All We Needed Was the Radio

by wolfiefics

Summary

Summary: Steve, Bucky and the radio—the things they heard and what it inspired them to do and become.
Friday, December 5, 1941
Brooklyn, New York

It was a Friday night. In theory, Bucky should have gotten paid today, which meant Steve Rogers was either going to come home to a girl giggling in Bucky’s bedroom or he was going to dragged to a dance hall with some girl that Bucky’s well-intentioned new girlfriend hooked him up with. Sometimes it was both, which was awkward.

There was nothing hanging on the door when Steve got home, groceries from his job at the local five & dime in hand. He’d gotten some good tips today, helping bag food stuffs (everyone was getting ready for a potential snow storm if the papers were to be believed) and he’d bought a few extra special things, like chocolate, some oranges and apples (Bucky loved apples), and some bottled sodas they could put outside to keep cool (and hopefully not frozen).

He was juggling with his key to their apartment when it was unceremoniously pulled open and Bucky plucked the paper bag of food from Steve’s arms. “There you are!” he pronounced with the flair of a Shakespearean actor. “Been waiting an hour for you to get home.”

Steve managed to hide his grimace. A double date with a girl who doesn’t want to be five feet close to the skinny asthmatic it is, he thought to himself. “It was busy today, everyone getting ready for the-“

“You will not believe what happened to me today,” Bucky interrupted and shoved a slip of paper into Steve’s hands.

For a moment Steve’s stomach flopped, thinking it was a dismissal slip but once he started reading it he broke out into a grin. “You got promoted?” he asked. “Who would promote your lazy butt?”

Bucky, handsome, devil may care, James Buchanan Barnes, looked affronted for a whole two seconds before giving into laughter himself. “I have no idea. Manager’s blind or something’ but hey, it’s a raise in pay by 5 cents a week. I work one extra hour a day is all,” he added dismissively.

Steve watched in amusement as Bucky, chest stuck out like some bantam rooster, strutted around the room. “‘You think maybe I should get business cards like a fancy lawyer?’ Bucky stopped, as if transfixed by the idea, blue-grey eyes gleaming in the dim light of their single bulb lamp in the corner of the room. “James B. Barnes, shift supervisor.”

“Brown nose,” Steve countered with a grin.

“Punk.”

“Jerk.”

“Let’s buy a radio!” As usual, Bucky’s mind was already spending the money.

“Buck!” Steve admonished good-naturedly.

“A cheap one, it don’t have to be new,” Bucky wheedled.

Steve looked adoringly at his best friend, tall, dark haired and square jawed, and a face that made girls go gooey in the street. His work at the warehouse gave him upper body bulk in the last few
month, filling out his clothes real nice. Even with all the fights he finished for Steve, he hadn’t lost a single tooth. His teeth weren’t completely straight and weren’t perfectly white like some movie star, but he had a killer smile all the same and used it to devastating effect.

He was using it on Steve right now, in fact. Steve felt himself capitulate even as he shrugged off his too big coat, an old one of Bucky’s. “Only,” he stated in a warning tone, “if we don’t go to the movies extra nights for a month and no double dates until after Christmas.”

Bucky looked like he was going to argue but then he shrugged and held out a work-roughened hand. “Deal.”

Steve inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. Almost a whole month free of awkward conversations with girls who didn’t interest him and weren’t interested in him. Heaven. It was hard to moon over the same guy that both girls on the date were panting over too.

Bucky disappeared into the bedroom and came out holding a beat up Detrola radio. He set it with a pleased flourish on the table and leaned over to plug it into the wall outlet. It immediately started making static and with a few nimble twitches of his fingers, Bucky had some swing band music playing.

He looked over at Steve, his face pure mischief.

“You,” Steve told his best friend, trying for stern and knowing he was failing, “are a conniving sneak.

“Yep!” At least he didn’t try to hide it. “If I’d known you were going to give in that easy, Stevie, I’d have brought it out sooner! I was certain you’d bargain no dates until at most Easter, maybe only New Years.”

Steve muttered under his breath and started pulling things out of the paper sack he brought in with him. Bucky wandered over and snagged an apple.

“God, old man Johnston gets the best apples,” he said around a mouthful of the fruit. “You want I should boil up some soup? I bought fresh bread from old Mrs. Slomski. She’s been selling bread over there,” by which Bucky meant the tenement houses where his mother still lived, “trying to raise enough money to buy her grandkids somethin’ nice, now that they’ve managed to get out of Poland.”

It was a familiar story all over New York, families, be they Jewish or not, fleeing before the onslaught of Hitler’s Nazi forces. Though Warsaw fell two years ago, Mrs. Slomski’s family took awhile getting to America, having only arrived about six months ago. She’d always looked out for Steve and Bucky when they were kids, giving them treats when she could or watching them to make sure they stayed out of (too much) trouble. Now they tried to return the favor when they could.

Bucky pulled the towel wrapped bread from the pantry. “Ma sent over some soup, she made too much,” Bucky continued, pouring a big bowl of what looked like potato and bacon chowder in their beat up pot.

‘Translation,’ Steve thought, ‘Mrs. Barnes thought we weren’t eating well, made extra and guilted her son into taking it with him.’

“Your Ma always makes the best potato soup,” Steve said amiably. He should have been irked at the charity but in this neighborhood, folks looked out for one another, tried to make sure their
neighbor didn’t starve to death. “It’s gonna snow, the papers say.”
“Yeah, I read on my lunch,” Bucky was stirring so he missed the expression on Steve’s face at his
next words. “We’ll have to sleep together. You get sick again, you won’t be able to work. Can’t
have that.”

Cold nights spooned against Bucky’s nearly inexhaustive supply of warmth was heaven and hell
for Steve. Heaven because he loved feeling Bucky’s body curved against him, reveling in his
warmth and his smell. Hell for the same reasons; Bucky was all about the dames, not about a
skinny smart mouth who was his best friend.

“Hey, I like this song!” Bucky sang out.

It Steve a second to recognize the song and by then Bucky was bopping all over the kitchen,
wooden spoon dripping potato soup all over the floor as he shimmied. Bucky stopped long enough
to turn the fire down under the soup and grabbed Steve from his chair, swinging him around like a
dame to Count Basie’s “One O’Clock Jump”. It was a catchy tune, Steve had to admit, even as
Bucky tried to twirl him.

Steve tried to get into the spirit of the dance, but he was never very good and kept tripping up both
himself and Bucky, but Buck was good natured about it, laughing and mimicking the saxophone or
trumpet at the right parts. When the song finally finished Bucky rushed over to stir the soup.

“See, Stevie,” he told him, “it ain’t that hard, dancin’.”

‘It’s not with you,’ Steve thought wistfully to himself.

Soon the soup was done and the bread sliced neatly on a plate (Steve’s doing; Bucky would have
just ripped off a chunk). Bowls were filled and they popped the lids on two sodas, clinking the
glass bottles together in a toast.

“How’s to the last bit of 1941 coming up soon,” Bucky said before he swigged his drink.

“And here’s hoping nothing bad happens in 1942,” Steve agreed before taking a sip of his own.

The soup was gone (mostly to Bucky) within ten minutes. They were young men, always hungry,
mostly broke, so good hearty food was rare in the house. Bucky ate another apple for dessert while
Steve ate an orange and they listened to the radio as more music, then news broadcasts and a
variety show came and went.

The darkness strained their minimal light sources and Bucky stoked the little stove in the corner of
their living room. It was coal and it was filthy but it was warm and that’s what mattered.

“Look it there,” breathed Bucky, awe in his voice as he peered out the window.

Steve looked out too. White fluffy flakes fell from the sky and the heavy leaden clouds blocked
what little starlight and moonlight the city afforded them. “Guess it’s officially winter now,” he
noted.

He hated the winter. Sure it was pretty with the snow, the only time to his mind New York looked
clean, but it was cold and he was always sick in the winter. Spring was his second least favorite
season. Sure everything was coming alive again but it always set off his asthma and he spent most
of it wheezing.

“Wonder if we’ll get enough to go out and build a snowman?” Bucky asked wistfully.
“A snowman?” Steve laughed.

“Sure!” Bucky smiled back but his smile faded when Steve hastily looked away, afraid he was mooning over him too obviously. “What’s wrong?”

Steve inwardly sighed, trying for an outer façade of nonchalance. “Nothin’, just tired is all.”

