the nightmare from which I am trying to awake

by Speranza

Summary

"You gotta bring him in, Cap." Tony Stark, distant: on speakerphone. "You can come in to me, or you can go to—well, I don't know who else is left. But you gotta bring him in."

Notes

*pushes pile of chips onto table* Deal me in, please!!

For lim, who midwifed: lim, I love you like rlb. Thanks also hugely to astolat for crossing to the Bucky side of Cap fandom to help me!!! :D (Also she insisted on more sex: thank yous to astolat@intimations.org.)

Also, Fandom, FYI there needs to be a "Find Bucky" genre the way we used to talk about "Get" stories--"Get Spock" etc. (See http://fanlore.org/wiki/Get-Spock for details.) But I think we need "FIND" the way we needed "GET" and "LAY."

See the end of the work for more notes.

I. light up on the silver screen, and not at all a man

It happens at the Smithsonian, of course. That’s where all the fossils are.
Steve goes to the exhibit after he leaves the hospital. He was prepared for it to be bad from the phone call, and it was. Bucky's still out there alone somewhere, Steve had to put the search on hold to come back, but right now Steve really needs to see pictures of Peggy Carter smirking in her uniform and red lipstick: he knows it's red, and it feels like a secret. The blurry gray photographs are crisper than her memories of him. For him, of course, this all happened yesterday. He's not sure who he will be if – when – she forgets him. Who he'll be when she's finally gone.

So Steve hides in the screening room and lets the flickering footage wash over him. The documentary's about twenty minutes long, and Peggy's in a lot of it, older than in any of his memories. He likes watching her talk, seeing her keen and sharp. "Even after he died," Peggy says finally, with a wry little smile, "he was still changing my life." Steve shuts his eyes, the words jangling around in his head. He knows just how she feels.

He sits through the film two more times, slouching down and trying to seem inconspicuous, ducking under his cap when people come in and leave: three teenaged boys, two beleaguered moms with their children, an elderly couple wearing windbreakers and good walking shoes. The old people seem happy, and Steve turns to watch them go – and then realizes that the room has another occupant.

So still. Barely a shadow against the wall. His heart pounds. He turns back to the screen: the film is ending, starting again. "Captain America," the booming voiceover begins, "the first Avenger, a symbol of hope and freedom for all Americans, began life as Brooklyn-born Steven Rogers," and Steve uses the entrance of four teenaged girls as cover to steal another quick glance over his shoulder.

It's Bucky, all right, sitting motionless in a dark gray hoodie, pale face turned up, expressionless, to the screen. He's so rapt that Steve, now watching the film for the fourth time, turns to see what he's looking at. It's archival footage of Brooklyn, or mostly, anyway – Steve's pretty sure he caught a glimpse of the Loews Valencia movie palace, which is in Queens, or used to be anyway. He looks back again and sees that Bucky's totally fixated, staring hungrily, and the phrase comes to him, suddenly real: he's feasting his eyes. Now they start with pictures of Fort Leigh and of Steve himself, 98 pounds soaking wet before the serum, and Steve stares at his hands and tries to think what to do. He's all too aware of the murmur of people outside the screening room: the building is full of civilians, not even to mention priceless artifacts. People keep drifting in and out: right now there are a couple of young guys up in front and three older women off the aisle. He could maybe text security, or step out and quietly start an evacuation. He thinks about damage control and hates himself for thinking about it. On the screen, the war rages on. He loses Bucky. Peggy's losing him. History repeats.

As if to make things calculably worse, an entire middle school class shows up just as the credits roll: at least twenty-five of them, shepherded by three teachers, who shush them and direct them to fill up four long benches. Steve's in the way, so he stands to give up his seat, trying not to be noticed. He uses the cover of the milling students to take another, longer, look at Bucky. Bucky's still fixated on the movie. His hood is up, but in the reflected light of the screen Steve can see that he's got a scruff of dark beard and purple hollows under his eyes.

Steve slips to the back of the theatre and sits at the other end of Bucky's bench, the last in the theatre. The middle school kids finally settle down at the boom of, “Captain America, the first Avenger,” or at least as much as kids ever settle down. They're squirmy, whispering, pointing and laughing at his star-spangled outfit. Bucky doesn't even seem to notice that they're there, so maybe he wouldn't actually notice an evac—

His hand literally goes up to cover his eyes. He pleads confusion. He pleads grief, he pleads
overwhelming emotion. He could take all the super serum in the world and he would still be a dumb kid from Brooklyn. Hang it, Bucky's been a high-level intelligence operative for seventy years: he's already taken in the kids and he's seen that one of the teachers walks like an ex-cop and that the woman in the front row has a handbag big enough to conceal a revolver and a couple of grenades, presuming she could get them past security. Bucky Barnes is not gonna miss the fact that Captain America is sitting front and center at the Captain America show, and if Steve thinks so, he's a bigger fool than even Tony Stark thinks he is.

So he gets up and walks to the end of the bench and sits down. Bucky doesn't react, doesn't acknowledge him or so much as flick his eyes over, just keeps watching the movie. They're in Italy now, and Colonel Philips is scowling at the screen. It's nice to see him. Beside him, Bucky's starting to give him the heebee jeebies: they're close enough that their shoulders are brushing, but Bucky doesn't seem to know he's alive, or care. Steve wonders if he should say something, wonders what he could say that wouldn't disrupt their careful equilibrium. Hey, Buck, I'm real glad to see you. Some movie, huh? Does Bucky really even remember him? He steals another glance at the pale, blank face. Maybe that's why Bucky's here: he's brainwashing himself, trying to rewrite, or overwrite, what's in his head. Maybe Bucky thinks he's just the guy up there on the screen. “Captain America, the first Avenger, a symbol of hope and freedom for all Americans…”

They watch the film through again, Bucky's boot hard against his. How many nights had they spent like this in the old days, side by side at the pictures? Dracula. Frankenstein. The Invisible Man. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde – jeez, if ever two kids were ready to become monsters. His life flashes before his eyes. It's Italy again. He's rescuing Bucky, standing with Bucky and laughing. Was he ever that happy? Peggy's back, Peggy's slipping away from him. Everyone he loves is going or gone. Even after he died, he was still changing my life. Bucky's close enough to touch. Bucky is as blank and unseeing as a machine - and suddenly it's too much, and Steve's twisting away so Bucky won't see the ugly feelings contorting his face. And that's when he feels the hand on his back, the arm - Bucky's good arm - sliding up over his shoulder. It's shocking in its familiarity. He's felt it hundreds, thousands, of times: Bucky's arm slung around him after Bucky scraped him off some bar room floor or peeled him off some brick wall somewhere.

Hell, he should have figured this. Bucky's the guy who has his back; that's who Bucky is. All he had to do was stumble and Bucky would be there to haul him back up.

Steve closes his eyes. The movie ends, starts again, but Steve isn't paying attention to anything other than the sound of Bucky breathing and the tiny tentative squeezes Bucky's giving his shoulder, like he's testing out the muscles in his hand.

It takes him a long time to work up the courage, because this is the first peaceful moment he's had in a long time and he doesn't want to lose it. But finally he lifts his head and, not trusting words, tries to put everything onto his face. Bucky's eyes go wide, and Steve reaches out instinctively.

"Bucky." Steve's voice is raw. "Come with me." His hands have found Bucky's arm, Bucky's shoulder, and he's holding on tight. "Come on, Buck."

This close, he can see that Bucky's eyes are bloodshot; he looks scared and sick, but he doesn't run. Then, in a voice hoarse from disuse, he says, finally, "Where?"

Steve doesn't know what to say to that. Then he does. "Everywhere," he replies.

II. where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in
The trip to New York with Bucky on the back of his motorcycle is one of the best days of Steve's life. He decides to take the bike after considering all their transportation options and Bucky's fragile state, but he hadn't considered how nice it would be to take a long drive on a warm day with Bucky sitting behind him. He goes the way he knows, up Route 1, which takes longer than on the new turnpikes but they're not in any sort of hurry. Life's slower along Route 1, and there are still a couple of places that time seems to have passed over. They stop for lunch at a stand that's pretty much a wooden shack with a counter, with a few battered picnic tables out front. They don't have a soda fountain, but there's Coca Cola in cans and even Canada Dry Ginger Ale. Steve buys frankfurters and hamburgers and potato chips and takes them on a red plastic tray to the table where Bucky's sitting. He's got his hood up - he always has his hood up – which Steve takes as one part hiding and one part shame, like he's afraid to have the sunshine on his face.

Still, Bucky eats a frankfurter and sips carefully from a can of coke, so it's almost like old times. They don't talk--Bucky doesn't talk hardly at all, or even look at him most of the time--but Steve thinks he knows what that is. Bucky's holding himself in a still, too-precise way that reminds him of the night he turned nineteen. He and Bucky had gone out celebrating, and eventually Bucky had gone all quiet and careful in his movements and monosyllabic, and two hours later he had grabbed the lamppost and thrown up all over Court Street. Bucky's got a similar look now, like something toxic's inside him, so Steve figures some kind of violent expulsion is coming, and bets Bucky'll feel better after.

It's evening and getting cool when they finally drive across the Brooklyn Bridge, but Bucky's chest is warm against his back, his thighs snug against his hips as they drive beneath the familiar arches. The part of Brooklyn where they grew up is full of swells ("gentrification," they call it, which he thinks is a weirdly last century –19th century – word), so he's taken an apartment further south, within hearing distance of the El, in a neighborhood where you can still hear a mix of unfamiliar languages and see stands of foods that you don't know what they are. To him, it's that slight frisson of ethnic suspicion that makes New York, New York: when he was a kid, the blocks had been policed as strictly as nation-states: Germans up past the Navy Yard, Italians down Court Street and Poles and Finns in Sunset Park, Jews to the south. It wasn't so bad that you needed a passport, but you had to know where you were and be respectful.

