He was breathing heavily. “When you can do the things I can—”

“Peter—”

“When you can help people, and you don’t, then—”

“Peter.”

Peter shook his head, not able to finish it. He met Steve’s eyes. “I’m going.”

Steve held his gaze for a few long, hard seconds. “I swear to fucking God, if you get hurt—”

“I won’t,” Peter promised.

“I’ll make sure of that,” Clint said. He looked around at the others. “We all will.”

Steve wanted to believe it. He wanted to allow it. But he couldn’t. He shook his head. “No. We can’t prioritize anyone’s life today. We can’t get distracted. If Peter’s going, he’s going knowing full well the risks.”

“I know the risks,” Peter insisted. He wasn’t backing down. “I’m going.”

Steve sighed. He leaned back, looking up at Bucky again. Bucky was still gargoyleing, but he looked down at Steve, sympathetic. He wasn’t going to put up a fight about this. Steve inhaled. “Fine. Three minutes until departure; let’s get a move on.”
Steve couldn’t help the sense of foreboding.

Clint must have noticed, because after he was done wishing Natasha good luck, he came over to him. “You feeling alright?”

“I’m fine,” Steve said automatically. His eyes flicked up to analyze Clint’s expression. “You?”

Clint shrugged, genuinely casual. “I’m good. I’m excited to get this over with, but it’s whatever. It’s Tuesday, so we save the world. Whatever.”

Steve smiled; he liked Clint. They should hang out more.

Clint patted his shoulder. “It’ll be fine. Did Tony set you up with those knives he mentioned?”

In response, Steve flicked his wrists and two wicked daggers appeared in either hand. Each were about six inches long, not including the handle, made of solid vibranium. Steve could throw them, but as there were only two, he was advised against it. Besides that, he was loaded up with his normal weapons, excluding the shield.

“Stay safe,” Pietro said behind Steve. He eavesdropped shamelessly as she talked to his sister. In the reflection of the knives he saw him touch her face gingerly.

“I will,” Wanda swore. “And you’d better too.”

“I will.”

“See that you do.”

They hugged, quickly, then Pietro was a blur of blue, speeding off the quinjet right before it hit the ground, the ramp already lowered.

“You ready?” Steve asked her, sheathing his knives. She blinked a few times, then glanced up at him, coppery eyes intense.

“He is not fit to fight.”

“Pietro is—”

“Not him,” she cut off, “him.” She pointed harshly to Bucky, who was leaning from side to side gently. “He is not fit to fight. His mind is too broken. Something bad will happen.”

Steve inhaled sharply, then forced himself to breath out slower. “Look,” He said, trying his best placating tone. “Bucky’s gone through some rough stuff. This might be his last fight.” Ultron’s voice echoed through his mind, God’s Righteous Man, pretending you could live without a fight, but Steve shook his head, trying to make himself forget. “But I promise you, he’s used to fighting like this. He’ll be fine.”

Wanda’s upper lip curled in a snarl. “You are listening to me, but you don’t hear a word I say. He is sick. His mind is ill. He should not fight.”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t exactly have a choice.”
She marched off the quinjet, still very much displeased. Then, it was just the Avengers left.

“I guess this is where we get off,” Tony said, breaking the silence. He clapped Bruce on the shoulder. “Ready to go green, big guy?”

The first Ultron-bot whizzed by, clinking and clacking the whole way, and Bruce nodded stiffly. “Yeah. Let’s kill these robots.”

“Let’s.” If was Bucky would said it, and a chill ran down Steve’s spine as he met Bucky’s eyes. Bucky hardly ever spoke in front of the team. His eyes were pleading, but his posture was hard, ready for a fight.

Peter dropped down from the ceiling, landing right behind him. He offered Steve a small smile.

*No use putting it off longer.*
The Battle Of Sokovia

Chapter Notes

Please note, this chapter does have side character death in it as well as a bit of gore. If that is a problem for you, please proceed with caution, but this is not a chapter I’d recommend missing.

Ultron was sending his army of bots in slowly, working his way up until they would eventually overwhelm them. The Avengers+ spread out to their respective positions, taking out as many bots as they could along the way.

Steve and Bucky headed in the direction of the church in the center of the city. The jet propulsor that was lifting the city in the air was located there; they needed to take it out in order to land the city smoothly.

Bucky kept moving, but Steve stopped for a moment, looking around. He had to get his bearings if he wanted to effectively fight, and though he knew he should be focusing on the buildings and city layout, his eyes caught on the clouds. Jesus. A fall from this height would already be fatal, and they were only rising.

He was ripped out of his thoughts by a bot that grabbed him by his leg and yanked him into the air. Steve cursed and tried to grab it, but it was too far away, the momentum of the flight pushing Steve back. He made himself go limp for a moment, focusing, then tensed all at once, throwing his torso forwards. He didn’t grab onto the bot’s torso like he’d wanted, but instead threw them off their path and into a building. The bot exploded into pieces, slicing Steve in a few places, but at least it wasn’t a threat anymore.

Steve pulled himself up, giving himself a quick once over. His suit had protected him from most of the shrapnel, but his cheek was stinging and his leg hurt from the impact. He was fine, he’d keep fighting. But…

That was only one bot.

Another swooped down, but this time Steve was ready. He sidestepped it, slashing with his knives and sending its legs and torso in opposite directions. The metal slid against the pavement with a horrible SRRITTTTTT! noise, right as another bot swung down. Steve dodged a blow from it, rolling away and hitting another bots legs. He swiped at it, detaching the main body from its propulsors in the feet, but it just meant that the bot fell on the ground beside him. He rolled over it, ignoring the stabbing sensation in his shoulder, and threw a knife at the first bot. It fell in a shower of sparks and Steve lurched up to his knees, straddling the second bot. It sat up, grabbing onto his shoulders, so Steve slammed himself back against the pavement. The bot crumpled underneath him.

“These are some delicate fuckers,” Tony commented dryly into the comms. “It looks like their outer plating is steel, but the inside stuff is cheaper metal. They were pretty hastily made, too. All of the ones I’m dealing with are crumbling like crackers.”

“Speak for yourself, old man,” Pietro said bitterly. His voice on the comm was enough of a shock to
make Steve lose focus. He half-dodged a bot, but it still clipped his shoulder. He threw his second knife after it, then chased it down to where it’d fallen to retrieve his weapon. “You literally have fucking missles. Some of us are having to kill them with our hands.”

“Funny,” Wanda said, edge tinted with genuine humor. “I’m using my hands to kill them and it’s working out fine for me.”

“Shut up, donkey-face.”

Wanda laughed. “You love me.”

Steve didn’t hear the reply. He’d retrieved his knives and more bots were closing in on him, diverting his focus. By the time he’d killed them, the comms were silent once more.

All around him, the bots stopped, hovering in the air like they were about to give a press conference. The ones closest to him turned, their red glowing eyes smiling down at Steve. “So, we’re at least a fourth of our final altitude,” the bots said in perfect synchronization. “I just wanted to check in. Everyone good? Does anyone want a break? Snacks, maybe?”

Steve heard Tony’s voice both over the comms and yelled into the air: “Is this really the best you’ve got? How about a challenge!”

All of the bots tilted their heads in synch. “Oh, you wanted a challenge? I’m happy to oblige. I don’t know how much more your Captain Rogers can take, though.”

“I’m fine!” Steve snapped. He looked up at the sky and frowned. “Is that…?”

“Snow?” Clint finished for him. “Why the hell—”

“Fuck!” Tony said. “Fuck fucking fuck!” Steve just had enough time to look over and see the giant metal leviathan rise into the air.

“The witch wasn’t the only one who saw your fears,” Ultron said in a sing-song. “And speaking of…”

“No!” Wanda screamed. “No, you can’t, no—!”

“Wanda, what’s happening?!”

“I’ll kill you!” Wanda screamed. “I’ll kill you, I’ll rip the heart—”

“All of you,” Ultron monologued, “Versus all of me.” And then he attacked.
Pietro was dead. Tony was out of service, too busy dealing with the Leviathan to kill bots. Wanda was enraged. Steve didn’t know about the others, and what fears Ultron may have brought down on them, but he didn’t have time to wonder.

He attacked like there was no tomorrow. His blades went through the bots like they were made of glass, causing them to shatter into pieces. It was clear that their design was a quantity over quality game. That wasn’t to say that it didn’t take effort to kill them; Steve was already covered in a fine layer of sweat, and the end was nowhere in sight.

He slipped in the snow, and every time he fell he experienced another flash of white. A train thundering down the tracks. An outstretched hand.

Of course.

It was never about the quinjet. It was always about the train; Steve’s biggest failure, abandoning Bucky when he needed him the most.

Steve gritted his teeth, slashing out with both knives and decapitating two bots. This wasn’t the time to be psychoanalyzing. They were in the middle of a fight, and it wasn’t going well.

“Hmm, is this not challenging enough?” All of the bots said in Ultron’s metallic voice as they continued to attack. “Maybe it’s time we pull out two more fears. Who should we chose? Natasha? Clint? Peter?”

Steve didn’t know what was happening, but he could hear Natasha yelling at Ultron, probably in response to something he’d done: “You don’t control me! You don’t control me!”

A hand touched down on Steve’s shoulder and Steve whirled around, ready to attack, only to find Bucky. His eyes were wide, but he was otherwise expressionless. “Stevie. Find. Peter. I’ll deal. With this.”

Steve nodded and took off running, turning on his comm as he went. “Peter! Location, now!”

“By the edge!” Peter replied immediately. “I’m fine, I don’t think— woah!”

Steve ran faster, getting to Peter just in time to see him decapitate another robot. “Peter!”

“I’m fine!” He said again. “I don’t know what he’s doing for my fear, but I— look out!”

A bot barreled into Steve, sending him flying across the ground. He rolled, still charged with momentum, and in a horrific moment felt his body reach the end of the land. He grappled for any hold, barely hanging on with his hands as his lower body dangled.

A bot marched up to him, kicking him in the face. Steve’s head snapped back, jaw aching something fierce, but held on. Peter was a few yards away, pinned against the wall by another bot. These ones were bigger, moving with more purpose.

“How sad,” Ultron mused, looking at Steve. “The boy’s biggest fear was losing you.”

The robot kicked again, and this time Steve couldn’t hold on. He floundered, but fell, hearing Peter screaming behind him.

Steve was facing the sky, his body curling in on itself as he plummeted towards the ground. He
couldn’t breath; he could hardly see. All he knew was that snowflakes still swirled around him.

Then he was slowing, and stopping, and rising again. He was surrounded in a red glow, and Wanda was at the edge of the cliff, bringing him back up. Steve was gently brought all the way to the city and set on the ground a few feet from the edge. Wanda turned, looking murderously at Ultron. He just had enough time to say “Uh oh” before combusting, parts flying like bullets.

Peter ran to Steve, apparently having taken care of his own bot. He wrapped his arms around him tightly, repeating a mantra of “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry, it’s all my fault, I’m so—”

“It is not your fault,” Wanda reprimanded, marching over to them. “It is mine. Now get up. We are not yet done here.”

At one point, Steve found himself fighting on the same block as Stark. Tony’d taken down the leviathan, finally, but his suit had taken a hit.

“What do you think we should do about Wanda?” Tony asked as he shot two bots at once.

“I don’t know,” Steve said honestly, “but she seems like a good kid. And she'll need help after we win.”

“That's pretty optimistic,” Tony commented dryly. “Quick, someone knock on wood.”