Bucky immediately went into mother hen mode, something he’d been doing ever since Steve’s mother passed on from tuberculosis last year. “We’ll throw an extra blanket on your bed,” Bucky declared firmly, “and you’re wearing two pairs of socks to bed tonight.”

“Bucky…”

“You ain’t getting sick.” Bucky’s expression turned mulish. “I ain’t standin’ over your ma’s grave and apologizing for not keeping my promise.”

Steve froze and looked up at his best friend. “What promise?”

“That you’d see 25.” Steve felt panic claw in his chest and tears stab his eyes. “I ain’t doin’ it just for that, Stevie,” he heard Bucky whisper in his ear as he pulled the smaller man into a hug, “I’m a selfish bastard, you know, and I ain’t letting you go. Ever.”

Steve’s heart raced. Did that mean what he thought it meant?

“It’s late, we’ve been working hard today and we got nothing to do tomorrow except lay around and do nothing,” Steve looked up in time to see Bucky flash him a wicked smile. “God, I love Saturdays.”

Steve was startled into laughter. He walked over to turn off the radio while Bucky made sure the fire was properly covered and banked now that the main room was warm.

“You think if it’s a bad winter we should move one of the beds in here?” Bucky asked.

“Might not hurt,” Steve replied through his thin flannel pajama top he was pulling over his head. He took a chance and added as his head popped out of the fabric, “As long as we’re sharing it. I won’t have you playin’ martyr for me, Buck.”

Bucky snorted, raking a hand haphazardly through his hair, buttoning his own flannel top up. “You wish. I’m about as far from martyrdom as you can get. Father Christie would make you do penance for that blasphemous thought.”

“I’m not Catholic,” Steve reminded Bucky.

Bucky sighed. “Wish I wasn’t sometimes. Father is brutal with his penances. I dread confession.”

They climbed into bed. It was cool in the room, not yet chilly, but Steve could feel the cold coming through the thin curtains covering the window. Bucky stretched out next to him and drew both blankets and the thin sheet over them. Steve tried not to press too eagerly close to Bucky but his friend obviously had no compunction about their closeness. He put his arm around Steve’s waist and drew the smaller man closer, spooning them together.

“Better?” Bucky’s voice was husky in Steve’s ear and Steve nodded a bit too frantically. “Am I embarrassing you?” he asked a few minutes later as he began massaging Steve’s shoulders and neck with his calloused and blunt fingertips.
Steve nodded but quickly shifted it to a shake. Yes he was embarrassed but he was getting aroused too, loving the feel of Bucky’s touch and not daring to hope that his feelings were being reciprocated.

“I forget how delicate you are sometimes.” Steve stiffened at the words and Bucky patted down his back like he was soothing a ruffled cat. “Don’t mean nothing mean by it, Stevie, just how you are. Delicate boned but it don’t mean you’re weak. Ain’t nothing weak about you.”

Steve couldn’t keep the mournfulness from his words. “Yes, I am.”

Bucky had him flipped over onto his back, pinned to the mattress, his handsome face fierce and a bit angry. “No, you ain’t. Sure you get sick, that don’t mean you’re weak, Steve, it means you’re sick. I ain’t never seen anyone in this whole city as strong as you. You think strength only comes from the body?”

Steve stared, transfixed by Bucky’s anger, as the other man continued to speak, to rant.

“I always hated it when the other kids would razz you, calling you weak or a shrimp or puny. They didn’t know nothin’ about you. They never saw how much you fought to go outside every day, to fight them when you knew you were gonna lose, to go to school and better yourself while the rest of us just bunked around. I wouldn’t let you believe them then and you sure as hell ain’t believing it now.”

Bucky rolled off him and Steve immediately felt the loss of his heat. “Bucky-“ he tried to say.

“No, “ Bucky cut him off, “I ain’t gonna listen to it. I wish I had half your brains, Stevie.”

“You aren’t stupid, Bucky,” Steve reasoned.

He was shocked when Bucky actually snorted.

“You can speak properly,” Steve insisted. “I’ve heard you. You’re better at maths than I am. I hate Shakespeare and you read it like it’s a Dick and Jane book.” He felt Bucky give a dismissive shrug. “I’ll make you a deal,” Steve bartered, “I won’t refer to myself as weak or puny ever again if you never call yourself stupid.”

Bucky’s response was so quick that Steve knew he’d been set up again. “Deal.”

“Damn it, Bucky,” he groused over Bucky’s pleased laughter. He turned his back to his friend and felt a thrill move up his spine as Bucky’s arm slung itself over his slight frame with casual familiarity. They’d slept this way enough as kids it was familiar, he reasoned.

Bucky’s warmth and the knowledge that the world was going to be bathed in white in the morning lulled Steve to sleep. Just as he hit mental nothingness, he felt Bucky’s lips lightly brush the back of his neck.

“I love you, Stevie,” he heard Bucky’s whispery baritone murmur and Steve, thinking he’d dreamed it, smiled.
Dawn broke over New York City, or more specifically Brooklyn, revealing the city as Steve suspected it would be: white, shimmering, and entrancing. The two friends stared out the window for a bit, staring at the wonderland. A few people had ventured out, leaving footprints or tire tracks in the snow, but not many.

Bucky gave a whoop of delight and rushed to make coffee and eggs for their breakfast while Steve made the bed. Steve got to the kitchen in time to toast some leftover bread in the oven.

“First one downstairs wins the snowball fight.” Bucky crowed and Steve rolled his eyes.

He was already dressed, having done that after making his bed, so all he had to do was put on his coat, scarf, gloves and hat. He beat Bucky downstairs by three minutes and had a snowball ready. He lobbed it at Bucky’s head when the taller man came into view. Some of the local kids joined in and soon it was a free for all.

They (well, Bucky) helped two little girls lift the giant head of their snowman onto the bigger body the girls had made. It was lopsided but the girls giggled their delight when Bucky found two black stones in the street for eyes and twigs from a nearby empty lot for arms. One of the girls hugged Bucky’s neck tight and asked if he would wait until she grew up so she could marry him. Steve’s heart twinged when Bucky assured her with his killer smile that he sure would.

They’d been outside almost two hours when Steve went upstairs to their apartment, stoking the stove in the front room again for warmth. He didn’t realize he was even coughing until Bucky came in a bit later and scowled at him.

“What?”

“You’re coughing.”

“I’m cold.”

“Damn it, Steve,” Bucky started but Steve interrupted.

“Don’t start, Bucky, I had fun. I never get to have fun because everyone’s fussing over me getting sick.”

He could tell Bucky wanted to say more, was itching to, but like a good friend managed to hold his tongue. Instead, the brunette stalked to the pantry, jerked aside the sheet they used for a door over it and looked at what they had.

“You got any credit left at the store?”
“A little, a dollar, maybe two.”

Bucky stalked to Steve’s bedroom and returned with both blankets in tow. “Put them on and don’t you dare argue with me, Steven Grant Rogers, or I’ll pummel you.” Steve wisely did as he was told. Besides, he was cold. “I’m gonna go and get some more food, stop by and see if Ma’s okay too while I’m at it. Any special requests?”

As usual Bucky’s anger, quick to ignite but just as quick to dissolve, abated. He wasn’t his cheerful self from earlier but he wasn’t angry either. Steve shook his head, Bucky threw another couple shovels of coal in the stove and left after admonishing Steve to stay warm, damn it.

Steve sat there awhile, watching the white world outside but quickly grew bored. He took the heaviest quilt, wrapped it tightly about himself like a shawl, went into his room to grab his notebook and pencils. He stopped in the kitchen and turned on the radio. Some local show was broadcasting various things, but he lowered it to background noise only, sat by the window and sketched.

He sketched the kids still playing in the snow. He sketched the girls’ lopsided snowman that now had a scarf and a raggedy bowler hat from somewhere. He drew the hazy skyline of the city in the distance and old Mr. Jergens’ Buick capped with snow.

Music played in the background and he felt warm and light as his fingers danced across page after page of his journal. He heard Bucky come in, gave an acknowledging nod to Bucky’s greeting and continued his sketching. He felt Bucky’s presence behind him and the intake of breath.

“Damn, Steve, but these are good.”

Steve shrugged noncommittally as he always did. He never thought they were special, but everyone else seemed to think so.

“Wish we could get you doing cartoons or something for the papers,” Bucky lamented, taking the book from Steve and flipping through the pages. “Or you get proper sketchpads and pencils and start selling them. Maybe get you some formal training. Wonder if fancy art schools have scholarships like universities do?”