The apartment's on the top floor, and there are big windows and lots of light: Steve thinks maybe he might try painting again. He could set up under one of those windows and put his hands on some oils, if they stayed here a while. Bucky wanders around and around, checking out each room and looking out each window from every possible angle, then settles down on the sofa and doesn't get up again.

In the days after, they communicate--to the extent to which they communicate--in glances and the occasional touch. Bucky's hand on Steve's arm, lingering, when Steve brings him soup and crackers: thank you. Steve gently elbowing Bucky in the ribs as he hands him a bowl of cherry Jell-O with whipped cream: hey, you're welcome.

They also communicate via TV. Bucky watches a lot of the History Channel, which Stark calls the Hitler Channel, and he can see why. The programs only really show history that they have footage for, so it's pretty much Hitler and after. It's not a place you're gonna learn about, say, Thermopylae. (Steve had done a project on Thermopylae for Mrs. Wiesman back in 6th grade at P.S. 29.) Steve didn't like watching it, even though he'd learned some useful things from it: he couldn't shake the feeling that the producers thought that, okay, Hitler had been a bad guy, but as a filmmaker he'd been swell.

Bucky watches hours and hours of it, and whenever he pauses the footage – Steve hadn't known the TV could do that, but it turns out Bucky knows a bunch of things about the world that he doesn't –
Steve drops everything and pays attention. He's learned it's always important when Bucky freezes the TV. Usually he finds Bucky shaky and hyperventilating, overwhelmed by images: tanks rolling into Budapest, the Kennedy assassination, Romania 1989. Steve finds its best just to sit down next to him and wait the tremors out; sometimes he grips Bucky's hand and squeezes, trying to give him an anchor; sometimes, when it's really bad, Steve has to pry the remote control out of his hand and switch off the television. Bucky never says anything.

But when what he's waiting for finally happens, Steve doesn't notice; he's drifting back and forth in front of his canvas, trying to see what the heck is going on. He stares at the muddy underpainting and tries to press light into the broken edges of the buildings. Then he notices the quiet; he's got used to the sound of the television, or sometimes the phonograph, which fills the silences between them. Steve immediately puts down his brush, not even bothering to grab a rag for his hands. Bucky's in the grip of some kind of seizure, but this time, as Steve drops onto the sofa beside him, Bucky thumbs the remote and the images lurch into motion: planes and orange fireballs, howitzers and tanks: "...communists handed the French a crushing defeat. The U.S. believed that a victory for the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu would destabilize the region indefinitely, and so proposed Operation Vulture, a plan to drop as many as three atomic bombs on..." The remote clatters onto the floor, and Bucky seizes him, the metal hand shredding his shirt and scratching bloody marks into his skin. The bitter taste of adrenaline fills Steve's mouth – this is it, it's happening – and he makes a grab for Bucky's wrists.

Bucky knocks him away, shuddering and blinking, rocking with some kind of internal explosion, and then all at once he's talking, scraping out words that make no sense: "Their fucking. It. I had orders to. Wasn't." He makes a horrible choking sound and lunges for Steve, clawing at him, and they topple off the sofa and crash onto the floor, and Bucky screams and thrashes as Steve pins him down and curls himself around him, arms and legs tight, throwing himself onto the grenade that is James Buchanan Barnes.

Bucky's head smashes into Steve's face, splitting his lip and bloodying his nose, but Steve finds Bucky's ear anyway, and gasps: "Stand down, soldier." His muscles shriek with the effort of holding Bucky down. "Stand down. Stand down. You're relieved," and that's when Bucky goes limp and starts sobbing, sounds so ugly and sloshing that they're almost screams, like something out of a nightmare. Steve closes his eyes and just holds on, aware that there's nothing he can say, no comforting words, that would be true: it's all right, you're safe, I won't leave you. He hadn't meant to leave Bucky the first time, and so what? That and a nickel will get you on the subway. Bucky's been lied to enough.

After a while, Bucky's sobs grow quiet and exhausted enough that Steve risks moving him, dragging Bucky's arm across his shoulders (hundreds, thousands of times) and hauling him up, then limping him into the bedroom. Bucky collapses onto the bed like a heap of old clothes, but his metal hand is still locked in the fabric of Steve's shirt. Steve thinks it's accidental but then realizes that Bucky is irritably tugging at him. He lets Bucky pull him down to the mattress and is surprised when Bucky shoves him onto his side and presses his face between Steve's shoulder blades. He lets out a long, exhausted breath and then falls into unconsciousness, his body slackening all at once, his face mashing into Steve's spine. They used to sleep like this, curled with a single cheap mattress between them and the cold of the floor. He likes having Bucky at his back again, so he toes his shoes off and settles down to doze and drift. Bucky's hand – heavy, the metal one – comes to rest on his waist. He dreams of the old country.

III. think what deep though invisible tracks they must leave
When he wakes, there's sunlight flickering through the drapes; the breeze is stirring them. Steve realizes that Bucky's awake and lying beside him, studying his face. "Steve," he says softly, sounding almost like his old self, and Steve's heart clutches with joy: "Yeah, Bucky, yeah. It's me," – and okay, that's all Bucky says to him for the rest of the day, but that's more than Bucky said to him yesterday, and besides, Bucky's finally looking at him.

Actually, it's more like Bucky can't take his eyes off him: he's watching Steve practically all the time now, like he's a puzzle Bucky can't figure out. This is an improvement he supposes, but as the days pass Steve starts to feel—shame: totally inadequate in the face of Bucky's suffering. What does he even think he's doing? He starts to try framing an apology, but has no idea how it would even go, what he could possibly say. Bucky knows – Bucky must know – that Steve hadn't known he was alive, that Steve would have gone to his death for him, that Steve had himself spent the rest of the century under ice. But what did that matter? Bucky's bruised eyes follow him around the apartment, and despair drives Steve out the door and down the stairs to the street, where, feeling a little crazy, he lurks in a doorway and calls Sam, who listens to his breathless self-accusations for about twenty seconds before telling him to shut up, Jesus, and then giving him a big fat dose of common sense, because a) this shit is not your fault and b) good intentions don't mean squat, welcome to it, and c) you are not going to undo seventy years of damage in six weeks, even if you are Captain America, okay? So get a grip. Sam also makes him write down the numbers of three professional counselors who specialize in torture survivor support, and realizing that this is a specialty makes Steve feel sick enough to need to press his head against the cool rough concrete of the alcove wall.

"I can be up there in four hours, you need me to come up there?" Sam asks, and Steve says, "No. No," and then thinks it over, because he doesn't want to be blockheaded about it, not if it'll help Bucky. He's well aware that some deep part of him wants Bucky all to himself. "Not yet, anyway," he says finally. "I think we're actually making progress."

Sam lets out a quick, hard laugh. "Well you're both alive, aren't you? That was even odds. Seriously, man, I can be there in four hours. Two and a half if I fly direct."

"Thank you, Sam. Thank you, buddy," Steve says and hangs up.

Bucky's at the kitchen table slowly paging through Steve's sketchbook when he comes back, and as Steve shuts the door he abruptly decides that he's got to tell Bucky some of those things he's sure he already knows, because he can't stand there being the tiniest chance that Bucky doesn't know them. But just as he pulls out a chair, Bucky looks up at him, one hand going to rub his forehead, and says, uncertainly: "Do you remember…we went to a dance once. Knights of Columbus," and Steve sits down, as if in a dream.

"Yeah," Steve says; they had gone to lots of dances actually. "I think so…"

"There was a little girl there. Glasses, pretty face. You liked her. Nancy something."

"Mary," Steve says, remembering; he had forgotten all about her. Now she swam up in his vision: a petite blonde in a pale dress, ringlets pulled back with a red velvet something, a tiny heart-shaped face with pretty blue eyes behind thick glasses.

"Mary. You spent the whole night talking to her and I remember thinking you were trying to make time with her, but then you had one of your attacks and we had to leave."

Steve sits there, transfixed: he remembers that night, struggling for breath near the punchbowl, remembers the girl's worried face. Bucky had hauled him out into the alley for some air, and then half-carried him home, when air hadn't been enough. He stares at the man sitting next to him. It's Bucky: it really is Bucky. He realizes that some part of him hasn't truly believed that The Winter
Soldier was James Buchanan Barnes.

But he believes it now. Bucky is here, scraping the memories out, like he's excavating himself. "So I went looking for her, after," Bucky says, and that brings Steve up, sharp.

"Wait, what?" Steve says.

Bucky looks at him guiltily, rubbing his head like it hurts. "Yeah, I—didn't tell you. I didn't want to get your hopes up. Just—I thought you liked her. I went to all the Catholic schools: Saint Catherine's, Saint Gertrude's, Our Lady of Snow. They must have thought I was a masher," he says, and then he's covering his mouth and laughing, and maybe those are tears in his eyes. If they are, they're gone a second later, when Steve looks again.

"Did you ever find her?" Steve asks, genuinely curious.

"Not even! I lost my reputation for nothing!" and this strikes Bucky so funny that he has to cover his whole face, his laughter going high and a little hysterical. Steve laughs helplessly even as he starts to panic inside, because he's pretty sure that Bucky's crying again and Bucky never used to let Steve see him cry. He wants so much to be here for Bucky but Bucky's been so invaded, so thoroughly violated, that Steve feels like maybe even just laying eyes on him could leave a scar. He doesn't know how to go, though, without it seeming like rejection – and then Bucky pushes up from the table with a muttered apology and takes himself into the bedroom. He hears the lock click.

Steve sits there for a moment, elbows propped against the table, fingers shoved into his hair. He's never felt so fundamentally compromised: Welcome to the 21st century, old man, and it's Tony's voice he hears. After a while he gets up and goes to the easel, and he has two really sensational hours where he loses himself completely. By time the light's gone, there's a lot more paint on his canvas, most of which he can't remember putting there – and Bucky's behind him. Steve has no idea how long he's been standing there.