Clint swoopes by on some sort of makeshift zipline, knocking Steve's head once as he passed. “Hey!” Steve said, but shot Clint a grin instead of a glare.

“Stevie,” Bucky said on the comms, immediately drawing in Steve's attention. “Building on your northwest corner. Good vantage point. Climb up. I'll cover.”

“So yes sir,” Steve teased, bolting for the building. A bot tried to get in his way but he decapitated it with a slash of his knives, barely slowing. He took a running leap onto the building and started scaling it, hearing a few times when a bot got too close to him and was taken care of by a few well-placed bullets.

Steve rolled onto the roof. Gravel dug into his hands, but the rest of him was protected by the suit, save for a few slash marks. Steve got to his feet at Bucky's side, right as he picked off another bot. Bucky didn't even look at him before asking “The Hell happened to you?”

“I got in a fight,” Steve joked, because that question had been mostly rhetorical. “What happened to you? Birth defects?”

“Punk.”

“Jerk.”

A bot tried to get on Bucky’s six and Steve stepped into his designated spot behind him, flicking his wrists to retrieve the knives. He let the bot’s momentum drive itself into one of his knives, then
yanked it downwards and side-flipped over it. He attacked another three bots then stepped backwards, his back hitting Bucky's reassuringly.

“Nice move, Clint,” Tony commented over the comms.

Steve laughed, pressing his comm on and turning it off as soon as he'd finished asking: “What'd he do?”

Bucky grunted behind him. “Are people talking on the comms? I can’t hear anything.”

“Maybe your battery is--”

Bucky stiffened and Steve immediately looked over his shoulder. Bucky was pressing his comm into his ear, like someone was talking to him, but Steve’s comm was silent. They only had one channel— at least, they were only supposed to have one channel.

Steve was so distracted that he almost didn’t notice the Ultron-bot rising in front of him, horrifically pleased with its ragged smile and glowing eyes. “What, you didn’t really think I was done, did you?”

Before Steve could react something hit his head, sending him sprawling to the ground. He rolled, momentarily at a loss for what direction was up. Even when he stopped, he was still too distoriented to act fast.

The Ultron-bot was still there, but it wasn’t what hit him. Instead, Bucky was standing stiffly, his gun raised— not ready to fire yet, but in a position easy to move… or rather, like he’d just finished moving. Like he’d just spun around and hit something with the butt of his rifle. Something like Steve.

Bucky stared at Steve blankly, like he was just another part of the roof.

“The witch told me that your friend has some problem with trigger words?” Ultron said, cocking his head to the side curiously. “Apparently one set isn’t working the right way, but that’s fine. There are others. There will always be others.”

Steve rose to his haunches carefully. “Buck. It’s me. Stevie. You hear me, right? You remember your serial number?”

“Oh, I’m afraid he doesn’t,” Ultron said, faux-sympathetic. “He has a mission, you see; eradicate the Avengers. I love symbolism, remember? It’s only right that the weak link should break the chain—”

He didn’t finish his thought before the knife was embedded in his forehead and the bot fell backwards, out of the sky. Steve stayed crouched where he was, bringing one leg up to kneel. He raised his hands in a pleading gesture. “Bucky,” he repeated. “Bucky. It’s me. It’s Stevie.”

Bucky tilted his head to the side, considering. The plates on his arm all shifted at once, and it was like he’d made up his mind.

Steve had no choice— he leapt. He leapt forwards, grabbing Bucky to tackle him to the ground, but Bucky just grabbed him and spun, flinging him off. The gesture was more violent than what Steve expected, and he rolled almost to the edge of the roof before scrambling up and attacking again. Bucky didn’t seem to be interested in him. He pointed his gun, his sights set on something below them.

Steve grabbed him, dodging a blow and trying to twist the gun out of Bucky’s grip. At the same time, he kicked his knee out and shouted the serial numbers, but it did nothing. Bucky got a firmer
hold on his gun and yanked backwards, forcing Steve to topple over it and roll to the ground, huffing. Steve got to his feet as Bucky pointed his gun at something below them.

“Bucky, stop!” Steve commanded, but it did nothing. He yanked at Bucky’s arm, but Bucky just reared his gun back, hitting Steve in the chin with it. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek and immediately tasted blood.

Another hit to the head, and Steve was grounded, his vision going double for a moment. He watched as Bucky jumped onto the ledge of the roof, aiming his gun with the perfect, comfortable movements of the Winter Soldier. Steve had to disarm him, had to get him to come back to himself, had to—

He glanced over the edge of the roof and his blood immediately went cold. He knew exactly what Bucky was aiming at.

Clint scratched his ear mildly. He took out his comm, frowning at it like it’d given him nothing but static.

“Clint!” Steve screamed. But Clint was too far, the fight was too loud—

Clint looked up, catching Steve’s eyes briefly.

And then the gun fired.

There was no questioning where it hit, no thinking of tourniquets or bandages or blood transfusions. The bullet hit directly in the middle of Clint’s forehead, and he crumpled.

“No!” Steve screamed, on his feet before he could stop himself. He tackled Bucky, but this time he refused to be pushed back so easily. He hung on for dear life, clinging even as Bucky rolled so he was on top and slammed Steve back against the gravel. Steve punched him in the face, and Bucky grabbed his fist, about to break it in his own metal one when Steve yanked it back and flipped him overhead. Bucky tried to get to his feet, but Steve was too fast, forcing him down and straddling his waist. He grabbed the shield, which had fallen nearby, and raised it like he was going to hurt him.

Steve stared at him, his mouth parted and his eyes wide. Bucky stared back.

A bot swooped close and that made up the decision for him. Steve threw the shield at it, hitting it with more force than even before.

The anti-triggers, the anti-triggers, Steve needed to—

“Hey fuckface,” he ordered, grabbing Bucky’s chin and holding on. Bucky tried to shake him off, but Steve held on, tightening his grip. “Look at me. Focus on me.”

The Asset bared his teeth, but stopped struggling.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Steve said, slightly out of breath. He took his hand away, pressing it into the gravel beside Bucky’s head. “Bucky Barnes. Does that ring a bell? And I’m Steve Rogers.”

“You’re… my… mission!” Bucky yelled, forcing him over. They rolled again, but Steve slammed his shoulders down and pinned him again, almost too easily. He stuck a wet finger in Bucky’s ear and slammed his knee down on Bucky’s crotch, and Bucky screamed, more in aggravation than any real pain.

“Would your mission do that?” Steve asked, breathing even harder. He leaned closer. “Would a
handler do that? Would anyone do that if you weren’t goddamn Bucky Barnes, you fucking lunatic? You—” Steve caught himself, holding on tight to his composure because if he let it drop now— hell. “Bucky goddamn Barnes,” Steve growled, and if his cheeks were wet, then fuck it. He just watched… he just watched…

Bucky blinked at him a few times, eyes fluttering in recognition. “Stevie?”

“You asshole,” Steve hissed, wiping at his face quickly. “You— you— goddamnit Barnes, we fucked up. We fucked up big time.”

Bucky didn’t have time to ask what happened. A bot swooped down and plucked Steve up like a sack of flour, and Steve twisted midair and yanked its fragile fucking head off. He dropped back onto the roof, shouting in pain as the angle caused his ankle bones to snap clear in half.

“Steve!”

Steve gritted his teeth. “I’m fine!” He shouted, realigning his foot. It snapped back into place, like a dislocation, except it wasn’t a dislocation. Steve had definitely broken it, but when he stood, he couldn’t even feel it. It just felt… normal.

“Fucking experimental broke-ass serum,” Steve grumbled. He looked up, about to tell that to Bucky, but Bucky’d moved. He was no longer in the middle of the roof, but looking over the side. At— at—

“Stevie?”

Steve turned away, unable to look at him. They were in the middle of a fight, but just like that, they were in the epicenter, the eye of the tornado. No one bothered them; no one could touch them.

But that didn’t mean they were fine. Quite the opposite, actually.

Bucky was beginning to breathe heavily. “Stevie. It’s. It’s Clint. What— what— who—” he looked over, met Steve’s eyes, and swallowed raggedly. “It was me, wasn’t it. It was me.”

Steve looked away. He couldn’t say it, he couldn’t say it, he couldn’t—

“Yeah. It was you.”

Bucky let out a pained sob, but Steve had already switched mindsets. They were in the middle of a battle, and—

“Dad!” Little girl, 4’1”, pigtails.

“Hey Pumpkin!” Middle aged man, on the younger side, 5’10”, alias: Hawkeye, relation, fath—

— and he couldn’t get distracted.

Priorities. Priorities. Steve was… Steve was alive and he had priorities. He couldn’t let the city drop. Analysis: the city would drop if the Avengers were divided or otherwise emotionally distressed. Addition: they would be distressed if they found out about a death in their cohorts.
Bucky let out a sob, and Steve added on. Important: Bucky must be protected. Analysis: Steve couldn’t protect him from them by himself. Addition: They would attack if they found out about the murder. Conclusion:

They couldn’t find out.

Steve jumped off the roof, zipping down a few stories before landing on his feet roughly, but silently. He didn’t feel anything anymore, no pain. No injuries, because his super-powered serum was healing him from all of them before they could get in his way. The perfect soldier. The perfect soldier.

The man stood there, casual, friendly. He was speaking, introducing himself, but the memory had no sound. Steve did feel something, though— fear. He was worried about something. This man was the first one to reassure him, tell him he was okay, Bucky was okay. An ally. An ally. A frien—

Steve marched over to the body (Clint’s body) and grabbed it under the shoulders, dragging it (blood still dripping from the bullet wound) away from the site of the death (murdermurdermurder too slow too slow). The building next to them had a door, and Steve dragged the limp form over, kicking the door in without slowing. It slammed open and Steve dragged the body (he had a goddamn family) into the house (he was your GODDAMN FAMILY) and deposited it (CALL HIM BY HIS NAME) on the dirty kitchen floor. He stared at it. He stared at the corpse (HE WAS YOUR FRIEND). There was a smear of blood on the floor. The body-- Clint's body-- was twisted, almost grotesquely. His legs had fallen open, knees bent but joints like twigs, easily snapped. His eyes were open, unseeing but staring upwards at something that wasn’t there. Blood from his wound trickled down his face, into his eyes, into his mouth. Down his neck. Onto the floor.

Steve felt stuck, completely unable to move. Not like he was frozen, but more like he was atrophied. Nothing held him back but his own body. And the body on the floor. The body on the floor that was so damn empty, but still heavy, holding Steve in place. The body that had been his friend, had sat with him on roofs and had, not an hour before, been swinging down a zipline, nocking arrows and making jokes.

“We need to take the church now!” Tony commanded over the comms. “It’s time to assemble!”

Steve bit back his response; that they couldn’t assemble, that they’d never be able to assemble again. He swallowed the comment, turned, and left. He didn’t look over his shoulder. He didn’t. He didn’t—

He slammed the door shut before he could. With luck, no one would find him the corpse.

(Blood dripping down the face, into the mouth. He’d seen Steve. He’d looked at him. He’d known. He'd known.)

Chapter End Notes

:)
In this chapter,
- The Ultron Battle begun
- Ultron used everyone/(most everyone??)s fears against them
- Steve fell
- Bucky got triggered
- Oh No Clint

:) :) :)

Let's also appreciate the gem of:

Bucky didnt even look at him before asking “The Hell happened to you?”