Steve watched Bucky’s features as he flipped page after page of drawings. Delight at the snowman blurred to awe at the detail Steve drew into the shadows over the skyline drawing and eventually merged into a small smile at the street scenes of the children playing and people trudging down the streets.

Wordlessly, Bucky handed the notebook back and went to put away his purchases. Steve continued drawing, but his subject matter was now Bucky. Bucky puttering in the icebox, Bucky reading a label on a can of corn, Bucky fiddling with the radio dial, Bucky Bucky Bucky.

Some country and western singers came on and Bucky started to sing along. He was okay, not great but he sang out to “Cool Water”, “Shadows on the Trail” and other tunes with the Sons of the Pioneers, Gene Autry and Roy Rogers.

“Maybe we should head west,” Bucky said, after a song by Gene Autry neither of them had heard before.

Steve snorted and doodled a cowboy hat on the drawing of Bucky he was currently working on.

“Nah, I’m serious. The dry air might be good for you,” Bucky persisted.
“Yes, all that dirt blowing around,” Steve noted acerbically.

Bucky thought about it and shrugged. “Okay we’ll go to California, or maybe Oregon! Like on the Oregon trail. Maybe we’ll fight some Indians!”

Steve looked askance at his friend. “I don’t think they are hostile anymore, Bucky. I think you buy souvenirs from them or something, not fight them. They’re on our side now, I suppose.”

The local station did a Bing Crosby versus Frank Sinatra, flipping between the two maestros every other song and Steve found himself singing along with Bucky on some of the songs he knew.

Soon it was nightfall and the news was all about the snow and the politics and what was left of the economy. It reported that the dust storms in Oklahoma had dropped in number with only seventeen reported, which was good, compared to the 61 reported three years earlier. Steve pointedly didn’t say anything about their earlier conversation about moving west.

Variety shows came on and while Bucky made tuna patties from some of the bread he dried in the oven, he made Steve draw some of the characters on the radio as he saw them in his head. They laughed over Steve’s renditions and plotted how to find out how accurate they were. It was all nonsense but Steve felt himself bask in the attention that Bucky normally gave his girlfriend of the week on a Saturday night.

Supper was eaten, more radio was listened to and the wind began to howl outside. Bucky fussed to make sure Steve was warm and they moved the radio by the stove in the main room. Bucky insisted on moving Steve’s bed to the main room too and when it was bedtime, the bed at least wasn’t a block of ice.

Cuddled up once again in Bucky’s warmth, Steve relaxed, his hand straying to his crotch area for a quick, surreptitious rub. His long fingers brushed Bucky’s and he jerked in reaction. Bucky did the same. Neither mentioned it and neither moved. It took them a bit to relax again and soon Steve was fast asleep.

Sunday Bucky grudgingly hauled himself from the warm bed for early Mass and left Steve tucked under the blankets. Grumbling, Bucky left the apartment for church. Steve knew that if he didn’t, Mrs. Barnes would be around right after to give her son an earful about missing it.

Since his mother’s death, Steve didn’t feel the need for church. He wasn’t Catholic and his mother always believed that it was better to enjoy the natural cathedral God made rather than anything man made.

He put all those days of effort into it, Steve, he could hear her say, the least we can do is take a day to appreciate it.

So Steve lazed under the covers, fantasizing and daydreaming. His hand found its way under his pajamas and he dreamed of Bucky’s hands on him as he brought himself to satisfaction. Despite being alone in the apartment, Steve blushed anyway as he got up to clean himself up, make the bed and some coffee. By the time Bucky returned a couple hours later, Steve was ready to take on the world.

“It is freezing,” Bucky informed him with a melodramatic shiver that probably wasn’t all feigned. “I stopped for more coal. Leeches raised the price, of course.”

“Of course,” echoed Steve.

“I’m to bring you to brunch so it’s a good thing you’re dressed. Ma’s not taking no for an answer.”
Steve tried, and failed, to hide a grin. Mrs. Barnes was more of a mother hen than her son and that was saying something. Steve never found out where Mrs. Barnes was from originally, other than she had family in Brooklyn. She had a little bit of every kind of accent that came out under various emotional circumstances.

Obediently Steve dressed as warmly as he could, which was good, because Bucky was right. It was downright Arctic. They trudged the two blocks to Mrs. Barnes’ place to find it bright, warm, cozy and inviting. Steve was welcomed with open arms, questions about his health that he wasn’t expected to answer just endure, and sat at the table like he was one of the family, which he was for all intents and purposes.

With her typical gusto, Mrs. Barnes cooked for many because she couldn’t break herself out of feeding just one. She served up a potato casserole with a bit of ground beef mixed in and side of cooked canned carrots and hot coffee to keep out the chill. The hot rolls straight from the oven Bucky and Steve fought over, because if anyone could make bread as good as Mrs. Slomski, it was Mrs. Barnes.

Soon the three of them felt plump as a Christmas goose and Steve insisted on helping with the dishes. He didn’t miss that Mrs. Barnes made carry home pails of the left overs for them.

They sat around, chatting amiably, Bucky mentioning Steve’s art and maybe finding out if he could get into one of the art colleges in the city.

Mrs. Barnes pursed her thin lips as she considered, so like her son was wont to do, and stated, “There’s the FAP that helps artists and the like. You might check to see how to get a job that way.”

Steve nodded. “That’s a good idea,” he agreed.

“No word from Pa?” Bucky asked casually.

Mrs. Barnes shook her head, sorrow etching her face briefly. Steve knew that Mr. Barnes had taken a WPA job out of the state a few years ago and two years after he left the regular flow of money and letters stopped. Mrs. Barnes tried to find out what happened, but no one seemed to know.

“Probably skipped out on us,” muttered Bucky.

Bucky took his father’s disappearance hard. He hadn’t idolized his father or anything, as the man was a bit fond of the drink, but he hadn’t hated him either. Mr. Barnes, as Steve could recall, was a bit shiftless and had hated New York. He’d moved with his family to the city as it was where Mrs. Barnes was originally from, hoping to find work and finding none. The Barnes’ were from Indiana, where Bucky was born.

“Stop it, James,” admonished Mrs. Barnes, her brown eyes tightening and dimming as they always did when Mr. Barnes was mentioned. “I won’t hear such talk, not today.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Bucky said.

Mrs. Barnes and Steve’s mother were the only ones who could call him ‘James’. Ever since Steve coined him the nickname ‘Bucky’ he ran with it, refusing to answer at school even except on the first day, when the teacher was corrected only once. Steve idly wondered if he answered to James at church.

They talked of local neighborhood gossip, Bucky’s promotion at the warehouse and when they thought America would be drawn into the war in Europe.
“I thought the last one,” Mrs. Barnes sighed, “was bad enough. Men coming back with shellshock, faces blank from watching their friends blown away, talking about the gas and the tanks and the No Man’s Land.” Mrs. Barnes gave a shudder that was dramatic but heartfelt. “I pray if we do go to war to help our Allies, you boys don’t get drafted. I’d hate to see that happen to you.”

The two young men fell silent. Steve was pretty sure he couldn’t imagine anything like that happening to Bucky. He glanced at his friend and saw he looked as stricken as Steve felt.

“Oh, but I’m sorry, Steve,” Mrs. Barnes said, “I forgot your father suffered from the mustard gas. That was thoughtless of me.”

Steve waved away her concern. “It’s okay,” he assured her. “I remember him only a little.”

Soon they were wrapping up in their coats, scarves and hats again, Mrs. Barnes pushing food pails in their hands and admonishing them to be careful on the walk back and to stay warm. “You especially, Steve. I don’t mean to fuss but we like it when you are well and it hurts to see you sick.”

Steve tried to smile but knew it came out a grimace. “Ma,” Bucky groaned but allowed himself to be pecked on the cheek. Steve allowed the same, reveling in her affection. He wasn’t at all embarrassed.

They trudged home, the leaden clouds looking like they were going to drop more snow, or maybe rain soon. The apartment was freezing and it took awhile for the coal stove to heat up the main room.

Steve flipped on the radio and turned to WOR, the station broadcasting the Giants-Dodgers game. They cheered on their Brooklyn Dodgers as they soundly tramped the New York Giants. The game was just getting exciting, with a run up the field when the game went away.

Both men started to yell but as the first couple words sunk in, they subsided.