"Sorry," Steve says, reaching for a rag and wiping his hands with turps. "I lost track of… Do you want a sandwich?"

"Sure," Bucky says. "Yeah," and then, "It's good," and for a split-second Steve doesn't know what he's talking about. Then Bucky nods at the canvas, and Steve turns and sees the shattered glass and cratered skyscrapers. The angles jarr against each other; he's scored in edges and bright lines that judder. The buildings are teetering, on the brink of falling apart. Bucky tilts his head to the side and looks hard at the painting, like he's trying to see something in it, read some message that isn't there, and Steve has the sudden, vertiginous feeling that he hasn't done enough, shown enough, risked enough yet. He hasn't put enough of himself out there, hasn't cracked himself open – not the way Bucky has.

He doesn't let himself think about it, just takes Bucky by the shoulder, leans in, and kisses him. He doesn't even mean anything particularly sexual by it – it's just the most intimate, committed thing he can think to do: a way of making himself vulnerable, sharing breath.

But that changes. Bucky goes still as their lips touch, then moves ever so slightly – and an erotic charge rockets through him. Steve's still got the rag in one hand, and he lets it drop as he drives forward, his cock filling, his whole body turning on. Bucky's good hand comes up to cup his head, and then they're kissing more intensely, grappling with each other, neither of them knowing what they're doing but doing it anyway, clumsy and instinctive. Steve finds himself awed, a little scared even, of his own violence of feeling – he hadn't known that he could feel this…brutal, this degenerate. It's nothing he's felt for anyone he's gone around with, not even Peggy. He's pushing Bucky relentlessly toward the bedroom, or maybe Bucky's dragging him there, he's not even sure.
Then Bucky comes down on top of him on the unmade bed. His mouth is lush, wet, and Steve just lets himself float in the tingling warmth, sandwiched between Bucky and the mattress. He doesn’t think he’s ever felt this good: certainly not in this body, which was given to him for fighting, and not in the tight, broken-down body he was born into. But. Now. Everything. Just. Feels. So. Good – and he rolls Bucky over and greedily drags his hands down Bucky’s hard-muscled torso to his pants. He slides the pads of his fingers over the hard arrows at Bucky’s waist, then unzips him and grasps the warm velvety length of him—and it’s not until Bucky twists his mouth away and gasps, "stop," that Steve realizes how far gone he is, how close they are.

He stops immediately, heart hammering. Bucky drapes his metal arm across his eyes, nostrils flaring, and whispers, "Slow. Slow, please," and Steve sees that Bucky’s in the same place that he is: trying to remember what pleasure feels like, and wanting to stay in this place of no pain for as long as possible.

They drift, unable to stop kissing and touching: Bucky’s hand slips down to his ass, and Steve’s obsessed with kissing just inside the collar of Bucky’s t-shirt, where the warm flesh becomes metal: a place that Bucky hasn’t shown him yet. Eventually Bucky groans and comes all over Steve’s thighs. The mess squelches between them, and Steve laughs aloud as Bucky’s arms come around him, wondering if he can really have this. He thinks he can put up with a heck of a lot if he can have this. He hugs Bucky hard, and then they’re kissing again, falling back onto the mattress, drunk with it. At some point, Bucky lifts his head; he looks shaken. "Steve," he says, and there's an agonized, uncertain note to his voice. "This--wasn't something I forgot, right?"

"No," Steve says awkwardly. "This is – new."

"Because I don't-- " Bucky's face contorts with emotion. "We didn’t--"

"No. This is—something from now," Steve explains.

That puts a look on Bucky's face that Steve doesn't immediately recognize. "Okay," Bucky says, and settles down beside him again, hooking an arm around his neck and kissing his temple. "Well that's something, at least," and Steve realizes that it's hope, that strange look. "That's the first thing I've heard that’s worth a damn," Bucky Barnes says.

**IV. out of the bright light toward day**

It takes him forever to swim out of sleep - he's pretty sure he hasn’t slept this well since before the Depression – and so he’s still flailing up to consciousness when he realizes that Bucky’s coiled and
poised for violence, one arm flung protectively in his direction. Steve struggles to sit up, blinking furiously. Natasha’s standing in the doorway.

“Okay, well, this wasn’t the scene I was expecting,” Natasha says, tilting her head.

"Sam," Steve groans, yanking the sheet up practically to his chin. "I'm gonna kill him."

“Don’t,” Natasha says kindly. “He was just worried about you. Not about this, though,” she adds, eyes darting to take in the scene. “This – would maybe give him a conniption.”

Steve puts out a cautionary hand, but Bucky’s already standing down, slouching back against the headboard and glaring. “We're modern men now, don't you know that?”

"Hey, sarcasm!" Natasha says, delighted. "I didn't realize things were going this well."

“Natasha,” Steve says between gritted teeth. “This really isn’t a good—"

“Oh, I can see that,” she says, looking from one to the other of them. “Tell you what: I’ll go make us some coffee while you boys find some pants. Steve Rogers,” she adds with a tsk, dropping her voice to an undertone, “I had no idea you were this easy.”

“Easy?!” Steve repeats, insulted, but beside him, Bucky snorts in amusement. “What!"

“She’s got your number,” Bucky says.

Natasha’s between them and the bathroom, so Steve just swabs himself with his discarded t-shirt and pulls on some pants. “You don’t have to--" he says, glancing over at Bucky, who's zipping up. “I'll take care of—" but Bucky just looks at him strangely.

"I'm going with you," and there's something flat and dangerous in his tone. "I know her better than you do."

Steve stops him immediately, putting a hand to his chest. "No," he says. "You don't."

Bucky's eyes flash angrily. "You don't—"

"No," Steve insists, overriding him, "You don't. You really don't, okay? You don't know her better than I do, and she doesn't know you better than I do, and you're all going to listen to me now. You got that?"

Bucky blows out a frustrated breath and spins away from him, hair flying. He scrubs at his face, and Steve can see he's breathing hard. "Okay," he mutters finally. "Fine. But you were so just your mother right there."

"Up yours," Steve says, and leaves him to collect himself.

Natasha is pouring herself a mug of strong smelling coffee out of the percolator, and when she sees him, she pours another. She brings them to the table, and Steve comes over, flips his chair around, and sits down. "Okay: so who knows where we are?"

"Sam," she replies, sitting down and pulling one knee up onto the chair. "Now me. I wouldn't swear that nobody else knows, but so far nobody's said anything about it."

"What are they saying?" Steve asks.

"Depends on who you think they are," she answers wryly. "Stark? The CIA? The Pentagon? Fury?"
You're lucky everyone's got their own problems right now. Nobody's really paying attention: everyone's scrabbling for higher ground." Natasha tilts her head, thinks it over. "They know you've gone to ground with The Winter Soldier, and no one's very happy about that, but I think the general feeling is that at least you're in pocket somewhere. Not everyone is." She takes a sip of her coffee. "Though I guess there's some doubt about whether you're still on the team. You know: where your loyalties lie."

Steve smiles thinly. "There shouldn't be. I was disobeying orders for Bucky Barnes when their grandmas were in kindergarten. There shouldn't be any doubt in their minds."

Natasha looks like she's trying to choose her words carefully. "Steve, he's not Bucky. Or, okay, fine —" she adds quickly, holding up a hand, before Steve can interject, "he's not only Bucky. Not anymore. Think about it: he's been The Winter Soldier for almost three times as long as he was ever James Barnes. He's a dangerous man, Steve."

"You know, it's funny," Steve says, scratching the back of his neck, "but I just did a verse and two choruses of this song with him about you. Why does everyone always assume I don't understand what's going on? Is it because I'm old? Do I look slow or something?"

Natasha leans forward. "No," she says in a slow, measured voice of the utmost patience, "it's because you've shacked up with The Winter Soldier, the most legendary assassin in the history of—" and then she lets out a laugh and sits back, ruefully shaking her head. "I can't believe he's your—friend. Or whatever he is. Jesus, Rogers, if I'd known you liked 'em that dangerous, I might have taken a run at you myself."

"Everyone's always underestimated me," Steve says. "Except Bucky, actually." Natasha still doesn't look convinced, so after a moment Steve pushes up, out of his chair, and goes to the sideboard where he keeps his uniform belt. He unsnaps the little leather compartment where he keeps his special things: the things they found on him after the crash, the things he always has on him. Inside there's his compass – the one with Peggy's picture in it – and his dogtags. He spills the tags and chain into his palm and gives them a brief, tight squeeze before bringing them back to the table. It's an offering, and Natasha knows it: she hesitates, then takes them and looks at them carefully. When a crease appears between her eyebrows he looks away, face burning. He knows what she's seeing: one of the tags says STEVEN ROGERS and the other says JAMES B. BARNES.

His throat burns when he finally speaks. "We always knew that if one of us was dead, the other was as good as. Natasha, please: I need you to back my play on this."

She sighs and lets the dogtags spool into a little puddle on the table. "Just — you're letting your guard down in a big way here. For a very, very dangerous man."

"He is. I am. You are. Doctor Banner is right - we're all monsters. If Bucky's any worse than us, it's because he's been doing this longer, for worse people, in worse—" Steve has to stop and breathe, because he can't stop thinking of the gurney, the chair, the electro-shock machine, the cryogenic freeze chamber, the leather straps —

"That's exactly my point," Natasha says. "After all that time, there might not be enough of him left. He might not be able to stop. You don't know how hard it is to say no."