“I got in a fight,” Steve joked, because that question had been mostly rhetorical. “What happened to you? Birth defects?”


Oh, also, there was the Clint thing. Aw, shucks. Poor Laura.. Poor Nat. *shakes head*

Update next Saturday!
The Abandonment

Chapter Notes

Just know, the posting schedule for this fic is going to get pretty weird, but just bear
with me. I'm going to try to keep up with at least one chapter a week, usually on
Saturdays, but when it's an option I want to post twice a week :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The rest of the fight was spent around the church. Line after line of bots came after them and they
took them down as quickly as they could. Still, they kept on getting pressed back until they were
stuck in a loose ring around the center of the church, where Ultron’s device was. Part of Steve
wanted to give in, let Ultron win, but in his serum-addled state of mind he was physically unable to
surrender.

There were five of them all circled around the device: Tony, his armor looking rough but still
holding on; Natasha, electrocuting and taking down bots one after another; Wanda, furious and
glowing; Bruce, still in the form of the Hulk; and Steve, knives drawn. He got distracted by the fight
for a few minutes and didn’t notice Natasha’s presence until she literally kicked him in the shin to get
his attention, going back to her own fight immediately. “Hey, did you see Clint anywhere? He’s not
responding.”

“No,” Steve replied immediately. “I’ll let you know if I do.”

Bucky was still in the city, but Steve wasn’t too worried about him. Bucky would make it out; God
wasn’t too good to let Bucky be consumed by guilt. It was justice; Steve understood that. He did the
crime, so he served the price. Death would be too easy.

It was the same reason that Steve stopped all defensive maneuvers, focusing solely on offense. He
wouldn’t die, not today.

Peter swung by on his webs, taking out bots right and left. His efficiency was incredible, but Steve
looked away when Peter tried to meet his eyes.

Within a few more minutes, Tony had left to take care of the city’s now rapid descent, and Ultron
was one of the only bots left. Steve blinked a few times; when had that happened? They were
surrounded in carnage, but Steve remembered little of it.

Ultron laughed awkwardly. “Hey, come on guys, we can talk about this—!”

A blast of webbing slammed him against the wall with enough force to make him explode into bits
of recycling. The Hulk came over and stomped on the parts for good measure.

Steve blinked, and when he opened his eyes again a little bit of time had passed. Natasha was
looking at him, slightly concerned. “I’m going to go look for Clint, okay? And Bucky, I guess.”

Steve nodded, unable to speak.
As soon as Natasha was gone, he marched back to that building—not the one that housed Clint’s body, but the one that he and Bucky had fought atop of. Bucky was sitting against it, his knees to his chest, dry-sobbing.

“Get up,” Steve ordered. He grabbed one of the straps of Bucky’s uniform and yanked him without waiting. He raised his other hand to the air, flicking his wrist to call for the shield. It flew down and slammed itself into place, but Steve only grimaced, sliding it onto Bucky’s back. “Come on. We’re getting out of here.”

He started marching again, dragging Bucky behind him. He didn’t know where they were even going until he reached the quinjet. It seemed cruel, but… there were still evacuation pods left. The others would have a way to get off the city.

Just then, there was a noise on the comms. “Steve,” Peter said, his voice broken up with… tears? “Steve! It’s Clint, I found him, he—”

Steve took out his comm and all but ripped Bucky’s out. He dropped them on the ground and stomped on them with an air of finality. Then he turned to Bucky. “Get in.”

Bucky sniffled. “Is this really the way we’re playing it? They deserve—”

“I don’t care,” Steve growled, baring his teeth. “Get in the goddamn quinjet. Consider it a kidnapping if you need to. We said we would leave when the fight was over. Well guess what, it’s fucking over, come on.”

Bucky met his eyes for a moment, then lowered his gaze, nodding weakly. “Alright. Anywhere’s better than here.”

“You’ll heal,” Steve promised as they climbed inside. “You’ll get better.”

Bucky shook his head bitterly. “There’s no going back. I can’t undo—”

“I don’t give a shit,” Steve growled. He slammed his fist on the button to close the quinjet’s ramp. The others would try to find them. Hopefully the broken earpieces and missing quinjet would explain their actions well enough.

Steve got in the pilot’s seat and punched at buttons and levers at what felt like random. In reality, he just understood how the machine worked, the same way he knew how to do complex math and hack into SHIELD. Bucky settled on the floor at his feet, leaning his head against Steve’s thigh numbly.

“Hey,” Steve said, voice going soft for a moment. “It’ll be okay, alright?”

Bucky nodded, but he didn’t say anything else.

They ended up hiding away in a large house on a lake. It was a summer home, but Steve got the feeling it wasn’t currently owned by just one family because there were no pictures. The drawers were filled with cooking utensils, and the linen cabinet was stocked, but the individual dresser
drawers were empty.

Steve had Bucky wait outside while he vetted the place out, his normal throwing knives drawn. He checked every corner, but found none. The place was deserted, at least for the time being, and it was as safe as anywhere. He brought Bucky inside.

Bucky all but collapsed on the couch, but Steve grabbed his arm, pulling him up before he could go completely limp. “No. If you lay down now you’re not getting up. Com’on, upstairs. There’s a bath.”

They’d eaten rations in the stolen quinjet, but more food would be a good idea. They didn’t have anything, though, so Steve would have to go buy some after Bucky fell asleep. They’d be fine until then.

Upstairs, Steve filled the tub and ordered Bucky to strip. Bucky did it, uncoordinated and slow, and when he reached for his boxers Steve said “Wait, one sec.” He gave Bucky a once over, checking for injuries. He had at least a few bruised ribs, maybe a broken one. He should avoid laughing for a few days until it healed up, but Steve doubted that’ll be a problem. Besides that, there was a cut on his thigh that had already clotted and begun to heal. He had other scrapes and soreness, but nothing that needed specific attention.

“Okay,” Steve said, then again, “Okay. You can take your boxers off now, get in.”

He normally wouldn’t be so specific, but he got the feeling that Bucky needed that. Bucky followed his orders, sinking into the water. He turned the tap off with his foot, his head going lax. The water already seemed to be helping him relax into himself; Steve hoped it’d be enough to bring him back fully.

Steve kept moving about, knowing that when he stopped the exhaustion, or the guilt, or the horror would sink in. Now was not the time for that. He would deal with Bucky, then he’d deal with the emotions. Get them over with as soon as possible so he could go back to Bucky.

Steve got a water bottle for him and made him drink the whole thing, then refilled it and repeated the process again. After Bucky had obediently downed three bottles, he whined quietly, and Steve let him off the hook. Steve drank two bottles while Bucky soaked, then he unwrapped a fresh bar of soap. “Wash yourself off. If I see any dirt or blood left after, I’m gonna make you do it again.”

Bucky grumbled something, but Steve didn’t hear it. He couldn’t even decipher if it was English, Russian, another language, or just unintelligible gibberish. It didn’t matter.

Steve let Bucky soak for as long as he dared, but at the first glimpse of his eyes glossing over, Steve forced him up and out. Bucky was practically limp as Steve wrapped a towel around him, a wet dog that was already resigned to being put down. He dripped all the way to a bedroom and flopped onto the bed without dressing. Steve had no clean clothes for him, so he let him. Bucky was asleep instantly.

Steve moved Bucky’s smaller weapons to the nightstand by his bed, and the larger ones to the closet, including the shield. He went into the bathroom and cleaned the blood off his face and out of his hair, and once he looked almost-close-to-presentable, left, locking the door behind him. It wouldn’t stop anyone who wanted to cause Bucky harm, but it would slow them by a few seconds.

The nearest town was about a mile down a winding dirt hill. Steve passed other vacation homes, but
they were all empty.

He bought as many provisions as he could carry, then made the trek back uphill. It wasn’t pleasant, but the serum made it more pleasant than it could’ve been. Steve picked the lock on the lake house door, dumped the food in the kitchen, and brought everything upstairs. It was silent, which meant Bucky was either asleep or preparing for an ambush.

Steve struggled with the doorknob, then finally got it open and pushed inside. Bucky was crouched, ready to strike, and Steve slowed for just long enough for him to see who it was before continuing, dropping the stuff on the bed. “I know you’re an aspiring nudist,” Steve said, not expecting any response, “But I thought I’d crush your dreams and bring you clothes anyway.”

“I’m not a nudist,” Bucky complained. His voice was incredibly low and gravelly, but it was Bucky, and the fact that he was talking at all was a miracle on its own. “Underwear?”

Steve tossed him a pack. He’d gotten two, and he made sure Bucky got the bigger one. If Bucky got the smaller one, and he gave Steve the look, Steve might just have to stab him, which would be incredibly detrimental to his healing.

“Imma shower,” Steve said, grabbing some clean clothes for him and glancing out the window. The sun was beginning to set. “There’s food downstairs. Feel free to eat some, or just to put it away. Or just wait here for me. Let’s not risk turning on the lights today; I’m going to pass out soon anyways.”

Bucky nodded stiffly, so Steve went to the bathroom. He scrubbed himself the best he could, but tried not to relax into the warmth of the shower. He wasn’t done yet. He wasn’t done yet.


“Go to sleep, Stevie,” Bucky muttered. He’d taken the bowl and set it on the nightstand, so Steve could lay down for real, head pillowed on Bucky’s chest. Feet in between calves. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Fuck fuck, Zzzzzzz.

The guilt hit the next morning.

Steve woke up, and he was wracked with it. For the first hour, all Steve could do was stare at nothing as his memory supplied moments with Clint he hadn’t thought about in months. Clint, as their shield liaison, meeting them and promising Fury they were worth the risk. Clint, introducing them to Natasha, inviting them to sit with them. Then, later memories. Clint, on the couch. Clint, at the breakfast table. Clint, in the rafters with Peter, the only Avenger really willing to mess around
with him. And, the most recent ones, the hardest ones to deal with: Clint and Laura, Clint and his kids, Clint kissing Nat on the forehead, Clint promising to protect Peter, Clint defending Pietro. Clint smiling at Steve.

_Steve should really spend more time with Clint. He was a good guy._

And then, of course,

_BANG!_

Bucky was awake too, but he didn’t move except to roll over so they were back to back. They would deal with their traumas apart, then.

After his brain dragged itself through the memories like a commando through the mud, it started offering up new reasons for Steve to feel like shit. Him, not being fast enough. Him, not being good enough. Him, abandoning his team. Him, abandoning Peter. Him, abandoning Natasha. Him, letting Clint die.

_Letting Clint die._

It was at least noon when Steve dragged himself out of bed by the skin of his teeth. He’d bought toothbrushes, but he didn’t bother searching for one. He didn’t change clothes. He just walked downstairs, put a few frozen dinners in the microwave, then balanced them on his arms as he made himself go back upstairs.

Bucky was still in bed, eyes open but dead to the world. Steve kicked the mattress, balancing carefully as not to spill the food. “Sit up. I brought rations.”

Bucky took a few moments to respond. He managed to sit up, but when Steve gave him a plate, he just blinked at it.

“No utensils,” he muttered.

Steve sighed. Right, he’d forgotten them. Shame on him. Shame, shame, shame…

“I’ll get them,” Steve promised. He retrieved forks and knives and hiked back upstairs. God, he was tired. Fuckity fuck, he needed a nap.

By the time he got back upstairs, the urge to eat was outweighed by the urge to sleep. He moved his own rations out of the way and flopped onto the bed.

There was a cold touch against his leg, the metal of a fork. “You dying on me?”