“We interrupt this broadcast to bring you this important bulletin from the United Press. Flash, Washington has announced Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Stayed tuned to WOR for further developments to be broadcast when received.”

The game came back but neither man cared anymore. Steve looked at Bucky, who was staring at the radio in horror. Steve was sure he looked the same as Bucky. It had been reported in all the papers that the U.S. Navy had moved a large portion of the fleet to Hawaii not long ago.

The game continued to the Giants losing to the Dodgers but there was no triumph in the win for the Brooklyn boys. Steve sat on his bed, staring out the window. Bucky eventually went into his own room, door slamming behind him. They both knew what the attack on Hawaii meant.

Within a day, maybe two, the United States would declare war on Japan. Germany and Italy would follow suit and America would be involved in a war on two fronts, Europe and the Pacific. There was no way there wouldn’t be a draft. There was no way Bucky wouldn’t be going.

And there was no way Steve would be going.

Chapter End Notes
Notes for those unfamiliar with American history or that part of American history:
With the stock market fall in 1929, America plunged into a devastating depression made only worse by environmental ravages of farming practices that essentially eroded away the Great Plains areas where a lot of our crops were being grown at the time. Dust storms literally scour ed the central states of Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Kansas, the infamous Dust Bowl, for almost the entire 1930s decade. People lost homes, farms, and family to the storms, be they buried under mounds of loose dirt blowing across states larger than many European countries or just packing up to leave for parts further west. Children and the elderly (mostly children though) breathed in so much dust it permanently damaged their lungs, some never recovering. You could say they drowned in dirt, the dirt they breathed turning to mud in their lungs as it mixed with natural fluids there (my own grandmother's lungs were permanently damaged from growing up in that area and she wheezed like an asthmatic her whole life even though she did not have asthma). America was not a pleasant place to be, with poverty at an all time high. President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (WPA), some of it public works, some of it just 'make work', to employ Americans as much as possible at government expense. Likely this is when America really did become a so-called 'debtor nation'. WPA built roads, dams, ditches, buildings, sometimes one shift would dig holes in the ground and the next shift would fill them up again, but it was work, a wage earned and hope attempted to be restored. There were many divisions of the WPA and the one that Mrs. Barnes talks about was specifically for artists, musicians, etc. Artists would be commissioned for jobs for the government, creating placards, posters and the like. There would even be exhibitions of their work to showcase the talent of Americas artists and musicians. There was also a division that employed actors and theater hands. No one’s talents was ignored, no occupation was considered less or more than another in the eyes of the WPA. Say what you like about the New Deal’s legacy but that alone, to me, stands out above it all. It wasn’t just labor the government wanted out of its people, but they hired hope, laughter, tears and entertainment through those that could act, sing, play, write and draw. If only we did as much today.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

First off WARNING! Smut ahead! The payoff some of you have been waiting for I'm sure. LOL Now for the boring stuff.

Note: I’ve nothing against the Japanese (or Germans for that matter, being of German extraction), please do not take the characters remarks as such. The past is the past, all we can do is learn from it. America isn’t, and wasn’t, perfect either and we did horrible things during World War II, and other wars, as well. I’m just expressing how the American public, through the characters, would have initially viewed (and in some ways still do view) the attack on Pearl Harbor. Many things led to the attack, many slights, miscommunications and cultural misinterpretations that escalated, fed by the needs of greed, power and cultural fervor. No country is immune to these feelings, they’ve all gone through it at one point in time, including my own country. Be proud of your country, no matter where you’re from, but don’t be blind to it’s faults either. For there, there be dragons.

Steve stayed curled into a tight ball on his bed. The cold drove Bucky from his room and he was once again curled around Steve. Steve swore he felt Bucky’s lips brush his neck again when Bucky slipped into the bed in the main room. He thought about turning over and initiating a real kiss, but maybe Bucky was just being brotherly with that kiss.

Steve couldn’t bear to lose Bucky’s friendship on the vain hope that ladies’ man Bucky Barnes fancied skinny, sickly male Steve Rogers. The little alarm clock that Bucky kept by his bed went off on the floor, but Steve was awake, having not slept much.

Bucky mumbled grumpily, shut off the alarm and stretched. “You awake, Stevie?”

“Yeah,” Steve replied, burying himself deeper into the warm covers.

“Roll over a minute, would you?” Steve obliged coming nose to nose with his best friend.

Bucky tilted his head a bit and brushed a kiss, light as a butterfly, over Steve’s lips. “I’m gonna enlist,” he said simply, blue-grey eyes serious. “You know they’ll take me. I’m healthy as a horse.”

Steve blinked and nodded, dumbstruck by the kiss. His heart was hammering in his chest.

“I couldn’t bear to go to war without…” His voice trailed off and Bucky looked unsure, almost frightened. “I thought you should know,” he finished lamely.

“Know what?”

Bucky’s smile was weak and not on his face for long. “That the dames, they’re nothing but a distraction, me trying to be a normal guy who’s supposed to want girls, not his best friend.” A hopeful look crossed Bucky’s face. “If you don’t feel the same, this conversation never happened. My dick isn’t going to make me lose my best friend in the whole world.”

Steve was positive now that his heart was going to beat right out of his chest. He saw Bucky’s
expression fall when Steve made no remark. He couldn’t. Bucky went to get out of the bed and
Steve, panicking, grabbed his wrist.

“No!” he managed strangle out. “I-don’t leave,” he said quietly. “I’ve always felt that way about
you, Buck. I didn’t want to say or do something and lose our friendship, is all.”

Bucky’s smile could have melted all the snow in New York it was so sunny. He leaned over and
brushed another kiss on Steve’s lips, putting a little bit of pressure and rubbing their mouths
together in a tantalizing way. He pushed Steve down into the mattress, and coaxed Steve’s mouth
open. Steve opened his lips, felt Bucky’s tongue sweep in to explore. He returned the favor,
causing Bucky to moan, his chest rumbling with pleasure.

He, quirky little Steve Rogers, was making one of the most popular boys in the neighborhood
growl like a tiger. He felt heady, light and powerful. He took control of the kiss, slanting his head
and leaning into it. Bucky broke the kiss for a moment but Steve fused their lips together again,
allowing his hands to do what his mind had been fantasizing for years.

He placed his fingers on Bucky’s chest and felt the muscles through the flannel fabric. He explored
a little, reveling in having such a masculine specimen all his own.

Bucky broke the kiss, eyes wide and stormy. “Steve,” he panted.

“Stay home,” Steve whispered.

“I can’t,” Bucky nearly whined.

“Come back at lunch, then.” Bucky hesitated, then nodded, quickly getting out of bed to bathe,
shave, dress, brush his teeth and leave. He gave Steve a long, thoughtful look followed by a
pleased smile before he walked out the door.

Steve stretched, pleased as well, until he remembered Hawaii and the announcement from
yesterday. His heart dropped to his stomach. Things were not going to go well for them after all.

Working only part time left Steve with a lot of free time. He ran outside and bought today’s paper,
scouring the want-ads (of which there were few). The headlines were full of the attack on Hawaii
and Steve couldn’t shake the feeling that things were going to go from bad to worse. But maybe it
needed to, he reasoned.

All their neighbors with family still in Europe talked about letters they received about Nazi
atrocities. Some were too fantastic to be believed, to be honest, but in this world Steve wasn’t about
to discount them either. If those things were true, maybe a war was what it would take to stop
them. Sometimes, he reasoned to himself, war was necessary, the last resort. You had to stand up to
bullies for everyone’s sake.

Bucky came stumbling in at around 11:45 for lunch. “Half the guys didn’t show, probably standing
in line to enlist,” he reported grimly, shucking off his coat. “And the snow’s melting fast. It’s still
cold, but not as cold as it has been.”

“Yeah, I went out for a paper.” He held it up and Bucky snagged the front page, reading the attack
article.

“Shit,” Bucky said went he finished. He made them both some sandwiches and flipped on the
radio. “They are saying the President is going to address Congress at lunch.”

“Probably to ask Congress to declare war on Japan,” Steve noted heavily. He felt Bucky’s big paw
engulf his slender hand and squeeze. “If that happens, Buck, Germany and Italy will declare war on us in return and it’ll snowball.”

“I know.”

“They’ll start the draft.”

“I’m going to enlist this week, I already told the manager.” Bucky’s face was determined. “Did you see how many men they think we lost at Pearl Harbor?” Steve nodded. “I hope they send me to the Pacific. I’ll shoot every Jappo I can find for that.”