"I said no." Steve turns and sees The Winter Soldier for the first time since the Beltway: he's suddenly huge, terrifying: vicious in a way that makes Steve feel despairing and helpless. "I said no when it happened. I said no afterwards. I said no in '48, in '49, in '53—"

"Bucky," Steve pleads softly.
"—'54 and '56, when the tanks rolled into Budapest—I was there before and after, you stupid bitch—"

"Bucky!" Steve shouts, appalled. Natasha just shoots him a sideways glance and waves it away like it's irrelevant, but it isn't; it isn't. He turns to yell at Bucky, but something in him's already giving way, quivering like a building losing structural integrity during an earthquake. Bucky's gone—he's gone where the tanks are—and he's backing away from the horror, wide-eyed and muttering in Russian as he slides down the wall.

It's Natasha who answers, pushing past Steve and crouching down besides him and responding in guttural tones that Steve can't understand. Bucky grits his teeth and nods, then jerks another nod, then looks at her — and for the first time Natasha looks back at him like he's a person, which is something: which is actually the whole ball game, Steve thinks. Bucky's white-faced and panting like an exhausted dog, and he mutters something else to her in Russian before covering his face with his hands: metal and human both.

"All right," Natasha says, mouth tightening, to Steve. "What do you want me to do?"

"Help me lay the groundwork," Steve says immediately. "For when—you know."

She nods, then stands, solid and graceful. "Can I tell them I saw you?" she asks.

From below, from behind his hands, Bucky mutters, "no; please, no," but Steve hesitates, trying to think it all through. "What did he say to you?" Steve asks instead. "Just now."

Her face softens a little. "It's—a proverb. It's kind of hard to translate." Her nose wrinkles as she struggles to explain. "It's sort of like—if you only knew how shit it all was, you'd understand. It's a saying we have a lot of occasion to use in Russia," she adds wryly.

Steve just stares at her and then says: "Do what you think best. I trust your judgment."

"Thank you," Natasha says. "I'll try to tell them how it is. Whether they believe me..."

Steve bends to hug her to him, and is moved when she hugs him back hard. "I'm sorry he," Steve gestures helplessly at her midriff, where the wound is.

"Don't be. I put six bullets into his chest. Not so's you'd notice," and then she's gone.

V. the cure for anything is salt water

He slides down the wall beside Bucky and sits down next to him, patting his leg reassuringly. Finally Bucky lets his hands drop. "I'm sorry," he mutters. "I blew that. Just—she's from—the t-time," and he stops to breathe deep. "I remember the before," Bucky explains in a whisper, "and the now—" and his metal hand blindly finds Steve's and squeezes hard, "but the middle, in the t-time—it's all—swiss cheese—and f-flashes of—" Bucky's breath comes faster again and now it's Steve squeezing his hand tight.

"Do you want to take a walk?" Steve asks, and then: "Come take a walk with me."

Bucky shakes his head, fear in his eyes. "I don't think—I'm not ready to—"

"You are," Steve says, and he needs for this to be true. Natasha's visit has made it clear that they can't stay in this bubble forever; the world won't let them. Natasha was the thin edge of the wedge;
there'll be others coming now. "Come on," he says, "we'll go to Surf Avenue. It's not far," and he's been saving that, knowing Bucky will be tempted by it.

Some of the hardness slips from Bucky's face. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. We'll go down the boardwalk, I'll buy you a hot dog. Nathan's is still there—"

Bucky's eyebrows shoot up. "There's still Nathan's?" and Steve laughs and says, "Yeah, can you believe it? Right where it was! First thing I looked into—okay, maybe not the first thing, but still: I looked into it. There's still Nathan's, and Lombardi's, and—oh, remember Enduro's? It's still on DeKalb, same family even running it, but they changed the name to something else, I forget." He knocks his shoulder against Bucky's. "Come on," he says. "Let's clean ourselves up and go. You can have the first shower."

"You go. I got something to do first," and when Steve comes out of the shower he's shocked to find Bucky standing at the sink peering at himself through a hole he's wiped in the fogged-up mirror; he's cut off his hair. He meets Steve's eyes and Steve's transfixed, throat closing, because it could be 1944, in the barrack shower, it could be 1937, at the Red Hook Recreation Center: somehow it's the year of our Lord 2014.

Bucky turns around, flushing red, and Steve closes the distance between them and hugs him hard, hard, hard, not caring that he's wearing nothing but a towel and dripping on Bucky's shoes. Bucky hugs back, tentatively at first, obviously overwhelmed by Steve's depth of feeling, and Steve has the clear but terrible realization that even though he knows what happened to his friend, that even though he knows that Bucky has endured seventy years of the worst kind of enslavement, some part of him is happy it happened, because this is a miracle. Somehow, in the midst of Steve's own catastrophic loss, the person he values most has been returned to him: this man, his friend. And that's such a terrible, selfish thought that Steve grits his teeth in a spasm of self-loathing; it's unworthy of Bucky, it's unworthy of him, to feel grateful for—

"What the hell is happening in your head, Rogers?" Bucky asks wonderingly, and Steve laughs and snorts and wipes at his leaky eyes.


Bucky nods and yanks off his t-shirt, and for the first time, Steve sees the whole metal arm, and the terrible scarring near the shoulder where it attaches. He's struck again by his own selfish happiness – God, what this has cost Bucky - but then Bucky, following his eyes, says, "It doesn't hurt. I don't mind it; it's useful, actually. My—" He stops, thinks hard, like he's struggling to remember. "I think my arm was destroyed in the fall."

"I'm sorry," Steve says, and in his head he's there, on the train.

"For what?" and there's a little of old Bucky edge under there. "For not being able to save me after a thousand foot drop?"

"For…" Steve clamps down on it, shaking his head, because it's not fair to lay this on Bucky, who's trying so hard to shake himself out of this nightmare. But Bucky's frowning, and Steve knows that look - that's Bucky's relentless, beat-it-out-of-him look – and then he's sort of gently banging on Steve's arm and shoulder, shaking him around, back and forth, and so Steve looks at him and says: "For not jumping in after you."

Bucky stares at him for a moment and then says, thickly, "That would've been stupid, even for you. Then Hydra'd've had two super soldiers. We could've been the Batman and Robin of evil," and this
idea is so preposterous and yet so potentially likely that they both start laughing. Steve's clutching his chest he's laughing so hard, and Bucky is leaning against the tiled wall for support, and then Bucky gasps, "Get out of my shower, you freak!" and Steve yells back, "My shower! My shower, my bathroom, my—" and Bucky shoves him out, then yanks his towel off for good measure, before slamming and locking the bathroom door. Steve stands there naked in the hallway and laughs and laughs.

When Bucky finally comes out, he takes a long time to decide what to wear, rummaging through Steve's clothes like he's trying to remember what's normal, or what conveys normal, or even maybe what he likes. Steve pours himself another cup of coffee and lets him take as long as he needs, and Bucky finally comes out wearing jeans and a long-sleeved black t-shirt. "Okay?" he asks Steve. "Classic," Steve replies.

Bucky comes over and takes the coffee out of Steve's hand and swigs it, and that's when he sees the dogtags sitting on the breakfast table, where Natasha's left them. The mug shakes a little as he puts it down and scoops up the chain. "They took mine."

"Have these," and Bucky stares down at them for a long time before slipping them over his head and tucking them into his shirt. The tags clank softly against the metal.

When they're finally ready to go, Bucky snags one of Steve's baseball caps and pulls it low down over his face, and even so he hesitates again at the door to the street. "You're all right," Steve says softly. "You're good. You can do this," and then they're pushing outside and heading south toward Brighton Beach Avenue. Bucky looks like he's moving through occupied territory, eyes moving constantly, muscles tensed and ready to spring, though he loosens up as they keep walking. Everything is uncannily familiar, from the rumble and screech of the elevated trains, to the aggressive bustle of shoppers, the crammed storefront windows advertising in multiple languages, even the smell of dog piss. Bucky uncoils, seeming to feel it too: the thrum of New York. The trollies are long gone but the tracks are still there, running along under the El: traces of the their past just beneath all the ugly, egg-shaped cars and the giant clean-air buses.

Steve hears the harsh crackle of Bucky's Russian and turns, poised for violence and sick with dread, to find that he's stopped to argue with a beefy matron standing over a huge counter of what look like pasties. Bucky's pointing to a tray of something labeled "сочник (sweet cheese)," then comes away glaring and says, "What a swindle. Who does she think she--what?" though Steve is spared from answering by the woman, who is shouting for him to come back even as she slides four pasties into a paper bag.

"You have any money?" Bucky asks him, and Steve, embarrassed, says, "Yeah, Bucky, sure," and gives him some bills from his back pocket. Everything nowadays seems absurdly expensive to him, but Bucky seems comfortable enough thumbing out the money. Then he's handing one of the pasties to Steve in a crumple of wax paper, "Try this, you'll like this," Bucky says, having taken a big bite of one himself, and Steve does like it - it's kind of like a calzone and kind of like a turnover: it's a Russian turnover, he supposes. They're munching their turnovers and bumming down the street, and it's only when they turn south on West 5th that Steve realizes that he's not steering anymore, but Bucky always knew Coney Island better than he did. He always rode on Bucky's ticket.

Bucky clutches at Steve's arm, then speeds up and breaks into a sprint, and Steve chases him down the street like it's 1932 and skids around the corner onto Surf Avenue. It's the far end, the Brighton end, but there's the boardwalk, and beyond it, the ocean, and even from here Steve can make out the Wonder Wheel and the coiled spring of the Cyclone.

Bucky's wandered into the middle of the street and stopped dead to stare down the strip, and when a
car honks at him to get out of the way, Steve has a moment of fear for the car: it's all too easy to picture the Winter Soldier punching the car out with one great swing. So Steve darts out into the street and says, "Come on, Buck - loser buys at Nathan's," and takes off, and Bucky's on his heels all the way down to Stillwell Avenue.

"You pay, sucker," Steve says, slamming his palm against the bright yellow and green Nathan's Famous sign.