“Nope,” Steve muttered. “I’m dying on me.”

“Injuries?”

“Nothing worth noting.”

“Head trauma?”

Steve laughed airily. “Galore.”
Bucky seemed to mull this over. “You should eat,” he decided.

“You should dig a hole in the garden to bury me in.”

“Can’t. There’s. Flowerbeds.”

And then Steve was crying.

They had a lot of days like that.

Steve wanted to keel over and die, but the serum kept him going. Even when his brain was a hobo-garbage-fire, his body still longed for survival. Steve really didn’t see the point anymore, but oh well.

Actually, that wasn’t true. The point was laying next to him, also dying slowly and rehashing through once pleasant memories, now tainted with blood. Bucky was doing his best, but like Steve, he was suffering. Clint had died; Bucky had killed him; they were supposed to suffer.

Still, Steve made sure they ate. Four days later, he made them shower again. Once they were clean it became apparent that the bed they’d been living out of was filthy, and instead of washing the sheets they just moved one bedroom over.

Rations ran out, and Steve hadn’t gotten any lotion. Bucky’s hand was beginning to crack from the altitude, and Steve couldn’t stand by and just let him bleed. He made Bucky put on real clothes and they went down to town together, both donning baseball caps and light jackets. If a store had a tv in it, they didn’t go in the store. If there was a stack of newspapers anywhere, they walked faster. There was life outside of this safe space in the mountains, and if they accepted that then they accepted defeat.

They walked faster.


They discovered the reason the lake houses were all empty. Not only was school in session, but it was the rainy season. Every night, often through the morning, it rained and rained, blocking out the sun and hydrating the earth. Steve and Bucky knew what rain meant, though. They were smart like that; they knew what you do when it rains, and they did just that.

Hiking in the rain, it turned out, was quite nice. It wasn’t pleasant, per say, but Steve got so focused on not slipping that when his mind wandered, it wasn’t even that bad. They marched through the foliage, letting the rain roll off their jackets and hats, and sometimes, their bare arms and hair, and it was good.

And it was good. And it was good. And it was—

Bucky became set on never leaving the bed again, so Steve negotiated for a little while before giving up and dragging him. He brought his limp body to the bathroom, first, because if Bucky hadn’t
gotten out of bed in twelve hours it meant that he hadn’t pissed in twelve hours. Once they were by the toilet, Steve kicked him light. “Get up. You gotta piss.”

“You’re mom’s gotta piss,” Bucky complained.

Steve went over to the sink and ran the water until it was frigid, then dumped it in Bucky’s face without ceremony. Bucky sat up rapidly, spluttering and lashing out. When he finally stopped, he looked Steve in the eyes with a glare so angry and miserable, it almost looked like he hated him.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “I’d tell you to fight me, but you’re too fucking pathetic to get off the floor.”

Bucky stayed where he was, breathing hard. His hair hung in wet clumps, and the top of his shirt was stained with water. He seemed to be fighting with himself, trying to decide between giving in fully to his depression and caving Steve’s face in. The second option apparently won, because before Steve’s mind could process his body was moving, darting away from Bucky’s predator form as he lunged. Steve spirited away, out of the bathroom and through the bedroom, hitting his shoulder on the doorframe as he went but not being able to slow down. He made a sharp turn at the stairs and ran down the first flight before jumping over the railing, landing on the ground with a roll. Bucky didn’t bother with that, and instead hurled himself off of the top step, landed with hardly a creak.

Steve leaped over a couch. Instead of following his actions, Bucky kicked the couch and the entire thing flew forwards. Steve jumped just before the couch could take out his legs, landing on the cushions right as it hit another piece of furniture. He was flung forwards, catching himself in a tuck, but before he could roll to a standing position Bucky stepped over him, trapping him. Steve flattened himself on the ground, breathing heavily.

Bucky flicked open a knife, almost in slow motion. Steve watched him carefully, still breathing hard. Bucky’s body was rigid but his eyes were clear, and when he got on his knees to straddle Steve’s waist like that, it was more reminiscent of an old man than a soldier. Bucky pressed the tip of the knife into Steve’s cheek, right where his simple was.

“You fucking idiot,” Bucky exhaled, and yep, that was Bucky. Pure, 100% Barnes.

Steve gave Bucky an arrogant smile. “It got you off the floor, didn’t it?”

Bucky grunted, neither agreeing nor denying. His eyes flickered forward. “I think I broke the couch.”

“You didn’t break the fucking couch. With that puny kick? Please.”

“I’ll puny kick your teeth in.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows and his knife in the same motion. He pressed the blade against Steve’s throat, above his Adam’s apple. “Would you? Really?”

Steve did his best not to swallow. “More than anything.”

Bucky kept staring at him, a little unbelieving. Finally, he sheathed his knife. “Fucking sadist, that’s what you are.”
“I think the word’s masochist,” Steve corrected easily, “but yeah, that too.”

They hiked. They got to a spot on the trail where the trees covered the outside of the path, but not the inside. On a whim, Steve moved to the middle of the path and stopped, tilting his head back and opening his mouth for the rain. It ran over his closed eyes and nose, and though some poured into his mouth, it wasn’t as much as you see in the movies. The water was both pure and dirty.

*God’s righteous man.*

Something brushed the inside of Steve’s mouth and he choked, keeling over. It took a few coughs to dislodge the wet little cluster of leaves.


Steve glared at him, the effect somewhat ruined by how he was soaked to the bone and still smiling. He bent down—he didn’t have to bend far—and picked up a handful of mud.

Bucky’s eyes went wide. “Stevie. Don’t.”

Steve crept forwards, still somewhat bent over. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t you dare—ack! You goddamn menace! Get off of me!”

Steve just cackled with glee, shoving more mud down Bucky’s shirt.

They wandered into the lake, swimming for the sake of keeping their blood flowing. They hiked in the woods, mostly when it was raining, but sometimes when it wasn’t. The ground was often spongy beneath their feet, but Steve didn’t mind.

They went to bed early. They stayed up late, staring at the moon and stars, faces illuminated. Bucky stared at the moon the hardest, eyes wide in imitation.

“It’s pretty,” Steve commented quietly. Bucky nodded, leaning over to tell him something but misjudging the distance. He exhaled in surprise when he suddenly found Steve’s face much closer than he’d anticipated. He didn’t back off though, not for a few good moments.

They swam, and Steve found a few fish. “Buck! Come over here, you’ve got to see this!”
And, when he saw it: “I’ve seen a damn fish before, Stevie.”

And, because Steve was an ass: “Not like this one. Com’on look closer.”

Bucky leaned down, and when he was close enough Steve shoved his head under the water. Bucky’s arm lashed out, grabbing his legs and flipping him over, dunking him too. They both re-emerged panting, and promptly started a water fight.

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They killed Clint.

They killed Clint.

They killed—

“The fuck is that?” Bucky asked sharply.

Steve frowned at the device, turning it from side to side. “I found it on the yard,” he said, making his voice swell with drama. “It’s an inter-planetary device, sent from a planet where everyone is so hideous, no mere mortal can look at them without crying. They were wanting you to come home to visit.”

Steve squeaked when Bucky stuck a wet finger in his ear. He shoved Steve aside, picking up the object that Steve had not found on the front lawn, but rather, in a store. “You plug it in?” He walked dubiously.

Steve rubbed his ear. “Yeah. It’s a food processor.”

“But why. Would we need to process our food?”

Steve shrugged. “I dunno. We could always try and make it process something else.”

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“It’s not gonna work,” Bucky insisted. They were both crouched behind the counter like it was a bomb shelter, both waiting for Steve to turn on the food processor. They’d managed to close it—barely—by using knives to cut up the shoe into smaller pieces.

Steve grinned. “It’s totally gonna work.” Without further ado, he pressed the red button.

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“Huh,” Bucky said, mildly interested. “What do you know.”
“I told you it’d work. Now what are we supposed to do with it?”

Bucky gave Steve a look that he knew he wouldn’t like the result of. “Dare you to eat it.”

Who would tell Laura about Clint’s death? Who would tell his kids? Did they find the body? Did Nat find the body? If not, then who told Nat?

“You know, I think you’re her best friend. She and Clint are close, of course. But lately they’ve been... I don’t know. Growing in different directions. Like sunflowers.”

Bucky was sitting on the floor. Bucky was shaking.

“It’s not gonna work, is it?” He asked, eyes big but mostly unseeing. “It’s never gonna work. Nothing will. I’m gonna be like this forever.”

Steve sat down with his back to a side table. He shrugged. “Maybe. So what?”

Bucky threw a book at him and Steve let it hit. He winced, but let it slip down his body, slide onto his lap and flop off. “So I’m fucked,” Bucky accused. “You heard Ultron; there are other trigger phrases. We couldn’t even get that one out of my head, you think we could get the others? How? Fucking how?”

Steve didn’t have an answer.

Lila’s voice: “Dad!”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter...

- "Steve, where's Clint?" "I have no idea"
- escape from Sokovia (aka team abandonment)
- the safehouse + bathing + routine + healing + hiking
The Long Awaited

Chapter Notes

Thanks to candycanedarcy for helping me with this chapter :) no one appreciates your tables as much as I

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They managed to go into town for lunch one day. They were sitting across from each other at an outside table, eating their food silently when the waitress came back with Bucky’s lost drink order and apologized profusely. Maybe she saw past his hobo-exterior; maybe she appreciated his form even when it was covered in layers of jackets; maybe she was just a nice person. But whatever her reason, she flirted with him.

Steve found himself growing extra quiet after that.

That night, Bucky apparently couldn’t stand it anymore. “Stop sulking,” he complained. “S’not like it matters. She was just a waitress; she didn’t even ask for my number.”

Steve looked up from where he was busy scraping mud off his shoes. It was purely coincidence that they’d have this conversation while he was armed. “I’m not sulking.”

Bucky scoffed and turned away, like that was that. He came back a moment later with a newspaper and sat down, methodically tearing little pieces off of it just for something to do with his hands. “You are. You’re always sulking.”

“Yeah, well.” Steve struggled for something to say to defend himself. “You’re ugly.”

“You’re also stupid,” Bucky added easily. “She was just a waitress. And it’s not like. It’s not. I’m not dating anyone, or. Anything. So what does it. Matter? I’m single.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed blandly, going back to his muddy shoes. “You should go for it. We can go back tomorrow. Hell, I’ll even clear out for a while, let you invite her in for coffee like a real gentleman. Quick question: will you tell her about the war crimes before, or after you fuck her? Because my vote’s for after. Women are so unaccepting of that shit these days.”

Bucky huffed angrily. “She was just a waitress.”

“Never stopped you before.”

Something hit Steve’s head and he looked up in surprise. Bucky had crumpled a sheet of newspaper into a ball and thrown it at him. Bucky glared at him from across the room as he continued tearing the front page into little scraps. “You know Stevie, I’ve been wondering why you came after me. It’d be a hell of a lot easier to leave me on that fucking floating city. Or to lead me to the quinjet and say bye. Or even just. To do nothing. Let the Avengers take care of the traitor.” Steve opened his mouth to reply, but Bucky snapped “Let me speak,” before he could.

Bucky continued, eyes burning a hole in the paper he was systematically destroying. “I’ve been trying to figure out. Why you did what you did. And I think I finally got it. You did it because you love me.”
Steve felt his mouth grow dry. “Sure,” he said quietly, unsure where this was going. “So what if I do? Not like I’ve been trying to hide it.”