“Bucky,” Steve began but Bucky overrode him, righteous in his outrage.

“What’d we ever do to them?” he asked rhetorically.

“I don’t know but we must have done somethin’,” Steve answered.

They debated it, holding hands, pressed close in their chairs, not for warmth but for whatever blossomed between them this morning now providing comfort. Bucky leaned over and kissed Steve a bit but a news bulletin breaking in with the President’s address to Congress distracted even lust.

“Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.”

Steve shivered and went to the bed still in the main room. Bucky followed but their attention was still focused on President Roosevelt’s address. He spoke of meetings with the ambassadors from the Japanese ambassadors who were talking peace even after their nation bombed the US Navy. Steve felt his hands clench into fist and Bucky shake.

“The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.”

“Bastards,” Bucky snarled at the radio. “They even took out the help that we could have sent to save our guys.”

Steve said nothing, just continued to listen.

“Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya. Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong. Last night, Japanese force attacked the Philippine Islands. Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island. And this morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.”

Bucky stood up so suddenly that he almost knocked Steve off the bed, running for the trash bin in the kitchen. Steve heard retching sounds but couldn’t blame his friend. War was again global and there was no way America wasn’t going to be in the middle of it by the end of the day.

Bucky stood in the kitchen, ashen and shaking, but from fear, rage or a combination of both, Steve didn’t know. Bucky’s handsome face turned more resolute, more determined with every word the President spoke. Neither said anything until the end.

“I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by
Japan on Sunday, December 7th, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.”

The government officials erupted into applause over the wireless. Bucky shouted, “Damned right we will!” while Steve echoed the sentiment with “We’d better!”

They listened to the commentator for a bit analyzing and describing this and that of the pandemonium in the room before they turned off the radio, sitting in the oppressive silence that remained.

“I’m gonna try.” The words blurted from Steve’s mouth before he could stop them.

Steve knew that Bucky understood what he meant. The other man said nothing for a few moments and then nodded. “Go with me when I go. Guys’ll be lined around the block to enlist for the next few days. Let’s wait til the end of the week.” He rinsed his mouth out in the kitchen sink, walked over and gave Steve another mouth-mapping kiss. “I gotta go,” he said regretfully, “but tonight we’re having a long talk about…” he paused awkwardly and motioned between them “…this, us, whatever.”

Steve nodded, heart in his throat. Had Bucky changed his mind? Was he wanting to go further? His mind raced with possibilities as Bucky bundled back up and walked out the door without a backward glance at Steve.

Neighbors came and went the entire day. People sought out the familiar and the comforting in the wake of the tragedy. The women in the building came by, having vented their fear and outrage in cooking, cleaning and other activities. Steve was the recipient of a scarf that someone finally finished and had no use for (thus why it had never been finished), and more food than he could cram into the little icebox and pantry.

By the time Bucky returned from work later than expected, Steve had the table full of food ready for them to consume.

Bucky gawked for a moment before sputtering, “What’s all this?”

Steve shrugged helplessly. “When half the women in this building give you food and they are bigger than you, would you argue?”

Bucky opened his mouth to say something, snapped it shut again and chuckled. “No,” he said, shaking his head in wonder, “I guess not.” He walked to his room and came out with his towel, soap and shampoo. “I have to clean up. Did the work of five guys today since we were shorthanded. I’ll be back quick.”

He didn’t wait for Steve’s nod but was good as his word, returning in ten minutes, smelling like Ivory soap and shampoo. Bucky plopped down in his chair at the table, the radio playing some jazz ensemble. They ate with little comment except on the taste or to pass something. Bucky ate enough for two people and looked exhausted.

They cleaned up the kitchen, having put a sizable dent in the food and took the radio into the main room. Steve stoked the fire and Bucky stretched out on the bed. He held out a large hand, beckoning Steve to him.

“How do you see us together?” he asked bluntly once Steve sat on the bed, stiff and nervous.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” Steve confessed, feeling himself blush a little.
Bucky gave him a sly look. “When you’re tugging off, what do you fantasize about?”

Steve knew for certain he was red as beet because he felt like he was on fire. “You touching me,” he mumbled, turning away.

Bucky must have heard because Steve could hear the smile in his voice without even looking. “And?”

Steve gave a helpless shrug, too mortified to continue. He felt the mattress shift beneath him, felt Bucky’s warm breath on his neck and the brush of Bucky’s lips against his nape like the ritual he’d learned to enjoy the last two nights.

“You want to know what I think? How I see us?” Bucky asked, his voice hoarse and husky.

Steve gave a timid nod.

“You, under me, begging, then ordering me around, your eyes, your gorgeous blue eyes closed as you come.” Steve felt himself hardening at the words, whispered so seductively in his right, then left ear as Bucky moved behind him.

“Have you—” Steve’s voice failed him and he cleared his throat awkwardly before trying again. “Have you been with…with…guys?” he squeaked the last when Bucky’s strong, sure hands began to rub his back, easing the muscles in his thin shoulders.

“A couple,” Bucky confessed. “I can’t say it was unpleasant but that was when I realized I wished it was you I was with and not them.”

Steve was startled at the confession. “How long have you—” He gestured to fill in the words he couldn’t say.

“Since we were sixteen. I realized that I was staring at the girls, sure, but sometimes me and the girls were staring at the same guy.”

“Oh.” Steve didn’t know what to say.

“How about you?” Steve shrugged, unwilling to answer. “Come on, Stevie,” wheedled Bucky and he capitulated.

“About the same, only I was just staring at you. Ma knew,” he added in a rush.

Bucky stopped massaging and strangled out a startled, “What?”

Steve nodded vigorously. “Yeah, she saw me watching you one day. She just said, in her disappointed tone, ‘Oh Stevie, no’, then she sat me down on the couch and talked to me.”

Bucky’s fingers tightened almost painfully on Steve’s shoulders. “What’d she say? That is was bad, that it was evil, that it was wrong?”

Steve shook his head. “No, she said that others wouldn’t understand, that it’s how they would see me and how I felt, but how I felt was how I felt. Only I could make it wrong or right. Turns out she had a brother that the family disowned who…who liked men. She said she always thought it was cruel that they disowned him, that he was her favorite brother.”

“Well, she didn’t have a stellar family,” snorted Bucky, resuming his caressing. “After your old man died and it turned out you was sickly they turned their back on her too, right?”
Steve huffed a ‘yeah’, remembering how it hurt his mother that all her little letters and cards were sent back year after year unopened and unreplied.

“Jerks, don’t need ‘em anyway,” Bucky stated emphatically and before Steve knew it, the other man’s lips were trailing over his back. He shivered, even though his clothes were still on, at the seductive sensation.

“You like that, Stevie?” Bucky murmured. Steve mumbled something resembling ‘yes’, thinking that it should have been obvious. “We won’t do anything you don’t feel comfortable doing. I ain’t messing this up, not for you, not for your first time.”

“Didn’t you like your first time?” Steve wanted to know, curiosity overriding his embarrassment.

He turned in time to see Bucky shrug. “It was all right. It wasn’t bad but I didn’t go to him for seconds, if you know what I mean?” Steve blushed again and Bucky chuckled. “I’ll treat you like glass, Stevie,” he promised and leaned in for a kiss.

Steve melted into it wholeheartedly, not realizing Bucky had unbuttoned his shirt and was brushing his thumb over his nipples until the sizzle of desire shot through his body like electricity at the touch. He gasped into the kiss and Bucky froze.

“No,” Steve assured. “I like it. A lot.”

Bucky smiled wickedly against his lips and continued to explore. Steve eventually grew bold enough to return the favor, divesting Bucky of his own slapdash buttoned shirt. The taller man hadn’t bothered to button it right and it hung crooked, giving him a decidedly rakish air to Steve’s way of thinking.

Before Steve knew it, he was on his back, Bucky leaning over him, exploring some more, hand brushing his pant waistline occasionally like he wanted to do more but hadn’t worked up the nerve. Steve shocked them both by popping the buttons and he saw Bucky’s eyes darkened to almost black as the smell of Steve’s arousal hit both their nostrils.

“Ah, God, Stevie,” moaned Bucky and he began licking Steve’s chest and down toward his crotch area. “I’ll make you feel so good, I swear it.” The words were spoken reverently, but Steve didn’t understand for a second what Bucky meant until he felt his pants being pulled down further on his hips, his member released with just his cotton underpants between skin and cool air.