"That is wrong, that is just wrong," Bucky mutters, but he bellies up to the counter like a sport and buys them each a cardboard box of hotdogs and paper cups of crinkle fries and two giant styrofoam cups of orangeade. Steve chows one down right there, in two bites, and starts on a second as they walk the final distance to the boardwalk. He follows Bucky up the splintered wood steps, and there, beyond the simple fence, is the beach, and the ocean beyond. It's past the season, but it's still warm and mostly everything seems open. To the left are picnic tables with bright umbrellas, and the kiddie rides of Luna Park, and the beach shops, and oh, ice cream and Italian ices. On the right is the Parachute Jump, though it doesn't look like it's running anymore. Bucky has wandered across to sit down on a worn wooden bench overlooking the beach, and Steve goes and sits next to him, idly spearing fries into his mouth with a red plastic fry fork.

Bucky stares out at the water for a long while, then takes off his cap and spins it away into the sand and turns his face up to the sun. "Stevie," he says, his voice low and cracking a little, "is this fuckin' paradise or what?"

"It is, Bucky. It is," Steve says, and sucks on his orangeade.

VI. I need a word for rounding your corner onto your street

They stay by the ocean for most of the day, eating food that mostly hasn't changed and wandering among people who have--but that's okay, Steve thinks; it's actually okay, because for the first time he's not alone in this strange land. In the afternoon they doze on the beach. Steve makes a pillow out of his jacket, and Bucky stretches out crossways, head resting on Steve's thigh to keep the sand out of his hair. Steve lets himself drift to the sound of the tide, the cawing of seagulls and the barking of dogs--and then suddenly Bucky's on top of him, hard and heavy and clutching his face, kissing him and it's so hot that Steve's whole body turns on for it. His jeans are too tight: he's suddenly aware of the rough, thick fabric hugging him. His t-shirt drags against his nipples and--

Bucky murmurs into his mouth, "I want to lay you," and Steve groans and feels he might come in his pants. "I always wanted to, but--"

"Jeez, Bucky, we're in public," Steve manages to gasp. "This is--we can't--"

"I did it with Dottie McLaren out by the pier once," and Steve feels a twist of contradictory feelings - laughter, shock, jealousy - before blurting: "She was three years older than you!"

Bucky props himself up on one elbow. "Course she was," he says reasonably, "it was her idea," and sure, of course the girls wanted Bucky. Everyone wanted Bucky; he did; that was just the way of things. But, Steve thinks, he's smarter now, or at least slightly less dumb, and being turned on this much seems to be sending blood to his brain as well as everywhere else, so he grabs Bucky by the shoulders and mashes his mouth against Bucky's ear. "I'd let you put it in me," he whispers, shaken at his own audacity. "I'd've let you then but you never asked me," and now it's Bucky who's groaning and squirming. This is what the top of the world feels like. "And don't get me wrong," Steve adds: "I'll make out with you all day long, but if you want more, we've got to go home. I'm not
Bucky pulls back to grin down at him. "Captain America: still not easier than Dottie McLaren," and Steve laughs, and not just cause it's funny: he wasn't sure how - or even if - Bucky remembered the whole Captain America thing.

"Hey, that's not a bad slogan," Steve says. "I should maybe use that."

"It's better than that whole star-spangled man thing," Bucky replies, and then he's rolling gracefully to his feet, extending Steve a hand and hauling him up, out of the sand.

"Hey, it's the star-spangled man with a plan," Steve reminds him, and he's just brushing sand off his pants when Bucky grabs him by the arm and starts dragging him toward the boardwalk. "This is a good plan," Bucky says. "I like this plan."

Sixteen blocks west and four stories up, and they're hardly inside when Bucky pushes him up against the door and kisses him, hands sliding up under Steve's shirt. Steve twitches a little at the feel of Bucky's metal hand, and Bucky freezes and yanks back.

Steve seizes his wrists. "It's fine," he says, and presses both of Bucky's hands to his body.

"I don't want to hurt you," Bucky says shakily.

"It's fine, it's fine," Steve says, "it's better than fine." He feels his courage surge and slides his fingers into Bucky's chopped-off hair and pulls their mouths together again. Bucky moans and shoves him back against the door, putting his hands everywhere, all over him. Steve tries to climb him, and Bucky works a strong thigh between his legs. He bears down, a tingling pleasure rushing up from the base of his cock and all through him. Being this turned on makes him feel thirsty, makes him feel crazy. Bucky's hands smooth down the small of his back, slide down over his ass - and Steve begins to tremble: jeez, who could ever imagine that it would feel so good to be touched like this? Bucky's stroking gently over his buttocks, then down between them, and for a few white-hot moments Steve is just gone, lost in a blaze of sensuality, and when he comes back to himself he's panting and dizzy, holding on tight to Bucky. Bucky, at least, feels solid as all get-out.

"I don't remember you being this strong," Steve manages.

"Yeah, tell me," Bucky gasps, sounding as destroyed as Steve feels. "Christ, you're beautiful: you were always beautiful. Is it wrong of me to wish you were smaller?"

"I am smaller," Steve blurts nonsensically, but Bucky gets it like Bucky always gets it, and leans in to rub his forehead, his nose and lips, against Steve's like a cat.

"I want, I really w-want to - " Bucky says haltingly, touching him again in that place that sends flares rocketing into his vision. "You know—"

Steve now knows exactly what it means to be hot and bothered. "I already said you could," he says, trying not to whine.

"Yeah, but—" and suddenly Bucky's giggling warm air against his neck, "I gotta say, I'm not quite seeing how this works," and Steve hoots with laughter as Bucky goes on, a little desperately: "Do you think there's a book or something?"

"I don't think people do books anymore," Steve says helplessly. "Maybe a website?"

"I saw a pamphlet once," Bucky muses. "Put out by some queer group on West 30th."
"I'm gonna take a wild guess and say they're not there anymore," Steve says, and then he's grabbing Bucky by the belt and dragging him towards the bedroom. "Come on, we'll make something up. Wing it, improvise, play it by ear—"

"See, right here, this is what they call leadership poten—" and then they stop dead and stare at each other, because Steve's phone is ringing. And then Bucky's face changes, and it's all Steve can do to stop himself from grabbing him, pleading: Bucky, please, don't go.

VII. But what can I reply / who knows it wasn't I?

"You should--" Bucky says, just as Steve blurts, "It's not--" except there's always the chance that it is important. Steve grits his teeth and then manages to extract the phone from his unzipped pants. "Hello?"

"Captain Rogers, it's Maria Hill. I need you to bring him in."

Steve is holding the phone so tight the plastic squeaks. "Who?" he asks flatly.

"The Winter Soldier," Hill says.

Steve doesn't respond; it doesn't take her long to get it.

"Sergeant Barnes," Hill amends, and Steve nods slowly to himself.

"I'm sorry, I'm not prepared to do that." He feels unnaturally calm.

"Captain, please. Think it over," Hill says quietly. "He's one of the deadliest men alive, a man with tens of kills to his credit. I believe Agent Romanov when she says he's no threat to you, but you're letting him move about freely in the second most densely populated county in the United--"

"You've got me under surveillance?" Steve's suddenly furious.

Hill hesitates and then says, "We've got you under protective--" and Steve yanks the phone away from his face for a minute and breathes hard. He's as angry at himself as anyone else; of course they're not going to let him get far. He's Captain America. From that first moment in that fake room, he's been treated like U.S. government property.

"Now you just listen," Steve manages, as Bucky stumbles past him to the table and sits down hard; he looks like someone shot his dog. "If you ever want my help again on anything, you'll back off and let me handle this. Or I swear to you, I'll--" and he's at a loss for a threat, and then he's not. "I'll leave the country," he says, feeling ripped apart by it, heartsick. "We're not the world's only democracy; we may not even be the world's best democracy anymore. There are other places worth defending. I hear Denmark is nice," and then he hangs up and sits besides Bucky, slamming the phone down onto the table.

Bucky looks up at him with tortured eyes. "I'm a dope," he says, and before Steve can argue, he adds, "and you're an even bigger dope. What are we doing, acting like this is all going to go away and they'll just let us be? Whatever they're telling you: it's true, I did it, I'm guilty," and there's a black horror in Bucky's eyes. "I did things they don't even know about. I killed NATO General James Keller. I killed the French Defense Minister and the entire peace conference envoy in Algeria. I killed Senator Harry--"

Steve grabs Bucky's hand, fingers clenching hard. "Did you ever choose the target?"
Bucky just stares. "Choose the--no! But I pulled the trigger--"

"You're a prisoner of war, Buck," Steve says, willing him to believe it. "You're possibly the longest held prisoner of war this country has ever had--" and Bucky's shaking his head in mute denial, no, no, no. "We're going to file for seventy years of back pay, I swear to God," Steve says, outraged all over again by the injustice of it.

Bucky's elbows are on the table, fingers pressed to his temples. "But Steve, what I did--"

"What Hydra made you do. I saw the files; I saw that obscene machine--"

"But I still--" Bucky's hands slide over his face, muffling his words. "You wouldn't have--"

"Wait a minute. Wait, wait," and Steve's so angry now that something inside him has snapped, just completely busted. "Do you think," and whatever's on his face, in his voice causes Bucky to drop his hands and gape at him with his bloodshot eyes. "Do you really think that if it had been the other way around, and I'd fallen from that train instead of you, that I would have—somehow—miraculously withstood—what, seventy years of torture, electroshock, brainwashing, whatever the hell they—"

"I don't know," and it's so soft that Steve can barely hear it, but he understands right away that this is the toxic thing at the very center of Bucky's soul: the fear that if it had been Steve, he'd've been able to resist all the forces of hell. And the thought sort of breaks Steve apart, because while oh, how Bucky loves him, he thought that Bucky of all people knew him better than that. Steve needed him—needs him—to know him better than that.