“You’re miserable,” Bucky complained. He didn’t look up. “You make me miserable.”

Steve could feel his hackles rise. “Sucks for you, I guess.”

Bucky growled. His metal hand twitched to the side, pounding once against the couch. “You should stop,” he said, quieter now. “I don’t know what kind of fucking fantasy you have… how you think I can get better, or, or, that’ll I’ll be who I used to be. Or. That I could ever be good enough for you. But you’re. Wrong. I won’t. Can’t. Sorry.”

Steve watched him carefully, trying to figure out where this was coming from. Bucky still refused to look up and meet his eyes. His fingers fidgeted nervously, his knee twitching with too much excess energy. And he was saying… what? That he wanted Steve to move on? That he thought Steve was… what, waiting for him to get better? Like some sort of… project boyfriend?

“That’s so fucking stupid,” Steve decided finally. *That* got him a glare from Bucky, which he appreciated. “Bucky, I don’t give a shit about any of that. I just want…” He immediately regretted starting that sentence, but Bucky’s gaze had stilled on him, and there was no backing down now. “I just want you. I don’t care how. I’ll be the best man at your wedding if I gotta, I don’t care. I just want you.”

Bucky didn’t move. He didn’t say anything.

Steve inhaled. “I wasn’t going to just *leave you* after Ultron. I may like you… like that… but I wasn’t going to— I wasn’t gonna— I can’t just leave you. I won’t— wouldn’t—”

“Oh, Okay, don’t hurt yourself.” Bucky paused, thinking. “You’d be my best man, huh.”

Steve made a face. “I fuckin’ better be. Otherwise, I’d have to kill whoever you appointed in my place.”

Bucky shook his head. “I’m not gonna get married; you know that. Who’d marry me?”

Steve looked up, grinning a little darkly. He didn’t say anything, but he wanted to.

Bucky hesitated, then: “Whatever you’re. Thinking. Say it.”

“I’d marry you,” Steve said without pause. “In a heartbeat. I won’t, because you don’t want me like that, but I—”


Steve felt his face twist up in concern. “You said— you said you knew. Look, I know you don’t want me like that—”

“It’s not that,” Bucky said, shaking his head. “It’s— in a heartbeat?”

“In a heartbeat,” Steve confirmed. “Buck, I told you—”

“Shut up.” Bucky curled over, hiding his head in between his knees like suddenly there was too much sensory input. “Shut up. Shut— you’re not joking, are you? It’s not. A joke. A, a fantasy. Not pretending.”

Steve was starting to understand what was going on. He sat back, relaxing with his arms behind his
head. “Nope. I’m not pretending; I have a feeling you were, though.” Bucky didn’t reply, so Steve kept going, probably a little too arrogant, but hey, he never claimed that he was humble. “So, Buck, my friend, my pal, my bro. How does it feel to realize that you’re gay?”

“I hate you,” he muttered, unmoving from his hunched over position. “I hate you, God, I hate you so much.”

Steve stood, stretching obnoxiously before moving over to sit on the couch next to Bucky. “Aw, Buck, I don’t think that’s true. I think you love me.”

Bucky hunched over even more, muttering to himself. “You little—fucking—I swear—”

“Shh, shhh,” Steve patronized. “Breathe.”

“Fuck you,” Bucky snarled, and then his metal hand was grabbing a fistful of Steve’s shirt and he was yanking him forwards, their legs pressed together, their chests bumping, so close—

Fuck it, Steve thought, and kissed him.

The biggest surprise? He kissed back. Instantly.

Bucky groaned into his mouth, kissing him harder and fisting both hands in Steve’s shirt. Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky’s neck, keeping him close, and they just…stayed there. Kissing like fucking animals, and when Steve moaned into Bucky’s mouth he shoved him onto his back. Newspaper shreds went flying like confetti from the impact, but there was no time to process. Steve had exactly one goal, and that included straddled his hips and connected their lips again, again, angry and possessive and Bucky was just as into it, if not more.

“I’m—a fucking—idiot—” Bucky said in the short gaps between kisses. Steve started kissing at the corner of his mouth, and Bucky gently pushed his head to the side, so he could kiss on the right side of his jaw. Bucky moaned, so Steve kept going.

“I thought—I’d push it—down, fuck Stevie,” Bucky said, interrupting himself with his own gasping. His left leg jerked up, and Steve slotted his leg between them, pushing his calf under Bucky’s leg to entangle them further. Bucky whined, then continued. “I thought—but then—you thought I’d find a wife? What the fuck? Why would I ever—need—a wife—if I’ve got you.”

It was Steve’s turn to moan, the noise coming own more like a mewl. Bucky grabbed him harshly by the back of his skull and pulled him back to meet his lips.

They stayed like that for a while, eventually slowing down to sweet, smaller kisses, instead of the heated, agitated ones from before. “I love you like fucking crazy,” Steve whispered, looking up through lidded eyes to try and gauge Bucky’s reaction.

Bucky pressed upwards, kissing him again. “I think I’d die if I lost you.”

“Don’t die,” Steve whispered.


“Fucking jerk,” Steve replied, still in a whisper. He was smiling now, and he didn’t think he was ever going to stop.
They slept together as tangled as ever. Steve spooned Bucky, his hands around his waist and his feet tucked between Bucky's calves. It was a wonder then, when Steve woke up in bed alone.

Bucky clearly wasn't in the bedroom, and upon inspection he wasn't in the bathroom either. Steve searched the house for any trace of him, keeping an eye out for any notes or signs of struggle. He checked his phone, even though Bucky didn't bring his phone with him. They'd have to get him a new one. He always used to surf the internet on the nights he couldn't sleep; Steve didn't want to leave him alone with his thoughts more than necessary.

After it was confirmed that Steve had no fucking idea where Bucky was, he gave up and went outside. It was dawn, so Steve had probably slept about five hours. He walked out to the lakeside and flopped down on his ass in the sand. He'd taken the anti-drug box off a while ago, and now he scratched the skin that it'd covered.

He ended up pulling out his phone and checking the messages again. There were a few he’d purposely avoided reading. He turned off his read receipts and opened them; might as well.

From: Tony

What happened? Did one of the bots mess with Bucky's arm? Bc if so, I can totally repair it. I'm not just a pretty face.

No, seriously. Lemme know what I can fix.

From: Natasha

Mission report: Mission accomplished. Civilian Casualties: unknown, suspected less than 10. Team Casualties: 2; Clint Barton; Pietro Maximoff. Allied Injuries: multiple minor, one moderate: Peter received a significant concussion. Recommended no stimulation for 24 hours to allow healing factor to reset. Other team members: operational. Team members Rogers and Barnes unaccounted for. Injuries: unknown. Location: unknown. Suspected desertion.

Steve turned the phone off and flipped it over. He took in a few deep breathes, trying to get his rebellious body under control. The human part kept wanting to react, but he wasn't going to let it, he wasn't.

Really, none of the information was a surprise besides the fact that Peter got a concussion. He'd been the one to kill the final Ultron bot, and he hadn't hit his head then, so he must have gotten it earlier. That wouldn't have been pleasant, fighting with a concussion. Steve comforted himself by remembering Peter's advanced healing factor.
When he got himself back under control, he opened his phone to check the last batch of messages. There was only one person left that he had messages from.

From: Peter

Where r u?????

No literally were r u.

*where

The Hulk just turned back to Bruce

He-dehulked? Un-hulked?

Idk

Nat's pissed. You better be alive otherwise shes gonna kill you.

Steve? Pls respond?

I'm sorry if I upset you telling you about Clint. We dont know what happened or who did it. I mean, like, a bot did it I guess. It's just weird.

Pls pick up. I'm really worried

....

Dont leave me.

Nat thinks that you left. She says you took the quinjet. But. You said you wouldnt leave without at least saying goodbye, and you said that you'd keep your phone on you so we could still talk. So, if you'd just... respond

Not that I'm being clingy, or anything

Just

Yeah

If you wouldnt mind

Please

Okay, we're back at the compound now. Apparently I have a concussion and shouldn't be texting, lol. Um. I'll check my phone when I get out of the med wing, tho. Text me back.

Okay, I'm back. And I was thinking. Maybe your phone is broken?? So I have an email too. Um, its PadawanParkerPants@yahoo. Just kidding, um, its @gmail.com, notYahoo, but the rest is right. It's kinda stupid, I know, but if emails work better for you...
Natasha just left to go visit Laura. I'm still here, but it's really boring. Bruce is going on a research trip, so I can't hang out with him. And all Tony does is hang out in his lab. I really miss training with you. Tony thinks I should go back to Aunt May's house, but I really don't want to.

Well, I'm going back to Aunt May's house now

Haha. Thought you'd like this [image attached]

Spider-Man conspiracy: is it true? Sources needed [link]

Lemme know if you see these. Or, you know. If you give a shit at all.

Steve processed the sound of combat boots on sand, so he wasn't surprised when Bucky plopped down next to him, their thighs brushing. He planted his arm in the sand behind Steve, leaning to read over his shoulder. “Ouch,” he muttered.

“Hey,” Steve said, voice dry. “You weren't in bed this morning.”

“I took a walk. You should respond to Peter.”

“Or stop reading his messages,” Steve agreed. He went back into settings and turned on his read receipt, but that didn't seem like enough. Steve huffed and leaned back, taking a picture of the lake with the morning sunrise in the background, and sent it. Then he took the back out of his phone so it'd show up as out of service.

Bucky grunted. “That'll do it.”

“I don't want to talk to them,” Steve defended. “Any of them.”

Bucky let out a slow breath, but didn't say anything. They fell into a comfortable silence, just staring at the picturesque lake. They probably didn't deserve that either.

“Hey,” Steve said, remembering. “Last night. That was real? And you… you meant it?”

“Aw, shucks Stevie. Yeah, I… I meant it. And you? You haven't changing your mind or… nothin'?”

“Nah,” Steve said, maybe too casual for what the situation called for. “Not really.”

He looked forward again, but Bucky wasn't done with him. He took Steve’s chin in his hand and made him turn toward him, then leaned in and kissed him without letting go. Steve kissed back, just sweet little things. Steve was scowling something fierce, the skin between his brows wrinkling, but after a few kisses it smoothed out. Then, when Bucky pulled away and ducked his head, Steve was… smiling.

“Hey, jerk,” Steve said, appreciating the brush of pink on Bucky's cheeks. “I love you.”

Bucky huffed. “Punk. I can't stand you.”

“Hmm. Yes you can.”
“Shuddup.”

“In fact, I think you love me. You want to kiss me and hold me and make me your girlfriend—”

“Boyfriend,” Bucky corrected quickly. He cleared his throat. “Things are… different, now. Two guys can date. Boyfriend and boyfriend. It doesn’t just have to be… a guy and a girl.”

Steve nodded, catching Bucky's eye. “And if I want to be your girl?”

Bucky looked a little surprised, but at the same time, he wasn't that surprised. He sat up, considering. “You'd be my girl? My. Dame. My. Wifey?”

Steve couldn't help the smile rising on his lips. “Yeah. You're wifey.”

“Hmm. Well. You're already. My Doll. So I suppose.” Bucky shoved Steve onto his back, making him squeal as he climbed on top of him. He leaned over him and sucked abruptly on his neck, just for a second, just to annoy him.

“You asshole!” Steve laughed. “I may be a little short for a guy—”

“No take-backs,” Bucky announced. “You're my doll. No take-backs.”