He shivered, part from the cold and part from the sensations he was feeling from Bucky’s talented tongue, lips and hands. “Cold?” Bucky asked and Steve made a noncommittal sound. “I’ll warm you up real soon.”

Steve found out what Bucky meant about three minutes later when Bucky’s lips and tongue nipped and licked at his cock. Steve came off the bed with a yelp of surprise, bashing Bucky in the face with his elbow as he did so.

Bucky was laughing and Steve felt flame suffuse his whole body. He glanced down and blushed some more. God, his blush went all the way to…to…

“You’ll like it, Stevie,” Bucky said, coaxing him back to the bed.

“I was just so startled,” Steve exclaimed. He knew his eyes were wide and he sounded like some naïve dolt. He knew about giving head, seen hookers do it to their johns in alleys since he was a kid. That was life in New York when people were out of work and willing to do anything for a bit of money for food and rent. He’d just never thought of two guys doing it.
Bucky grinned at him, that heart stopping grin that Steve loved so much. “Come here,” he coaxed again and Steve, feeling like some shy bride, returned to his position, giving himself to the sensation of Bucky’s mouth eagerly suckling, licking and toyng with him.

He felt the familiar tension of his release building, ten times more than anything his hand alone ever provided. He squirmed on the mattress, his hands clenching and unclenching helplessly in the blanket beneath him. He began babbling, he didn’t know what he said, and then the world shattered into a million stars and his hips pumped of their own accord into Bucky’s mouth.

Replete he lay there like some lump, listening to Bucky’s purr as the taller man pulled himself level with Steve once more. “I told you that you’d like that.”

“Mumpf,” Steve managed to reply, sated to his bones.

“It gets better.”

Steve opened an eye lazily. “Yeah?”

Bucky waggled his eyebrows suggestively, teasingly. “Oh yeah, for both of us.”

Steve thought a moment and then realized what Bucky was hinting at. Eager for more and over his initial shyness, he put his arms around Bucky’s neck and pulled him down for a kiss. Buck’s mouth tasted salty and of something else that made him want to blush again, but Steve kind of liked it. Bucky moaned when Steve’s hands started to roam. Soon Bucky was the one panting and squirming beneath Steve’s onslaught exploration. When he worked up the nerve to touch Bucky’s cock Bucky jumped sky high and snatched Steve into his arms, rolling him onto his back and grinding his hips against Steve’s.

“You know what I want?” Bucky panted, looking deep into Steve’s eyes. Steve nodded jerkily and Bucky groaned a laugh into Steve’s neck before giving it some experimental light nips. “I’ll go slow as I can. We’ll make this good for you too, Stevie.”

“Bucky,” groaned Steve. “Stop making me sound a like girl virgin or something.”

Bucky pulled back and frowned. “Well, you kind of are in this, Steve,” Bucky told him seriously. “Ain’t no cherry to pop, so to speak, but, well…” Steve was amazed that Bucky blushed a little. “I’m gonna be fucking you like a girl. It’s not like I can just slide on in and..oh hell.”

He flopped heavily on top of Steve and was laughing a little at his own embarrassment. Steve stroked Bucky’s back, reveling in the feel of him, the warmth and the strength. “I just meant you have to find pleasure too,” he murmured.

“Oh,” mumbled Bucky into Steve’s neck. He pulled back and grinned down. “That will not be a problem, I assure you.”

Steve wet his lips with his tongue, watching Bucky’s eyes follow the movement hungrily. “Then what are you waiting for? The next ice age?”

Bucky moaned his name and proceeded.

It was…well, weird was the only way Steve could describe what Bucky did next, wetting his fingers in his, or Steve’s, mouth, stretching Steve’s hole a little at a time. They were both squirming, giggling, panting and Bucky was soon pulling Steve’s legs around his waist and his cum and spit slicked cock was nudging Steve’s entrance.
Bucky went slow, Steve had to admit, but it still hurt a little, but it was a good hurt. Once he got used to having Bucky there, he gave a jerky nod for Bucky to keep going. Sweat was beading Bucky’s brow and he took the nod for the permission it was a bit more enthusiastically than Steve wanted but he wasn’t about to deny Bucky now when he’d been so patient and his need for Steve was so great.

Soon Steve got used to the sensation, wanted it, craved hearing Bucky’s harsh breath and his moans of passion. Bucky’s rhythm increased but Steve found his own desire rebuilding again. Fumbling clumsily he began to stroke himself, closing his eyes to revel in the sensation of Bucky and his own trembling hand. With a warbling cry, Bucky thrust himself once, twice, thrice hard into Steve and he felt a warm flood. When he belatedly realized what it was, the thought alone sent Steve over the edge and he came all over his belly and lower chest.

Bucky pulled out carefully, with an embarrassing popping sound that caused them both to giggle like girls and blush. On shaky legs Bucky picked up his now dry towel where he put it by the stove and wet it a bit in the sink. He cleaned them both off, not very well, but enough to get by until a proper bath.

Collapsing on the bed next to Steve and gathering him up tight, Bucky let out a satisfied sigh and Steve resisted the urge to preen. ‘I did that,’ he thought to himself, ‘I made Bucky lose control, to want me, I did it.’

“You look smug,” Bucky mumbled, one blue-grey eye staring at him with a hint of mischief glinting in their depths. The other eye was buried in the pillow.

“More like unable to believe my luck. Best looking guy in town and he wants me,” Steve replied honestly.

“Hardly in town,” scoffed Bucky but he still looked pleased at the compliment. “And what’s wrong with you?”

Steve shrugged, not wanting to start an argument.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Bucky said around a yawn. “Nothing’s wrong with you, Steve. You’re damned perfect to me. That’s all that matters.”

Steve felt like he was glowing like a brand new light bulb. To hell with the Jappos and the Germans and Italians and the war. He had Bucky, for now at least, and he wasn’t going to let go until he absolutely had too.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Bucky in the war...without Steve. He's not a happy camper.

Chapter Notes

Notes: Author is assuming most readers have had a viewing or two (maybe 3 or 12) of Captain America: The First Avenger. The next few chapters will be entirely from Bucky’s point of view as he enters the European theater. It’s never been stated how the soon-to-be Commandos entered the European theater. Germany pretty much had Europe closed up from the English Channel to the Soviet Union, which is why the Allies needed D-Day. And while the Commandos kicked ass and took no names to Hydra, I can’t believe it was just a few months that they accomplished this with no prior battle skills beforehand (except Steve but he was a super soldier, so he’s allowed). D-Day was June 6, 1944, and on May 7, 1945 Germany surrendered, so not a full year passed. However the Allies attacked via Sicily into Mussolini’s Fascist Italy in 1943 so I’m going to have Bucky take that route initially, come home (missing Steve as he was on the road as “Captain America”) before being redeployed with the 107th after D-day into the French countryside with the push to Berlin and their eventual capture by Hydra. I couldn’t find a listing of the 107th (all lists stop at 106, figured that’s why Marvel used the number), so I figured, hey, it’s a fanfic, I can play if I want, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky Barnes was in a pickle and he knew it. He’d gotten his orders to go to England like a good little soldier and he did it. He left his mother crying and his best friend and secret lover alone, like a good little soldier. The good little soldier, though, was quickly turning into the tough guy from Brooklyn not willing to take guff from some bully spitting something at him in German that he didn’t understand.

Timothy Dugan stood next to him, red hair and bushy mustache aquiver as he too listened to the German kid all but scream at them. What he was hot and bothered about (and it was hot enough to be a bother at the moment), they didn’t have a clue and Bucky was rapidly reaching the ‘don’t give a shit’ stage.

“I won’t tell if you won’t tell that I punched him in the balls if doesn’t shut up soon,” Dugan said amiably and Bucky suppressed a grin.

The German shut up.

“See? That’s how you find out if someone understands you. Threaten their balls.” Dugan looked pleased with himself and Bucky had to admit, he’d shut up too with a threat like that.

Dugan was a former strongman in a circus. Once he put his hands on something, he wasn’t letting
go short of a crowbar or having his arms ripped off. He was easily over six foot two and was nothing but 250 pounds of solid, Irish muscle.

“So now that we know you know understand English, how about you tell us where the rest of your buddies are so we don’t shell this quaint little town into rubble?” Bucky asked conversationally.