"So you don't think I'm a person, is that it?" Christ how that hurts. "You think I'm him—the superhuman monkey—some plasticman robot who doesn't—" and Bucky at least knows him well enough to see that he's wounded to the quick, because he's reaching out, recanting, "no, no, I don't mean that, you know I—"

"It could have been me. It would have been me. Human beings aren't meant to—Nobody could've—" and Bucky's got him now, Bucky is hauling him up from the chair and hugging him tight, the metal arm strong against his back, and saying, "Steve, I'm sorry. Steve," and Steve flings his arm around Bucky's neck and holds on, holds on tight.

It's a long time since he's let anyone comfort him, and it feels too good to stop, and so they find themselves tottering toward the sofa and collapsing into it. He's happy just to have the warm muscle of Bucky's leg against his, Bucky's metal arm curled around his shoulders, and suddenly it seems perfectly reasonable to him that Bucky's hugging arm got upgraded. The thought makes him giggle, and then grow sad, which is stupid: having this is making him feel how just much he's missed it, even though he now has it again.

"Two days," Steve blurts, and squeezes his eyes shut; in denial, embarrassed, kind of horrified. He's never admitted this to anyone; not even himself. "I made it two days without you. And then I crashed into the— " He can hardly make himself say the rest. "I kept wishing it was me instead of you."

Bucky goes very far away, and Steve guesses where he is from the twist of love and grief on his face. He's on the train, and this time he's watching Steve fall out, hang on, let go and disappear. Bucky's obviously never imagined it from Steve's point of view before.

"I honestly don't know what I'd've done in your place," Bucky says, voice cracking.

"Sure you do," Steve replies softly. "You'd've been Captain America," and then Bucky is crumpling
and making soft animal noises in Steve's arms, sobbing with naked relief.

**VIII. a cat is never on the side of power**

They never make it to bed that night, just curl up on the sofa like dogs. But when the sun comes up, flooding the room with light, Bucky opens one irritated eye and drags Steve into the bedroom. The room is dim, the curtains still drawn, and they collapse on the bed and pass out again. Steve's still drifting sleepily when Bucky rolls over onto him, pulls his underwear down, and takes his cock in his mouth - and that wakes him up fast.

He jerks up, gasps, flailing: "Bucky!" but Bucky soothes him back down to the mattress; easing him down onto his back with long strokes down his chest, kissing into his stomach. Steve claws the sheets and pants as Bucky's mouth - Bucky's lips, Bucky's tongue, Bucky's nose and cheek - slide over him, licking and kissing, so soft and wet. He's never ever felt anything like this. It's disgraceful and awkward - his cheeks are burning - but it's wonderful, too. It's so hard to keep still - he can't keep still, he's rocking his hips up, up, up--and Bucky's moaning around him and tightening, doing something wicked with his--

He comes with a shout, and then, crazily enough, he's laughing at the ceiling: overcome by joy. Bucky scrambles up next to him and grabs him and kisses him roughly, hungrily, and Steve knows that Bucky's feeling his own sort of joy. There's a strange taste to Bucky's mouth, a stickiness that makes him excited and curious and a little breathless.

Bucky always had a way of making him feel like the most unsophisticated guy on the block, but he thinks he could do this for him-- he wants to do it for him. He kisses back hard, excited all over again, brave again, he drags his tongue across Bucky's shadowed cheek, licks him, licks into his mouth. He can't stop looking at Bucky: the way his eyelashes flutter, the way he's panting, and Steve pushes him back against the mattress, pushes his shirt up. God, Bucky is so good-looking - but then again, he always was: if the super serum had any outward effects on Bucky Barnes, Steve doesn't know what they are.

He drags his hands over Bucky's chest and feels the ridges and planes of him, the heat of him. Bucky is— they look at each other and Steve grins and yanks Bucky's hand down to his zipper, flicks the button and lets himself nod rapidly as Bucky pulls his own cock out of the open V of his pants. Steve wants to—he touches—he grasps Bucky's cock and looks straight at him. They're both smiling and kind of laughing a little as Steve slides his hand up, then licks his palm and does it again: Bucky gasps, and that's even better, and then, overcome by his own enormous feelings, Steve bends and presses his mouth to Bucky's cock, kisses him, licks and swallows him. He feels the intense heat pulsing in his mouth, sliding against his tongue, and Steve's heart pounds with the forbidden thrill of what he's doing: giving pleasure, loving Bucky this way. He's letting Bucky's cock slide and thrust into him and he presses forward, takes as much as he can, thrusts back.

Bucky reaches down, the metal touching his face with surprising gentleness, trying to nudge him away: he's close, Steve guesses. But Steve holds on to Bucky's hips and goes deeper: he wants this, wants to feel this, has never wanted anything so much. Bucky moans, straining to hold back, and then he can't: his hands helplessly grasp at Steve's hair and then he's coming, crying out, cursing, hips jerking forward. Steve gags a little but keeps going, tensing his mouth, sucking gently through the pulses, the aftershocks. They press themselves together; they have interlocked. Steve holds, and holds, and holds, and then turns his head and kisses Bucky's thigh. Bucky's metal hand is cupping his head; heavy and possessive. Steve doesn't mind. He doesn't mind one single bit.
"Cheesecake," Bucky says, after a while.

Steve lifts his head. "Who're you calling cheesecake?"

"No, I mean I want some," Bucky says. "Cheesecake. Cup of coffee."

"Let's do it," Steve says.

They don't talk about it, but they both know that the best bakeries are back in their old neighborhood, or at least they used to be. They shower and dress, and take the F train north back to Court Street, and Steve sees right away that Bucky's a lot more comfortable on the El than he is: he has no trouble negotiating the Metrocard machine, or the turnstiles, and the chrome and orange cars don't faze him. Bucky's been in and out of time and travelled all over the globe while Steve been locked in ice, but slouched here on the shaking, screeching subway Bucky looks like part of the world where Steve knows he doesn't. Even the way he wears Steve's clothes makes them look totally different: Steve wouldn't have recognized those black pants, that gray t-shirt, as his own if he hadn't just seen Bucky take them out of his closet.

Court Street is pretty recognizable: the 19th century courthouses themselves still dominate the landscape, and a lot of the old buildings and brownstones are still there, too, interspersed between others made of shiny glass and steel. There are businesses selling things that he never even imagined, and fancy restaurants and cafes with twinkling lights decorating the trees outside, and then, it's like their vision clears, and there's the Court Pastry Shop and Mazzola's Bakery and Jay's Kosher Deli and the Jersey Pork Store, and wow, what a thing to be there as a grownup with money in your pocket. They treat themselves to coffee and cake, then go on a serious bender, buying sausages and rice balls and cold cuts, loaves of fresh olive bread and a rum-flavored sponge cake. The clerks behind the counters are mostly middle-aged guys in white aprons - "younger than we are," Bucky grins, elbowing him - who put their purchases in brown paper bags and wrap white pastry boxes with red bakery string. It all makes Steve a bit homesick.

Bucky must be feeling it too because afterwards he heads like a homing pigeon toward Grace Street, brown paper sack tucked in the crook of his arm. The row house is still there, but it's all decorated with fancy little bronze bits and the windows and doors have been replaced: they're "retro" which means they look nothing at all how windows and doors used to look. There are also no fewer than eight buzzers outside the door. They stand there for a moment, looking up at the house, then turn around and sit down on the stoop. The view from here is more familiar. They've spent a lot of time on this stoop.

"I suppose they're all dead," Bucky says finally.

"Yeah. Andy in the war, the rest from natural causes."

Bucky nods, unsurprised - but then he says something that surprises Steve. "I've been here, actually. Twice, since the war."

"You..." Steve's having trouble processing this. "You came here?"

"Yeah. And to your place--I think I went there once, but it was--" gone, the whole building: Steve knows that already. Bucky's getting that strained, glassy look he gets whenever he tries to remember anything from The Time. He stares at his boots, trying to focus. "I ran away from them. Twice. At least twice." He frowns. "1965, I think. '68? '73?"

Steve's heart twists: Bucky'd said no, but he'd done more than that; he had tried to escape.
"And I came here. Of course, I didn't know why I came here. I just did. I came here and sat on the stoop." Bucky raises a hand and gestures across the vista of Grace Street. "And then they came and took me away again," he says, and suddenly he's sucking for breath, great gulps of it. Steve grabs his arm and holds on tight. "I can't believe that happened," Bucky mutters, lost and incredulous. "I can't fucking believe that all happened."

"I can't fucking believe it either," Steve repeats helplessly, and Bucky blinks at him and bursts out laughing, then leans forward and plants a kiss smack on Steve's forehead. Steve grins and then leans back on his elbows, like he's done a thousand times before. He feels like if he closes his eyes, he can maybe hear the sounds of jump rope and stickball.

"You know, I'm glad you missed the sixties," Bucky muses. "They were horrible."

Steve looks at him, curious. "Really? Everybody always says the sixties were so great."

"God, no." Bucky looks appalled. "Horrible." He looks out again over Grace Street, and Steve follows his eyes, trying to imagine it circa '65 or '68 or '73. "I mean, I wasn't going to no Beatles concerts," Bucky adds grimly. "From what I saw, it was..." He stops.

Steve doesn't press him, and he never finishes the thought.

IX. fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross

They take a walk along the Brooklyn Heights esplanade, which wasn't there when they were kids - there's so much more traffic, so many more cars - and then take the train home to drop off their packages. Bucky keeps remembering food he wants, so they hatch a plan to get pizza and Italian ices at the Spumoni Garden and then spend a quiet night at home noshing on what they bought today and maybe watching a movie, though Steve won't be sad if they don't end up seeing much of it. He has some ideas about how to distract Bucky from the movie. Heck, even in his day, a movie was a bit of a pretext.