“No take-backs,” Steve repeated. “Imma take you back.” He didn't know what that meant, but it sounded vaguely threatening. “Why don’t you kiss me again. See how much you like the taste of my teeth.”

Bucky hummed, considering. He leaned over Steve, pinning him down with his body. Steve was happy to lay there and let him.

Bucky put his flesh hand over Steve’s mouth, covering it before pressing a kiss over it. “Yeah, I'm not gonna do that,” he decided. “This bitch bites.”

Steve made a disgruntled noise under his hand, but didn’t try to push him away. Apparently realizing that he was allowed to stay like that, Bucky took advantage and leaned down again, biting the tip of Steve’s nose. He moved over a bit and Steve closed his eyes so Bucky could kiss each of his eyelids.

“I like you like this,” Bucky teased. “You're so nice when you can't talk.”

“You prick,” Steve said, but it came out more like “Mmm mmmf.”

“Aww, you agree,” Bucky said, the glint in his eyes revealing that he knew the truth. He slid his metal hand over Steve's back, making him arch up against him, and finally he took his hand away to kiss Steve's lips. Steve kissed back for a moment, then, because he was an ass, bit Bucky's lip.

“Ow.”

“You deserve it. I ain't your bitch.”

“Mmm. Yes you are.”

“Fight me.”
Bucky dropped down and kissed Steve again.

Chapter End Notes

Fucking finally, am I right?

In this chapter, Steve and Bucky finally got together. It only took 180k+ words, but let's not pretend, they've been dating the whole time, they just didn't acknowledge it. In other news, the Avengers are worried and Peter is incredibly sad and upsetting.

Next chapter will be up next Saturday, and comments are always appreciated!
The Mixtape

Chapter Notes

The next morning, Bucky didn’t get out of bed. Steve made breakfast and cleaned the kitchen, then did a small load of laundry and washed the windows. It was domestic as hell, but Steve was doing his best to waste as much time as possible. Finally, it was noon and Bucky was still in bed, so Steve went upstairs and climbed on top of him. “Hey, Butternut. Go brush your teeth for me, will ya? Then we can do something nice.”

It took a few minutes for Bucky to get up and take care of his hygiene— not just brushing his teeth, but going to the bathroom and changing clothes— and then Steve let him back in bed. He’d learned decades ago that when Bucky was in a mood, it was best to get him moving. Right now, he was clearly depressed. Good hygiene wouldn’t fix that, but it certainly would make getting out of bed again a little easier.

Steve had done some research on grief and depression, just to make sure he was headed in the right direction. He knew that he hadn’t dealt with Clint’s death properly— his serum had butted in and healed over most of the soreness there, saving him from real emotions like grief— but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t help Bucky. Right now, the goal was to get back up to functioning capacity.

Steve just really didn’t want him to hurt anymore.

“You wanna read?” Steve asked when Bucky came back in the bedroom. Bucky shook his head. So far that day, he’d been completely nonverbal. Steve knew how to deal with that too, but he made a mental note to watch out for any speech. “Okay. Is there anything you want to do?” Another shake; not surprising. “That’s fine. I brought breakfast.”

Bucky climbed onto the bed with Steve, picking up the bowl from the nightstand and stirring the contents meekly. He didn’t lift the spoon to his mouth.

“Okay, well, I’m going to read,” Steve decided. “And put on music.” Music was supposed to be good for sad people, as long as the music wasn’t also depressing. Steve had his phone, but no way to attach it to any speakers. He had found a CD earlier though, a homemade mixtape titled “Classic Elvis”. He popped it in the CD player, leaned against the bed’s headboard, and opened his book.

Steve made it a few pages in before he got distracted by Bucky. Bucky finally decided to eat, though he didn’t finish his food before flopping down in Steve’s lap. It wasn’t the most productive thing, but human-contact was another good thing for sad people. Steve would be a pillow for as long as Bucky wanted him to be.

The music washed over them. It wasn’t like what they grew up with, but was closer to that than modern music. It wasn’t as fake; you could hear the actual instruments and background singers. And Elvis— God, Elvis. Steve had heard some of his later songs, poppy energetic tunes filled with voice cracks and general scratchiness, but these were different. These songs were lower, with attention paid to the rhythm and tones. This wasn’t Elvis, the King Of Rock and Roll; this was Elvis, the gospel singer. Not all of the songs on the CD were gospel music, but some were. Steve hadn’t appreciated “How Great Tho Art” until he heard Elvis sing it, low and melodic, the sounds of a full band thundering behind him.

“Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou arttttttt! How gre-at Thou arttttttttt!

Steve listened to that song for a while before going back to his book. He only got through another two pages before getting distracted, however. The next song had started, and Bucky was tapping along to it.

“Are you lonesome, tonight?
Do you miss me, tonight?
Are you sorry... we drifted... apart?
Does your memory stray
To a bright summer day
When I kissed you
And called you
Sweetheart”

Steve sat back, not closing his book, but no longer paying attention to it. Bucky shifted slightly, staying comfortable, and resumed tapping along against Steve’s knee.

“Do the chairs in your parlor [tap tap]
Seem empty [tap] and gray [tap tap]
Do you stare [tap] at your doorstep? [tap tap]
And picture [tap tap], me there? [tap tap]”

Just like that, Steve was hit with a wave of memories. Him, on the run. Him, in the war. Bucky, bruised and bloody and broken, after getting shot, after Zola, after sixty-some years of imprisonment. Bucky, not knowing what to say. Bucky, not remembering how to speak. Bucky, afraid; Bucky, upset; Bucky, blank and empty and—

“Is your heart [tap], filled with pain? [tap tap]
Shall I, come back [tap] again? [tap tap]
Tell me dear [tap]
Are you lonesome [tap tap]
Tonight? [tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap…]”

Bucky wasn’t smiling. Instead, his face was perfectly relaxed, a cat sitting in a sunbeam, curled up with it’s tail tickling its nose. Steve, unable to help himself, reached down and dug his hand into the
root of Bucky’s hair, massaging it. Bucky’s eyes fluttered closed, his lips parting to exhale deeply.

The next day, Steve woke up alone. Well… not really.

He woke up in a bed in which the only warm spot was of his own making, but not alone. Bucky climbed on top of the covers, clumsily digging his knee into Steve thigh and making him whine in pain. “Shh-shh-shhhh,” Bucky shushed, crawling forwards so he was no longer crushing him. This had the additional effect of making it so he was looming over Steve. Steve was laying on his side, squinting his eyes up at Bucky and gripping the sheets with one hand.

“Fuck off, it’s too early.”

“Now, is that the way to talk to the love of your life?”


“I’ll yin your yang,” Steve threatened, muffled.

“I brought you breakfast.”

Steve peaked out from the pillows, suddenly interested. “Breakfast?” He’d been the one in charge of feeding them lately, and in all honesty, it was exhausting. Steve’s appetite was fucked— the only thing he ever really craved was heroin, which was problematic— but he still had to make sure they were eating. Lack of nutrients was bad for Sad People™.

So, needless to say, he was pleased at this change. “Breakfast?”

“Breakfast,” Bucky agreed. “You just need to sit up.”

Steve obeyed, propping up his pillows to give himself better support and pulling the sheets up to his chest. He was wearing a oversized white shirt from one of the shops in town, so he wasn’t cold, but he appreciated the little bit of extra weight the sheets gave him. “What’d you make me?”

With a flourish, Bucky proudly brandished a open container of vanilla Greek yogurt. Steve felt his face fall. “Yogurt?”

“Yogurt,” Bucky agreed. “It’s good!”

“You’d know,” Steve complained, “You’ve already taken a bite out of it.”

“Just. Smell it. I promise. It’s good.”

Steve felt a little dubious about it, but he leaned forwards, sniffing it. Bucky held the container right under his nose, just a little too close. Steve was about to comment saying well, I guess it smells alright when Bucky shoved the container in his face. Steve reared back, cupping his nose like he’d been punched. When he pulled his hands away, there was yogurt on them. “Why you—”

Bucky was too busy giggling to dodge Steve’s blow, and he let himself be tackled. They rolled over
the edge of the bed and onto the hard floor, and Steve nabbed the container out of his hand. He scooped up a bunch of yogurt with his bare fingers and wiping it on Bucky’s face. Bucky was going “No, no!” but Steve didn’t stop, taking it a step further to rub his nose on Bucky’s cheek, transferring as much of the yogurt as possible onto it.

“That’s what you get!” Steve declared, triumphant. “Serves you right! I am the yin to your yang, the apple to your eye—”

Bucky rolled him over and Steve squeaked, then yelled indignant when Bucky started rubbing his face on Steve’s, covering him in yogurt. “You disgusting— I swear— once you get off me you’ll be sorry— ack!”

Steve finally managed to kick Bucky off. Bucky sat back on his heels, still grinning while Steve caught his breath, still laying on his back. He pointed a finger at Bucky accusingly. “You!”

“Me,” Bucky agreed.

Steve kicked him, then got up and climbed onto his lap. Bucky braced his hands against him, like he was scared that Steve would try to fight him again, but Steve just creened up and licked a little spot off Bucky's face, like a well-mannered cat taking a dainty lick of milk.

“You’re gross,” Bucky declared, cringing.

“S’what you deserve,” Steve muttered. He decided the yogurt wasn’t good enough to literally lick off his boyfriends face, so instead he just smeared it around, annoying Bucky further.

Bucky huffed. “Don’ know why I put up with you.”

“I do. It’s cause you loooove me.” With that, Steve shoved Bucky back and jumped to his feet, spiriting to the bathroom. He slammed the door closed, trying to flick the lock so Bucky wouldn’t be able to walk to a farther sink to wash his face, but Bucky shoved it open just in time. After that, they had to battle for dominance over the sink, which only led to more pinches, and to the yogurt getting everywhere.

“Goddamn menace,” Bucky complained, right before Steve slapped him in the face with a towel.

They listened to Elvis. They ate yogurt. They showered— not together, it didn’t seem as though Bucky was quite ready for that, but they showered— and they lounged about. Steve read a full self-help book, and started trying to subtly therap-ize Bucky. Bucky read science fiction and called Steve out for trying to therap-ize him. And it was good.
The mixtape did not have many songs on it, so the songs it did have were completely memorized within the week. Sometimes, Steve would be sitting on the couch, a forgotten book still in his hands as he listened to Bucky in the kitchen, quietly singing “Tell me dear, are you lonesome, to-night?”

———

The world is a set of scales. There is no way for anything to ever be just good or just bad; to do so would erase the world’s balance. Therefore, whenever something was good, it must be paired with something that wasn’t so good. Every eye in a tornado was surrounded by a cyclone of wind.

Their cyclone, it turned out, wasn’t Bucky. Bucky’d healed a tremendous amount just being away from real life. He transformed into the Asset less, and when he did, he was blank again, not angry or emotional like he’d been pre-Ultron. Bucky wasn’t even grieving as hard anymore. They’d been gone for over a month, and time had truly made everything more bearable.

Their cyclone wasn’t Bucky at all.

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Steve had never been all that great at impulse control, but he was getting progressively worse. He and Bucky would go to the store, and Steve would find himself buying things besides the necessary rations. He bought dark chocolate (“Do you really have to get the 80% ones? They’re too bitter.” “I’m bitter”), blankets (“Just because you’re chewing on all of the blankets at the house doesn’t mean you should just buy twenty more”) and shirts (“Colorado Bitch?” “What about it?”). His impulsivity showed in other ways, too.