The German looked mutinous a moment then thoughtful. “Not in city,” he said in broken English, his accent thick and heavy.

“Wonderful!” Dugan said sarcastically to no one in particular. “So we shell the hell out of the Italian countryside and hope we don’t hit some building five times as old as our own country.”

Bucky gave him a withering glance and turned back to the Kraut. “Look, friend,” he started.

“Not friend!” The German said emphatically.

Bucky sighed. “Okay, kid,” he began again.

“Not kid,” the German, who didn’t look any older than fifteen, maybe sixteen years, said mulishly.

Bucky sighed again and pinched the bridge of his nose. And he once thought Steve was stubborn, mule-headed and prickly.

“Fine, punk,” Bucky snarled, grabbing the kid by the front of his uniform and giving him a shake. He weighed about as much as Steve did. The thought of Steve made Bucky’s heart ache a little. “We’ll play it your way.” Bucky looked over his shoulder at Gabriel Jones, a tall black man with better manners and education than Bucky ever dreamed of having. “Call in the strike order. Tell them to raze the damned countryside to the ash.”

Gabe looked grim and nodded, lips thinning determinedly. Bucky knew Gabe understood it was a bluff. They were a small compliment of fifteen men who were lost, having been separated from the rest of the 107th about two days ago in the midst of battle and stumbled across this little slice of picturesque by accident.

The Kraut didn’t know that and was green as could be. He started babbling immediately. Obviously, he’d heard Americans were insane. Considering he had a half-crazed Brooklyn boy rattling his teeth, a giant with a big bushy mustache cracking his fists behind him and a black man with soot smeared features and a crazed, white as bleach smile he flashed often surrounding him, Bucky didn’t blame the kid for caving.

“Over the hill,” the kid all but sobbed in terror, “in small caves.”

“Of course they’d find shelter,” groused Dugan. “If we flush the buggers out, can we have their stuff?”

“Fine with me.” Bucky dropped the kid on his butt and hefted his rifle back onto his shoulder. “That damned radio working yet, Jones?”

“Nah. Damned thing is what you call useless,” Jones informed them.

The kid gave a hysterical laugh. “Bluff?” he asked, expression turning speculative.

Bucky punched him, knocking the punk out cold. “Don’t even think about running to your buddies, brat,” he muttered. “There has to be-“ He stopped as a new sound reached their ears.
It was unmistakable and, if it was Allied, music to their ears. If not, it was a badly tuned orchestra getting set to unleash Wagner on their asses. Bucky decided he was the stupidest of the lot (Steve would have said bravest but Bucky was learning that the difference between brave and stupid was pretty murky) and poked his head out the door.

“Tanks,” he reported the obvious. “They have pretty flags that have stars, bars, and stripes on them.”

“Wahoo!” Dugan yelped. “We should probably greet them and tell them where this kid’s friends are.”

“Probably,” Bucky agreed. “So who’s doing the honors this time?”

Dugan and Jones grinned unrepentantly at him. “You’re the Sergeant, Sergeant,” they said in near unison.

“I hate you guys,” Bucky said but went out to greet the tank brigade rumbling through the nearly empty little village.

He saluted a lieutenant riding on top of the head light tank. The lieutenant raised a hand and the entire unit stopped. “Sergeant?”

“Barnes, sir, 107th,” Bucky said with his crisp salute. “About fifteen of us got separated from our unit two nights ago. Stumbled across this place. Krauts on the other side of the hill, according to our informant.” Dugan tossed their German prisoner on the ground next to the tank. “They’re holed up in some caves, apparently.”

The lieutenant nodded and leaned into the tank to relay an order before popping back up again. “I’m Lt. Sagan. Your fellows are behind us by about half a mile. Join up with them when they get here. We’ll stay until everyone catches up and decide what to do from there.”

The lieutenant paused. “Have any of you done any reconnoitering yet?”

Bucky shrugged. “A little. The town’s secure now, pretty empty when we stumbled across it. We found this guy upstairs in one of the houses, hiding under a bed. Not sure if he is a deserter or was scouting himself when he heard us.”

“Any of your men a decent shot?” The lieutenant seemed to have a plan and Bucky had a feeling he wasn’t going to like it.

“I am, sir. They originally had me slated for potential sniper duty. Couple others with me are handler than most with a rifle.”

“Excellent.” The officer dipped back into the tank. All Bucky could see was his back bowed like an arch in khaki brown. When the lieutenant came back up, he looked pensive. “Sergeant, you and your three best shots will begin a scouting expedition. I want to know where those caves are, how fortified they are and what the enemies head count is before nightfall.”

Bucky suppressed a grimace. It was barely noon and nightfall was in about six hours. He saluted like a good soldier with a crisp, “Yes, sir!” He added as an afterthought, “Our radio seems to be malfunctioning, sir, could we get another?” The lieutenant nodded and Jones was soon swapping out their piece of shit transceiver for one that didn’t look much better but seemed to actually work.

All the tanks were now parked in the middle of the little cobblestoned square. Bucky could hear the distant heavy tread of hundred of boots in the distance. Infantry wasn’t stealthy when there
were a lot of them.

“Dugan, Jones, and Duesenberry, with me. Make sure we have ammo, provisions and the damned radio works.”

Dugan and Jones checked their supplies and Deusenberry, a short, squat little guy from Montana or Minnesota (something west of New York that started with an M), gripped his rifle tightly, nodding nervously.

Bucky checked his own gear, found he needed more ammo and rations and got resupplied. Within twenty minutes the four of them were slinking through the little village for the outskirts of where their German kid prisoner had waved a vague hand earlier as the direction of his fellow Germans.

There wasn’t much forest, but not much open field either. Thousands of years of human habitation changed the landscape a dozen times over, so it was spotted with copses of trees, open meadows and hills dotted with both.

The four of them headed for the higher hills, the most likely place to find caves, keeping silent and watchful. There was no way the Germans wouldn’t have look outs.

They found one napping against a tree. The guy didn’t have time to even yelp when Dugan snapped his neck like a twig. Another they found in a tree, looking in the other direction for some stupid reason. Duesenberry, being either a lumberjack or monkey, clambered up neat as you please and pushed the lookout of his perch before the idiot realized he had company. Bucky bayoneted him before he could do more than make a strangled yelp. He tried not to think about what he’d just done. He’d been doing that a lot lately.

They knew they were close and Bucky made the other three wait while he crept forward through the underbrush. Someone had to be dumber than the rest. He figured he was the sergeant, he qualified. It didn’t take him long to find the Germans’ little hidey-hole. The kid had been right, it wasn’t a deep cave, just enough to keep the elements off. They looked unkempt and disheveled.

They looked like deserters.

He counted twenty that he could see but doubted that was all. He tried to find a different angle but there wasn’t an easy way to do that without potentially revealing himself. So he snuck back to his fellows and they moved far enough away that any broadcast they made wouldn’t be heard by the enemy.

“Advise that potentially 20-50 men in caves near our position,” Bucky told Gabe. “Advise probable deserters, couldn’t tell how many weapons or how well armed they all are. They’ve got a good hole, easily defended. Nearby stream for water, looks like they were living on rations and stolen food.”

Dugan snorted but said nothing. Gabe nodded and reported over the transceiver. A moment later they got orders to remain, monitor and stay out of sight. More men would be coming to join them for a quick sweep in and apprehend.

Bucky sighed. That wasn’t what he wanted to hear. He looked at his comrades and knew they felt the same.

“Damned officers,” muttered Duesenberry. “Ain’t their butts on the line.”

Bucky nodded. “Let’s keep watchful in case they send out replacement lookouts. Last thing we need is to get ourselves made before the cavalry arrives.”
They found a spot of trees and settled in. No replacements for the lookouts arrived. Only about two hours passed since they left the little village and an hour later they were joined by the lieutenant and 75 more men.

‘Subtle,’ Bucky thought even as he saluted.

“Lead on, Sergeant,” invited the lieutenant. “And well done,” he added.

The lieutenant took in the lay of the land and quickly dispersed the 75 men in various locations around the cave’s mouth, far enough away to not be heard but close enough to shoot. “Your men with me, Sergeant,” the lieutenant invited.

“Sir?” Bucky asked in confusion.

“Sergeant, I’d be pleased to have your accompaniment closer to the cave. I’d like to attempt negotiate a surrender with them first rather than give the order we blow them away.”