They're just getting ready to head out again when Steve's phone rings. Bucky instantly pivots and stares at the wall and Steve's heart sinks. He slides the phone out of his pocket, trying to keep his emotions in check. He'd thought he was pretty good at it. "Hello?"

"You gotta bring him in, Cap." Tony Stark, distant: on speakerphone. "You can come in to me, or you can go to—well, I don't know who else is left. But you gotta bring him in."

"Who?" Steve asks.


Steve waits, but Stark doesn't have the sense that Maria Hill does. "Who?" Steve asks.

"The Winter Soldier," Stark repeats. "Freezer Burn, the Russian Mob. Ice Ice Baby. Sid Vicious, the White Russian, Psychosicle, MC Hammer and Sickle--"

Steve hangs up.

The phone rings again. Steve stares at it, debating how to handle this, and then Bucky comes over and gently takes the phone from him. Steve's shocked into stillness.

"Hello?" Bucky says. "Mr. Stark?" and then, "This is – Sergeant James Barnes," and maybe no one
but Steve would hear the tremor in his voice. Steve's so damn proud of him. "Yes," Bucky says. "Where?" He listens. "When?" he asks. "Okay," he says, and then, to Steve, when he hangs up: "I gotta go to New York."

"You don't have to," Steve says fervently, and when Bucky laughs, it's a terrible sound.

"Yeah," Bucky says. "I do," he says, and then his hands are on Steve's pants, roughly unbuttoning and unzipping him, the zipper rasping against Bucky's metal fingers. His urgency is contagious, and Steve barely manages to shove Bucky's shirt up and get in a few desperate kisses before Bucky turns him around and braces him hard against the wall. Bucky's boot knocks his legs apart and now Steve's breathing so fast that he thinks he might pass out – certainly would have, back in the old days. Bucky's leaving deep sucking kisses on his neck and stroking his cock, cupping his balls—not that he could get any harder, his body's primed for it, screaming for it. Bucky's grinding up against him, and Steve pushes back relentlessly, waiting, wanting: what is he waiting for?

"Go on," Steve says breathlessly, bracing himself with his palms and letting his head hang. "Come on, I won't break—" and Bucky groans as Steve shoves back against him, blindly reaching backwards to grab Bucky's hip, and then all at once it's happening, Bucky's hands are tight on his hips and he's pushing into him, and oh Christ, oh Christ, oh Christ, it feels so—so—and he's twisting his face back for clumsy, heartfelt kisses. Sweat's running down his back and his palms are skidding against the wall - he's losing control, this much pleasure shocking and unfamiliar – and then Bucky curls his metal arm around Steve's chest. Steve groans in relief, more solidly anchored, and pushes back, disrupting Bucky's rhythm with his own need, and then Bucky's panting, cursing in his ear, and Steve laughs aloud when Bucky suddenly drags him to the floor.

They wrestle for control for a few minutes, kissing and groping, hands sliding over skin, until Steve closes his eyes and willfully surrenders. Bucky fucks him until he's lost to himself, just moving, rocking, his cheek dragging raw on the carpet; finally he comes all over himself, dizzy and shuddering, and then comes again. Bucky's muttering "Steve, Jesus, Steve—" and struggling to breathe, and he feels the exact moment Bucky loses it, gasping against Steve's neck and convulsing in wave after wave.

They lay there together for a while, damp and sweat-slick, holding each other, and when Bucky finally grabs Steve and kisses him, there's salt on his lips.

"Don't forget," Bucky says, almost angrily, and he seems to be talking to himself even more than to Steve. "Don't you fucking—"

"No," Steve says faintly. "No, no."

"You gotta help me hold on," and Bucky kisses him one more time, vehemently, before hauling himself to his feet and trembling into the bedroom. Steve sits up, wrecked, his head in his hands, and tries to pull himself back together.

Bucky comes back wearing his leathers, his gauntlets, his holsters, even his guns – Steve had no idea those weapons were even in the apartment. Steve opens his mouth and then stops himself: if Bucky thinks it's time to suit up, then it's time to suit up, so Steve gets to his feet and goes to put on his black uniform.

They go down to the bike, and Steve hooks his shield on the front, over the handlebars, then hesitates and offers Bucky the key. "Do you want to drive?" he asks.

Bucky looks at him strangely. "No," and he doesn't understand until Bucky slides onto the bike behind him, wraps his arms around him, and tucks his face against Steve's neck.
The ride back across the bridge feels different from the ride they took to Brooklyn: now Steve drives slowly, dreading their arrival at Stark Tower. He doesn't know what he's delivering Bucky to, though Bucky seems to know: he's dressed for it. All at once the dread overrides him and Steve skids the bike to a stop at East 17th and 3rd Ave.

"We don't have to do this," Steve says desperately, turning around. "I was serious about Denmark. We can make a run for it, go somewhere they'll never--" but even as he's saying it, he's struck by the futility of it: Bucky's been sent on missions all over the world, and SHIELD found Dr. Banner in Calcutta. There's nowhere they can go where they won't be found, and Steve sees that Bucky knows this already: the sad, terrible knowledge is in his eyes. Goddamned James Barnes, still making him feel like the most unsophisticated kid on the block, and then he tries to scrub the words from his brain.

"Come on," Bucky says, and pats his shoulder with a gloved hand. "Let's get this over with," and Steve nods silently and kicks the bike into life again. They speed up 3rd, then circle around to the secret underground entrance a few blocks north of Stark Tower, because, as Stark likes to say, Grand Central Station is enough of a freakshow.

They stop for a light on East 50th, and behind him, Bucky leans forward and mutters into Steve's ear, "Hey, over there, on the right, didn't we once--" He doesn't finish the thought.

"What?" Steve asks, twisting to look back over his shoulder, then to his right; there's the Waldorf, and some office block he doesn't recognize: half the street is still covered in scaffolding since the Battle of Manhattan. "What am I--"

"Nothing," Bucky shoots back. "Never mind, my mistake," and Steve wants to ask more but the light has changed and he has to focus on the road again.

X. history is about as instructive as an abattoir

The underground entrance to Stark Tower is nondescript, which is just the way Tony Stark wants it; it looks just like any other entrance to any other garage. Steve has recently learned that there are lots of secret tunnels and passageways in and around Grand Central: FDR, it turns out, used a secret subway platform under the Waldorf to hide the fact that he had polio. Steve makes a sharp right in and waits, heart pounding, as a light in the ceiling flashes from red to green, then takes the steep ramp down, and down, and then around, driving through a brightly lit tunnel several blocks south to the base of Stark Tower. He knows they've arrived when they reach a group of fancy cars, mostly red and silver, though there's blue and green and banana yellow. There must be thirty or forty of them, and beyond, there's a fancy elevator door.

Bucky's already slid off the bike, his head turning at regular, almost mechanical angles: scoping out the perimeter. Steve grabs his arm and Bucky jerks a quick look at him; Steve has the awful sense that he's not quite seeing him. "What did you see back there?"

Bucky mutters something Steve doesn't quite get, and it takes Steve a second to realize that's because it's in Russian. "You weren't there," Bucky says shortly, still not looking at him; he's gone very still, like he's listening for something. "It was from The Time."

Steve gets off his bike and un hooks his shield. "What was?" he asks, not even sure why he's pressing: maybe because it feels normal to try to engage Bucky in conversation; maybe because he feels that Bucky Barnes is vanishing before his eyes.
"I shot a Soviet spy and his wife," The Winter Soldier says, almost offhandedly. "Early '60s, I think," and then, "Here they come--" and Steve's taken aback by the spray of bullets. He instantly raises his shield to cover Bucky except Bucky shoves him hard away and breaks right, and suddenly Steve is slammed against the wall by two brightly colored Iron Man suits. Bucky ducks down behind a row of cars and disappears. The wash of bullets follows Bucky, smashing windshields and dinging expensive paint. Steve struggles wildly, but they've got him pinned; faceless, inhuman, like being walled in with metal.

There are soldiers everywhere, thirty at least, running in two by two formation and armed with automatic rifles. They run past him - they're not interested in him - all except for the last one, who looks at him apologetically and says, "Captain Rogers, I'm sorry, but we have orders to—" That's when Steve hears the first scream, and a body comes flying out from out of nowhere and lands on the hood of a red convertible with a crunch.

The air shrieks with gunfire, but it's coming from too many different directions; they don't know where he is. Steve suddenly sees him, twisting through the air before landing and vanishing, and then there are more bodies: soldiers crashing to the concrete on all sides of the garage. Steve has never felt so helpless in his life, and he grits his teeth, shouts, and manages to send one of the suits flying back. He knows he's only got a second before he's immobilized again and so he does the only thing he can think of: he waits for his next glimpse of Bucky and then throws him the shield, hurling it as hard as he can.

Bucky blindly stretches out his metal arm and catches it like he knew it was coming. Then he flies into motion, leaping into a spray of weapons fire--and thus begins the most excruciating 8 minutes of Steve's life: he feels like going limp and screaming. He can't bear for anyone in this fight to win -- or lose -- and God forbid that Bucky is killed he's going to go back to the Alps, to the bridge, and throw himself off. And if he doesn't die, so be it. He's come too far. He can't go back or go on.

The Winter Soldier's shredding through them, men falling everywhere. He's loose-limbed and deadly, fighting with a calm, inevitable precision that Steve remembers from the Beltway, from the helicarrier. Steve watches with a sick sort of horror as he uses the shield to knock out one soldier and take the feet out from under another, sending him smashing him through the back window of a car. There's twelve of them left, ten, seven - and then the last couple of men are backing away with guns raised, and suddenly there's a clanking and the bang of a door opening and Tony Stark is yelling. "Okay, okay, stop, stop, stop. Jesus."

Everybody stops. Stark looks around at the fallen soldiers, the smashed cars, the bullet casings and broken glass, and then sighs. "This is a crime against automotive history. I hope you know that."