Steve and Bucky, as people who had been very comfortable with each other for a very long time, skipped through the basic stages of dating and went straight to the stages of civil partnership. Steve knew they were going fast when Bucky stopped closing the door to shower, but this was reaffirmed one day when Bucky was sitting on the toilet (as he’d been for five minutes; he was distracted by his phone) and Steve marched over and plopped onto his lap. “Bucky, I have an idea.”

“I’m on the toilet!”

“It’s important!” Steve affirmed.

“I’m on the toilet!”

“You’re done!”

“Most people consider sitting on the shitter private time!”

“Do you want to hear the idea or not?”

“What if, instead of getting Greek yogurt where you have to mix the preserves in, we get plain vanilla yogurt and buy the preserves separately. That way, we get to decide how much of the preserves we add in.”

Bucky looked at him like he was the stupidest person alive. “That’s what was so important you had to interrupt me on the John?”

Steve pouted. “You were taking too long.”

Bucky, gently yet firmly, shoved him off and slammed the door behind him. “Is that a yes?” Steve yelled through the door.

There was a pause, then: “Yes, but I’m still annoyed!”

“Love you too!”

Bucky may have been annoyed, but they’re Greek yogurt game increased by 150% after that day.

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“Goddamn idiot,” Bucky grumbled. “I’m going to tie you up and lock you in a closet so you can stop getting involved with stupid shit.”

Bucky may have been happy to live out a life of domestic, non-violent bliss, but Steve was pretty sure his biology didn’t allow for non-violence. It explained how much he and Bucky’d been roughhousing, anyways.

It also explained for Steve’s most recent endeavor. Somehow, in Colorado’s tourist country, he’d managed to get himself in a fight. It hadn’t actually been that hard, and it had been justified, but it was a fight nonetheless.

“Goddamn punk,” Bucky muttered, finished wiping the blood away and now putting a butterfly bandage over the spot on Steve’s forehead that had opened up. “I’m gonna put you on house arrest. I’m gonna tie you down. I’m gonna get you a child leash, so you stop picking fights with every living creature under the sun.”

“In my defense, I haven’t actually been in many fights lately. I fought the guys today, and then Ultron like, a month ago. If anything, I’m doing pretty well.”

“Pretty well my ass.” Bucky handed him an ice pack, but placed his hand over it to keep it in place anyways. “You’ve got a black eye. What the hell? You’re trained in this shit, why’d you let a bunch of non-enhanced’ kick your ass?”

“It’s not right to stab civilians,” Steve reminded.

“It’s not right to get yourself beat up just because your jumpy, either.”

“Kiss my ass.”

Bucky leaned down and kissed his non-injured temple. “There. Happy?”
“Oh, fuck off.”

Bucky ignored him. He started to card his fingers through Steve’s hair, looking for any bumps or blood. If Steve wasn’t wrong, he gave him a little sniff, too. Finally, Bucky knelt in front of him, taking his face in between his two big hands, and Steve leaned into the affection, especially appreciating the rare touch of the metal hand. “Hey,” Bucky said, gentler now. “I love you a lot. Stop breaking your goddamn face.”

“Noted,” Steve muttered, then closed his eyes and adjusted his icepack so Bucky could kiss him.

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Unfortunately, words weren’t enough to stop Steve’s fidgettiness.

“I’m retired,” Bucky declared one morning. “But I don’t know if you should be.”

Steve looked up from the couch. “Huh?”

“I’m not saying you should throw yourself back. Into the thick of things,” Bucky explained. “Actually. I’d really prefer if you didn’t. But. Regular training again… a sparring partner… it might be good.”

Steve frowned. “What are you trying to say?”

“I think we should go back to the compound.”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter...
-Elvis
-Yogurt
-Fight
All in all, Steve was going to miss the lake house.

The Colorado weather was pleasant, even if it was getting a little chilly. August had turned to September, and in a few days October would be upon them. Regardless, the lake was refreshing, the town was pleasant, and they’d actually made a decent amount of memories in the house.

Steve had a stick of gum in his mouth as he cleaned up. They would make the house nice again for its owners, clean and fresh like they’d never borrowed it. The one thing they weren’t putting back in its place, however, was the Elvis CD. The night before they’d put it on and practiced dancing. They tried to do the Lindy again, with varying degrees of success, but then the song had changed and neither of them wanted to sit down, even as Elvis sang *Do you miss me tonight? Are you sorry, we drifted, apart?*

There was a part of the song where Elvis stopped singing to deliver a sort of monologue. It just so happened that by that point, Steve and Bucky were thoroughly wrapped in each other, slow dancing with technique that was just horrible enough that, if they were caught, they could deny they were doing anything innocuous. But it meant that Bucky’s mouth was close to Steve’s ear, so he could listen as Bucky whispered the words along.

“I wonder if... you are lonesome tonight. You know, someone said that the world’s a stage, and we each must play a part. Fate had me playing in love, with you as my sweetheart. Act one was when we met. I loved you at first glance. You read your lines so cleverly and, never missed a cue. Then came act two. You seemed to change, you acted strange, and for why I’ve never know. Honey, you lied, when you said you loved me, and I had no cause to doubt. But I’d rather go on hearing your lies than to go on living without you. Now the stage is bare. And I’m standing there. With... emptiness, all around. And if you won’t come back to me, then they can bring the curtain down.”

Steve hid face in Bucky’s chest as they kept rocking. Around them, Elvis went back to singing, finishing the song with one last verse:

“*Is your heart filled with pain*

*Shall I come back, again?*

*Tell me dear...*

*Are you lonesome...*

*Tonight...?*”
Steve and Bucky flew on the quinjet all the way to Pennsylvania, then ditched it. They put it on autopilot to fly itself back to the compound, and they rented a truck to drive the rest of the way there. That way, the other Avengers could have a little warning that they were coming back, and Steve could avoid it for just a little bit longer.

Steve popped another stick of gum in his mouth as they drove. He usually chewed gum when he was in a good mood and doing stuff, but right now he was nervous enough that he wanted something to occupy his mouth, and he knew Bucky’d get pissed if he started chewing something else.

“Wanda’s birthday is coming up,” Bucky mentioned idly when they were officially on the road. “She mentioned it. Earlier. It’s at the beginning of October.”

“I doubt it’ll be fun for her,” Steve commented blandly. “Her first birthday without her twin.”


“Yeah,” Steve hummed. “Hopefully Tony already knows. I bet he’s planning her a big party, streamers, balloons, the works. He probably made her a robot butler or something for a present.”

“Probably,” Bucky agreed. “You know… we give Stark a real hard time. But. He’s not all that bad. He’s… reliable. Trustworthy.”

Steve snorted. “We should probably take notes.”

That made Bucky laugh. “Maybe.”

They drove in silence for a little longer before Steve rested his head against the window, getting cozy. The one problem with renting the truck was that it meant Steve couldn’t cuddle with Bucky while he drove: the center console and national road laws thoroughly discouraged that. But still, he managed to fall asleep.

Bucky woke him up with a gentle shake a while later. “Hey. We’re about half an hour out, last chance to change your mind.”

Steve opened one eye, peaking at Bucky before closing it again. “I’m fine. Why, you nervous?”

Bucky coughed. “While, I recently killed one of their— our— friends, so.”

“On the bright side, they don’t know it was us.”

Bucky huffed. “The bright side.”

“We could procrastinate more. You want ice cream?”

“I… you know what? Ice cream sounds really good. We should… go and get some. Sit down and everything.”
Steve snorted, and went back to sleep. He woke up naturally when they parked, and was already out of the car before he realized where they were. “Baskin Robbins? Seriously?”

“What? I heard they’re good.”

Steve was about to go in when Bucky grabbed him by his hoodie, pulling him back. He frowned at Steve, staring at his face and not saying anything. Finally, Steve huffed. “What?”

“You look like you got jumped.”

“I did get jumped,” Steve reminded him. “They’re battle wounds.”

“You jumped a bunch of unsuspecting tourists.”

“Hey! They were being bigots! And besides, I gave as good as I got—”

“God, sometimes I wish you’d just shut up,” Bucky muttered in the way that meant he really, really didn’t mean it. “Maybe put your hood up?”

Steve did so and looked in the reflective window. “Now it just looks like you hit me.”

“Pal, I’m not far from it. Maybe I could just get the ice cream—”

“Hey, I thought we were procrastinating? Explaining why I’m not a victim of domestic abuse is a great way to kill time.”

Bucky looked a little dubious, but he didn’t complain as Steve pushed his hood back and grabbed Bucky’s hand, leading him into the store. The bell rang, and immediately they were hit with the scent of artificial milk and freezer burn. The store was done up in plastic pinks and off-whites. Steve tilted his head up and marched forwards, like he was challenging the building. Bucky pushed his hat lower and followed behind like a dog going to the vet.

The man behind the counter blinked a few times when he saw them, looking very carefully not freaked out. “Hi! My name is Scott, and— I have to go to the back for a minute. I’ll have someone out here to assist you in one moment please.”

Steve grinned as he left. “He doesn’t actually hit me, it’s a kink thing, I swear!” He called. Scott did not come back, causing Steve to burst out laughing.

Bucky pulled him to his chest, rocking them gently. “Menace.”

A woman came out then, decked out in the full Baskin Robbins uniform with a pink collared shirt, khakis, an apron, and a hat with the logo. Her hair was long and honey brown, and she shuffled around, cleaning a new ice cream scoop and moving with her shoulders hunched, making her at least half a foot shorter. Finally, she stopped in front of the glass, standing up enough to see them despite her cap. She started speaking and a jolt of electricity went down Steve’s spine at her accent. “Hi. Welcome to Baskin Robbins. My name is Wanda, what can I—” only then did her eyes focus on them, and she frowned. The frown quickly turned into a full blown scowl. “I’m going to kill him! Tell Stark to stop sending spies to—”

“Okay, what’s going on in here?” Scott re-emerged, gently clasping onto Wanda’s shoulders like he was holding her back. “We’ve talked about this, you need to be nicer to the customers. It’s not okay to get angry at—” he looked up at them and seemed to remember who they were, because he immediately paled, swallowing visibly. “Captain America and Steve Rogers.”
Steve leaned his elbow on the counter, smiling pleasantly at them, well aware of his busted up face. “I also go by the Nomad. In case you were wondering.”

“I— yes sir. Mr. Nomad. Sir.”

Steve’s heart panged at the reminder of Peter, but he made himself continue smiling. “I heard you have ice cream here. Any recommendations?”

“How about fuck you!”

“Wanda!” Scott admonished. “We don’t cuss customers out to their faces! Especially not— not superheroes!”

“Yeah, Wanda,” Steve teased. “So rude.”

Wanda marched up to the glass case, thrusting her finger in Steve’s face. “You tell Stark to stop fucking spying on me! It’s bad enough he— he—”

“What?” Bucky asked gruffly.

She hissed in pain. “You know what he did. You might think it’s fine, but it’s not. Now get out, before I make you’re molecules vibrate together so hard your body creates a black hole and—”

“Woah!” Scott physically pulled her back. “Wanda, come on. You can’t actually turn someone into a black hole, but they might get the wrong idea. After all, they’re superheroes. In my shop. Hey, you guys don’t have ice cream yet, let me get you some, on the house!”

So Scott served them up while Wanda leaned against the opposite counter, glaring at them with venom. Steve had just ordered his bowl of complementary ice cream when Bucky nudged him and gestured at Wanda’s ankle. Steve’s eyes caught on the metal there— it was a monitor, the type people on house arrest wore.

They finished the non-transaction and went to sit down. The table was just as abnormally plastic as the rest of the store.

They’d just started digging in when Wanda marched over, still furious. “Scott wants me to apologize, but you should know I will never apologize. No one has ever ruined things for me as much as Stark, so you can tell him to go and fuck him—”

“We don’t report to Stark,” Steve interrupted, taking a bite of his ice cream. It wasn’t very good. “We are headed there next, though. When does your shift get off? We can give you a ride home.”

“My home is two blocks over, nowhere near Stark.”

Steve frowned, finally putting his ice cream down. “What?”

She narrowed her eyes. “When did you get back?”

Bucky took a bite of his mint chocolate chip. “We haven’t actually. Gotten back. We’re on our way now.”

Wanda clearly hated Steve, but she didn’t seem to know what to do with Bucky. “But you’ve been in contact with Stark?”

“Nope,” Steve replied, leaning back in his seat. “Sit down, why don’t you. Hey Scott? Wanda’s going to take an extra break now.”
“Yes sir!” He replied, apparently delighted.

Wanda sat on Bucky's side of the table, scooting the chair as far away from him as possible and sitting with legs and arms folded. Steve remembered how she'd been during the Ultron fight, tall and proud, a powerhouse through and through. She'd saved his life. She deserved better than this.

“<Oh no.>” Bucky grumbled in a language that Steve didn’t bother to take note of. “<Mama Rogers is out and ready to fight.>”

“<I'm always ready to fight,>” he responded, and then to Wanda: “So you don’t live with the Avengers. You very much don't like Stark, and you think he's been sending people to spy on you. And the ankle monitor?”

She shifted in her seat, apparently unsure whether she actually wanted to talk about it. Finally, she huffed. “Stark's been monitoring me from afar. Apparently, they were fine fighting alongside me but they didn’t trust me when it was all over. They had better things to do than introduce me to American society, but they didn’t trust me to go home, so they stuck me here. The ankle cuff monitors my location and power output. If I so much as use my magic to unscrew a bottle, he knows.”

Steve nodded slowly. “Do you get in trouble?”

“He sends someone. Says it's to make sure I'm not doing anything bad, but I know it for the fear tactic it is. I have no control over my life; I've been taken from my home, my brother's been killed, and now they stuck me here in this fucking ice cream shop!”

Bucky frowned at the bottom of his bowl. He scraped it, getting the last bites, then reached across the table to take Steve's, which was mostly uneaten. Steve let him upon silent agreement. “<Sounds like something you'd stick your nose into.>”

Steve grinned. “<Doesn't it?> Okay, okay, let's think. Bucky are on our way to the compound now, you can come with.”

“Excuse me,” Scott said from the front, “But she still has a few hours in her shift.”

Steve ignored the fact that Scott had, apparently, been listening in to their entire conversation. “She quits!”

Scott frowned. “She can't do that.”

“Are you really questioning Captain America?”

Bucky looked up sharply. “<Watch your fucking tongue.>”

Steve kicked him under the table as a means of affection. “Scott, are we going to have a problem?”

“No sir! It's just that Tony Stark gave the business a stipend to agree to his terms, so I'm not supposed to--”

Steve gave Bucky a look, like your turn. Bucky sighed and turned in his seat, projecting as much false confidence as he could. “A stipend?” He growled. “You mean a bribe.”

“An unjust bribe,” Steve agreed. “Are you really about to tell Captain America, the patron of freedom and honesty, that you were taking an illegal bribe and, as such, believe that it’s within your rights to obstruct justice?”
“God, you're laying it on thick,” Wanda muttered.

“It's unconstitutional! This is not the country Captain America fought for! This is not the country Captain America died for!”

“I'll call my boss!” Scott announced, scampering into the back room.

“You do that!” Steve yelled after him. “And while you're at it, give yourself a raise!”

“I don’t think that's how the bureaucracy works,” Bucky muttered.

“It's not,” Wanda confirmed.

Steve stood, peering in the back. Scott wasn’t visible from there, which meant they probably weren’t visible from where Scott was. “I wouldn’t know, I've never had a real job,” Steve muttered. “Okay, and… go!”

Bucky was out of his seat in a flash, sprinting to the door while Steve grabbed Wanda's wrist and yanked her to her feet. She made a noise of surprise and stumbled to gain her footing, but once she had control she slapped Steve's hand away and ran without his help. The bell dinged as the left, sprinting to the car and slamming doors. “Backseat, backseat!” Steve yelled, shoving her into the backseat and sliding in behind her. Bucky put the car into gear and jerked forwards, and then they were off.

“I think we should go directly to the source,” Steve announced, seeing Bucky turn towards the compound before he even opened his mouth. “Wanda, we'll swing by your apartment and get your stuff later.”

“I don’t want to go to the compound, I want you all to fuck off and leave me alone!”

Steve, gracefully, ignored her. He lifted her cuffed leg up and set it on his lap, barely dodging getting kicked in the face. “Hey, do you want this off or not?”

“It'll send a signal to Stark,” she warned, accent getting heavier. “He’ll know if you remove it.”

“Good,” Steve said, unsheathing a knife. “Let him.”

He used the knife to find the place where the two plates of the cuff connected, and used it to pull it apart. Underneath there was a complex mixture of wires and levers, the type of thing that, if Steve weren’t enhanced, and if he hadn't spent months upon months watching Tony work, he might not know what to do. Steve ended up pulling a stick of gum from his bag and popping it into his mouth, chewing as he focused in.

Bucky yanked the car too hard in a turn and Steve hissed, almost cutting the wrong piece. “Hey, fuckass, take the turns slower or I’m going to cut her fucking foot off.”

“I can’t take this,” Wanda announced and shoved Steve’s hands away. She raised her own, twisting her fingers inwards like she was warding against evil, and the metal pieces went bright red and started hissing. A moment later and they collapsed, the cuff opening. “Unroll your window,” she ordered, making like she was about to toss the thing.

Steve frowned. “Hey, no, we don’t litter.”

“You kill people,” she argued. “What do you mean you don’t litter?”
“I mean we don’t litter. Also, how do you know about the killing? That’s supposed to be a secret.”

“Worst kept secret ever,” Bucky grumbled.

Wanda tilted her chin back. In the low light, her eyes seemed more red than brown. “Many things are meant to be secrets. That doesn’t stop me from knowing them.”

Steve tilted his head a little. “Cute, if a little weird. You’ll fit right in. Bucky, I told you we were going to adopt her.”

“You are not adopting me.”

“We’re adopting her,” Steve confirmed. “You’re going to love Peter. Wait, have you met him?”

Wanda’s face stayed plain, not giving away much. “Is that the little boy you slept with?”

Bucky coughed loudly and Steve kicked the back of his seat before looking back at Wanda. “Excuse you, he is the almost adult teen that I watch over, who I just happened to nap with. Word choice is important in English; if someone else had heard you, they might think you were insinuating something.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, because Barnes has no lingering feelings of jealousy relating to the boy.”

Steve chose to ignore that for the moment. He gave Wanda his best ‘genuine’ expression, lips pulled together and eyes wide and serious. “Hey, listen. There’s a reason people call you a witch. Maybe tone it down a little? At least until they get used to you. They’ll already be defensive as Hell, don’t give them more reasons not to trust you. And hey, if it makes you feel better, they don’t like Bucky or I much right now, so you’re not alone in this.”

Wanda pursed her lips and turned to look out the window. Steve didn’t know if that was a good or bad sign, but at least it seemed like she heard and understood him. Sometimes, that’s all a person could ask for.

Somewhere along the drive, Steve felt the righteous fury build up again. How dare Tony treat Wanda the way he did? Steve left the Avengers trusting that even if they argued, Tony would be the one to make sure everything was taken care of. The Avengers were not bad people. If it weren’t Tony who made sure Wanda was cared for, then Clint at least should—

Steve felt a low, sinking feeling. He swallowed it. He was done grieving; now he was just mad.

So when Bucky and Wanda went to the living quarters to settle in, Steve went straight to the workshop. He didn’t have to throw open any doors— Jarvis still opened them for him— but he made up for it by storming in and yelling “Tony, what the hell?”

He was met with not one, but two surprised expressions. Tony apparently had been in the middle of a moment with Pepper. Well, too bad for them, Steve had an agenda and was not in a patient mood.
“Steve,” Pepper said pleasantly. “It’s been a while.”

“It has,” Steve agreed, trying not to take his anger out on her. “If you wouldn’t mind excusing us, Tony and I have some things to discuss.”

Pepper sighed and nodded, leaning on Tony for a moment longer before walking away. They exchanged a meaningful glance, then she walked out, heels clicking all the way. Tony watched her go for a moment longer than necessary before turning to deal with Steve. “You’re back. Hurray. Does that mean we can raise the flags from half mast?”

“You abandoned Wanda,” Steve accused, ignoring Stark’s quip. “You abandoned Wanda. You brought her. To a foreign country. And you abandoned her, with a dead end job and an ankle monitor like a prisoner. You forbade her from using her powers, how could you do that?”

“I did it because I had to,” Tony snapped. “I had a funeral service to attend to, actually. In case you didn’t know, Clint—”

“You had two funeral services to attend to,” Steve corrected. “Pietro died too.”

Tony looked surprised by that. “He wasn’t—”

“One of ours? Oh yes he fucking was. But I guess you don’t hold funerals for prisoners, which is what Wanda is—”

Tony sighed, long and painful. He ran his fingers through his hair, pacing away from Steve. “Look, you want to take care of Wanda, make sure she’s eating, facilitate her training? Fine, I don’t give a shit. We got new living quarters while you were gone, we’re back to having individual apartments. She can live with you two. I don’t give a shit.”

Steve raised his chin, ready for a fight even though Stark was apparently conceding. There was something more he wasn’t telling him, and Steve wanted to know what it was. “You built individual apartments? That’s a big renovation.”

“I know it is!” Tony all but yelled. “The old design had a common floor you had to walk through to get anywhere, and…” he shook his head.

“Ah, and Clint was always there. Always. I couldn’t stand it.”

Steve waited. “And?”

“And Clint was always there. Always. I couldn’t stand it.”

Steve nodded slowly. “I’m sorry.”

Tony waved his apology away, like it was just one of those words you say when nothing else came to mind. “Not your fault. But if you’d just go, I have more important matters to attend to.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

The look Tony gave him made Steve’s blood run cold. He took a step forwards. Whatever this was, something was very, very wrong. “Tony? Like what?”

Tony jerked his head to look back at a screen, avoiding Steve’s gaze. “You only ever think about yourself. Never anyone else. Never realizing that something you do could actually hurt someone.”

Steve moved closer, trying to make sense of the screen, but Tony’s fingers were moving too fast, blurring the information that came up. Still, Steve could see outlines, coordinates… maps? “Tony.
What happened? Who— who—”

Tony clenched his jaw. “Peter didn’t know where you were or if you were coming back. Apparently, you sent a text with a picture of a lake or some shit, and he decided that was enough to track you with. He— he ran away, and he wouldn’t respond to my texts, and I can’t get access to his location. Steve, Peter’s gone.”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter:
- more Elvis!
- Scott and Wanda!
- Tony and Peter drama!

I am working on writing more chapters, so hopefully the updating schedule will be cleaned up soon 😊

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