"W-what the--" Steve pulls away from the metal suits, which have gone cold, so furious he's literally sputtering. "Damn it, Stark, what the hell do you think you're--?"

But it's not Stark who answers. "It's a test," Bucky says, letting the shield fall away; he looks exhausted. "It's always a test. I didn't kill anybody: that's what you wanted to know, isn't it? What kind of dog he's got leashed?"

Stark's looking steadily at him. "Yeah."

Steve's so offended he can't speak, but Bucky just shrugs and makes an offhand gesture: see for yourself. Steve looks around and realizes that the soldiers are stirring, shifting, groaning: hands are going to concussed heads, people are staunching wounds. Tony's also looking from person to person, and seeing it too: there are no fatalities.

"You're entitled to that," Bucky says. "You're entitled to more than that, Mr. Stark."
"Tony." Stark's eyes are black and unreadable. "Mr. Stark was my father. But you knew that, didn't you."

"Yeah," Bucky says, his voice barely audible. His shoulders slump, and Steve can't think of a damn thing in the world that might make any of this better. But then Bucky says softly, "He saved my life, you know: your father. Ain't that a kick in the pants."

Tony Stark's eyebrows shoot up. "What?"

"He did. He flew the plane that air-dropped this idiot into Italy," Bucky says, jerking a thumb at Steve. "Your father flew a private plane into a war zone." Bucky rubs his head. "Because he was crazy. I owe my life to the ongoing interventions of crazy people."

Stark is gnawing thoughtfully at his lip. "You really know how to sweet talk a guy," he sighs finally. "The Widow Deadly seems to think that you're only mad south by southwest and that you know a hawk from a chainsaw. Birdman thinks you're an MIA POW with PTSD who probably needs a weekly meeting of Assassins Autonomous. Captain Delicious over here, we won't even ask: consider it stipulated. Weeks of CIA surveillance have provided the riveting information that you're an incipient foodie, but what else did we expect from the CIA, really?" Steve isn't fooled; Tony's tone is light but his eyes are sharp and they haven't left Bucky's face for an instant. "So what about you, Sergeant Barnes?" Tony asks finally, his mouth a mechanical smile. "What do you want?"

Bucky stares down at the floor, face gone terribly blank and still. Steve wonders how long it's been since anyone's asked Bucky what he wants. Finally he looks up.

"I just want to serve," Bucky says quietly. "That's all I ever wanted. And I want to serve with him, because he needs someone to watch his back and I need someone to--" Bucky's voice goes tight. "I get a little lost when I'm not with him, I don't mind saying."

"Well, that's the fucking understatement of the century," Tony says, and then: "I think you boys had better come upstairs. You're not a vegetarian, Barnes, are you?"

XI. and we walked out once more beneath the stars

Steve is being dragged across the concrete to the smooth steel edge of the building, fingers clawing and bloody and there's nothing, nothing to hold on to. He tries to spread his body, increase surface area, friction, drag, while he desperately works his fingertips into--

Bang--and the cable snaps, and Steve gasps with relief as the terrible pulling stops. He looks up, sweet air filling his lungs and sees Bucky lowering his gun. Bucky gives him the signal for 2 minutes; hang on and turns, leaping, disappearing. Great. I'll just wait here, Steve thinks, momentarily faceplanting, but he can't give himself the rest he wants; instead he scrabbles up to his feet, grabs his shield, and runs to where Bucky and Natasha are fighting the - the whatever it is - Steve's unwilling brain supplies.

Bucky leaps on its back and tries to strangle it with a thin metal cord, and it shrieks and lurches around the roof. All at once the cord passes straight through it, sending Bucky flying backwards - the "head" lopping off and falling to the roof with a terrible plop. "Ugh," Natasha says, and fires straight into it even as it reforms itself into something that slithers and darts like a lizard. It turns and fires its weapon at Bucky, the same one that had just entrapped Steve - it's kind of a bola that wraps around the legs and then throws out a weight, dropping anchor over the side and dragging the victim with it. Bucky handles it better than he did, though; he drops and wriggles out of it before it tightens,
twisting with such litheness that he's out of it before it plummets heavily over the side.

Natasha winces. "Hope nobody's down there."

Steve's steels himself to take another go at it, and he's gotten in two massive swings with the shield when Tony suddenly buzzes up overhead, carrying a huge sack. "Out of the way, out of the way, everybody out of the--" but he rips open the sack before any of them are fully clear, and a huge cloud of white crystals explodes overhead. Salt, Steve realizes, throwing an arm up to cover his face. Natasha and Bucky are also reeling away, but the effect of the salt on the slime creature is truly miraculous: screeching, it began to fizzle into a white gooey puddle. Steve stares at it as it dissolves, revulsed and mesmerized.

Tony throws the sack down and lands, flipping his helmet back and brushing salt off his suit. "Done and done, mis amigos. Didn't any of you take 6th grade science?"

"Yeah, but they hadn't invented salt yet," Steve says.

"They don't have science in Russia," Natasha says. "We're very poor and cold."

Tony ignores them both. "I say we hit the car wash and get dinner: who's with me?"

"Just not Thai again," Steve groans; Tony's been on a Thai kick.

"Seconded," Natasha agrees. "I vote for that French place on 1st and 62nd, and you pay."

"It's Barnes's turn," Tony says huffily, "which is just as well since he's the only one of you who ever reads a restaurant review." He looks over at Bucky, who's bent over brushing the remaining salt out of his hair. "Yo, Spring Fever: what are you in the mood for?"

Bucky straightens, fingers still idly carding through his hair, then yanks off his goggles. "The new restaurant in the Trump Building looks good." He looks at Natasha and says something to her in Russian, and her lips curve when she replies. Tony looks at Steve, who unbuckles his helmet and blows out with his lips. "The hell I know," Steve says.

Tony grins and briefly clasps Steve's shoulder. "You know, he's really had a salutary effect on you. You're like 200 percent more a human being." He considers. "The irony of that is astounding." Tony glances at his watch and says, "OK, showers all around. Dinner at eight. Avengers who didn't assemble get no food."

Tony changes his mind when they find Dr. Banner home alone in Avengers Tower, and so they end up dragging him along with them to the restaurant, which is called something like Pomegranate or Nectarine. Steve hangs back when they walk in, but Tony clearly likes showing up in public places with three or four of his most superheroic friends. The wait staff fawn and show them into the private dining room, but thankfully New Yorkers are New Yorkers and try to act cool as they pass by. Food looks good, though.

Steve doesn't even look at the menu, just says he'll have what Bucky's having. This turns out to be a really terrific beef stew and a glass of scotch - Bucky can't get drunk either, but he says he likes the taste of it anyway. And maybe it's endorphins, or relief at having killed the slime monster, or the warmth of the room or the flickering candles or hearing Bucky laugh and seeing Natasha smile, but Steve sits back, the scotch burning his throat, and even feels a little drunk. Dr. Banner and Stark are having some totally impenetrable argument. Steve lets their voices wash over him, lets himself drift.

He comes to himself when they clear the plates and nudes Bucky's arm with his elbow. "Let's not stay for dessert," he says, leaning in. "I promised I'd walk Mrs. Epstein's dog."
Bucky raises an eyebrow and gives him a sultry look. "That the only reason?"

"Well," Steve says, shifting in his chair. "I also thought we could maybe catch a movie," and that's kind of become their codeword for romance. Steve's shown Bucky his catch-up-with-the-world list, and Bucky was interested in playing along, but honestly most of the things they've seen have been disappointing: they don't feel the sparkle of nostalgia and happiness that make them special to the people who love them. So mostly he and Bucky get distracted. They've seen the start of lots and lots of movies.

Natasha's committed to chocolate mousse and Tony and Bruce are committed to espresso and the end of their argument, so Steve and Bucky take their leave and head out to the bike. Bucky drives, and it's such a relief to let him, to sling his arms around Bucky's waist and just go where Bucky's going. There's a bite in the air as they cross back over the bridge, but for the first time in a long time the coming winter doesn't feel like loneliness. There'll be Thanksgiving and Christmas; maybe snow, even. They used to go sledding and skating back in the day; he used to be crap at it, but now he wants to try again.

They park in front of their building in Brooklyn. Mrs. Epstein's light is still on, and being a celebrity superhero's good and all, but it's nicer still to just be a neighborhood guy. Half their neighbors wouldn't know Captain America if they fell over him, and the other half--well, a girl down the block once looked up from watering her yard and said, wow, you're a dead ringer for Captain America; flirting, maybe: Steve was never quite sure. He hadn't known what to say, but Bucky had; he'd slung his arm around Steve and grinned and said, "Yeah, isn't he? He was actually Mr. Coney Island 2008," and Steve hadn't known where to put himself and had hit Bucky quite a lot once they'd gotten back upstairs.

Steve goes to walk Mrs. Epstein's pug and when he gets upstairs Bucky's changed into comfortable clothes and is making popcorn in the machine that Sam sent them. It looks like a rocket, and is about as hard to program, though Bucky seems to understand it okay. "Don't suppose you're in the mood for a monster movie," Bucky says, looking up wryly.

"Yeah, no," Steve says, yanking off his tie and going to change. "You want to pick something off the catch-up list?" he calls to Bucky from the bedroom.

"I'm really not in the mood for more punishment," Bucky mutters, and when Steve comes out he finds Bucky flipping through their private watch list: mostly things from the '30s. Garbo pictures and Claudette Colbert, a couple of good gangster movies, monsters and musicals. And then Bucky stops and looks over his shoulder and Steve laughs and says, "Oh, absolutely," and Bucky cues up Horsefeathers. They sprawl together on the sofa to watch it, limbs tangling together. Steve stretches out an arm to turn off the lights.

They end up watching really almost all of it.

THE END

End Notes

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