“Uh, yes, sir,” Bucky said automatically but his tone clearly said “You’re nuts, sir.”

Lt. Sagan grinned sadly. “Those were my orders. Can’t say I’m pleased about it either, Barnes, but I have to follow them.”

“Oh. I mean, yes, sir.”

“Any of your men speak German, Sergeant?” whispered Sagan a moment later.

“I do, sir,” Jones piped up. “But not fluently. I can read it better than I can speak it, unfortunately. I’ve been getting better recently though.”

Sagan nodded, not batting an eyelash at the news that a man of color was bilingual. Bucky’s respect for the lieutenant rose a notch.

“In that case, I’ll do all the talking. Anyone shoots, shoot back and shoot to kill.”

All four men nodded, readying their rifles.

“Guten tag!” Sagan shouted out when they were close enough to be heard by the Germans in their caves. Sagan was half-standing, half-crouching but still in a somewhat open area. “Wir sind Amerikaner, und Sie umgeben sind.”

Shots rang out and the lieutenant jerked twice. Bucky immediately dove for cover, shouldered his rifle and returned fire but Sagan’s voice, commanding if pained rang out.

“Stoppen! Übergeben Sie und Sie werden nicht geschädigt warden!”

Bucky clambered from the rock he ducked behind and crouched near Sagan, grabbing him under the armpits even as bullets sprayed the ground near them.

“Damn it,” Sagan gasped once they reached relative cover. Fire was being exchanged between the two sides now, with occasional cries of pain on both sides when a bullet found its mark. “I was hoping they’d be sensible.”

“Would you, sir, in their place?” Bucky asked, as he tore fabric from the wounded leg and abdomen. The leg looked livable. The stomach hole not so much.

Sagan coughed raggedly. “Guess not,” he agreed. “Take them out ’til they surrender, Sergeant. If
none speak English the word you’re looking for is *grebe* or something close to that.” Sagan coughed again, blood pooling at the corner of his mouth now.

Bucky felt heavy as he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good man, Barnes. If I live, I’ll recommend you.” Sagan gave a lop-sided grin and Bucky’s estimation of the man rose a few more notches. This was a good man in a bad way.

“No need, sir,” he assured the other man. Last thing he wanted was a promotion even if it meant more pay to send home to Steve and his ma.

Bucky turned to Gabe. “Call in that the lieutenant’s been hit.”

He fired a couple of rounds, carefully lining up his targets so not to waste ammunition before Gabe cursed from his relative shelter behind a rock.

“Damned thing’s not sending. We’re getting transmissions, but can’t send shit.”

“God damn it, fucking radios are useless. Can you get Tokyo Rose on that damned thing at least?” Bucky swore. He turned to say something to Duesenberry but instead he got splattered in blood and gray matter as Duesenberry took a head shot. “Fuck!” There was no coming back from that, not when the back half of your head was gone.

After using his jacket edge to wipe off his face, Bucky lined up another shot on some German asshole and popped him one right back. His aim was true and the German collapsed in the cave mouth with a jolt of his body.

Gunfire lasted well into darkness when finally the call for surrender, in English, came from the Germans. About twenty-five exited the cave, explaining that seventeen were wounded or dead within. All were taken prisoner, and with Sagan and their own dead, the remaining American forces trudged back to the little Italian village.

Sagan didn’t make it. He was dead before they reached medical aide. Bucky made his verbal report to a major who looked hard-bitten and tough as nails before being dismissed.

They buried their dead, and those of their German enemies, making notations of the names, ranks and serial numbers of them all. Bucky watched dispassionately as Sagan’s body went into the ground with the rest the next day.

‘What a fuckin’ waste’, he thought trying to be dispassionate and failing.

He hadn’t known the man but a couple hours but for some reason the lieutenant struck a chord with Bucky. Even Duesenberry’s, death, a man he’d met in boot camp and fought with all this time, was less of a loss for some reason to Bucky than Sagan. Sagan had reminded Bucky a little of Steve in his optimism and seeming sense of fair play.

Mail call came round that afternoon and he had a couple letters, one from his ma and one from Steve. He read out loud to the guys the one from his ma, full of neighborhood gossip, prayers and hopes that he was well and behaving himself. She included a new rosary as he’d written he’d lost his, mainly because he couldn’t bear to tell her after he shot his first man, he’d jerked the thing out of his pocket and pitched it as hard he could with a scream of rage. He hadn’t set foot near a priest or a church since and hadn’t cared.

Steve’s letters he always opened in private. The guys would often read letters from family or friends to their fellows who didn’t get mail that time to share a little bit of home. He knew more
about other people’s lives in his regiment than he did about most of his neighbors back home. It was how the soldiers kept sane. Usually letters from a girlfriend or wife weren’t shared but in bits and pieces. Steve’s letters, from a friend he told everyone, those were his private slice of heaven and Bucky’d be damned if he share one bit of Steve with anyone.

Though Steve never wrote racy things (probably blushed thinking of what to say and worried the letters would be opened) and always signed them ‘Your friend’, Bucky could hear Steve’s clear voice in the neat copperplate script. The little guy always included sketches in the corners, the side bar or just a sheet of a landscape or something. Bucky shared the individual drawings, proud of his friend’s talent and not ashamed to brag about it.

Dear Bucky-

Glad to hear you’re okay. I wish I could say I understand what it’s like for you, but as you know and probably always knew, I’ll never get over there. Yes, I’m still bitter that you have to suffer through all that without me, that I’m not there taking it on the chin too. Yes, I know you’ll probably say it’s for the best but I don’t care. Still wish I was there.

Your fellows sound like a great bunch. Hopefully one day I’ll meet them. That Dugan sounds like a hell of a guy to have in a fight on your side. A real circus strong man? He must be huge. Could probably break me in half with a sneeze. I’m laughing here, pal.

I’m still working part time at Johnston’s store but doing some artwork for the FAP every once in awhile. Pay’s not great for the amount of work I put in but still, money is money, right? At least I ain’t been evicted.

Had a bit of a cold last week but I took care of myself and feeling okay now, so don’t worry. I’m a big boy, see? I can take care of myself without Mother Hen Bucky hovering over me.

Here’s some rough sketches of my latest project to give you an idea of what I’m working on. They asked if I could do some ‘day in the life’ type drawings and I said sure. This one guy thinks he might be able to get me some contacts at one of the art schools, which is kind of funny considering we talked about me doing just that way back in that horrible December.

Write soon. Your letters come sometimes a little at a time or a whole stack at once. I guess that’s how often they get mail out on a boat over there or something? Send me some ideas to draw for your friends to cheer everyone up. I’m sure you’ll get lots of requests for dames like Rita Hayworth or Betty Grable. I’m even willing to take a special request from you too, you jerk.

Your friend,

Steve

Bucky stared at the letter. It sounded so impersonal now for some reason. Before he was reading between the lines but now it seemed like…He snarled at the envelope, seeing the date on it stamped two months ago.

God damned war was taking everything away from him, his sense of purpose, his sanity, probably his life eventually and maybe his best friend and the person he loved most in the world.
He sat at a campfire later that evening, staring into the flickering flames, occasionally tossing in dried grass to watch it spark and burn like tiny fireworks. He didn’t care that everyone thought he was acting strange. His thoughts were on Steve, how much he missed his smell, his touch, his rare, cheerful smile, the earnest look on his face and the clear blueness of his eyes.

Dugan sat down next to him and pulled out a flask. “Here. Don’t tell anyone I got it.”

Bucky took a swig of biting whiskey gratefully. “Not a word,” he agreed.

“Homesick?”

Bucky shrugged. “Brooklyn’s Brooklyn. Not much to miss, truth be told. It can be hell but it’s home. Do I miss it? No. Do I miss who’s there? Yeah.”

Dugan nodded his understanding and smoothed his mustache in a nervous gesture. “You talk about that friend of yours a lot, the artist, the one who’s sick all the time.”

Bucky felt his shoulders tense. “Yeah?”

“I’m in the circus, my friend, we get all kinds. I don’t mean nothin’ by this question, I just gotta know. You fancy him?”

Bucky thought about swearing at the big man but he’d learned that Dugan’s perspective on the world was a lot like his own: live and let fucking live. You’re judged by what kind of friend you were and how well you guarded your friends’ back, not by what society held as right and moral.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered in a low tone. “You say anything, though, I’ll call you a liar in front of everyone.”

Dugan held up two meaty paws in surrender. “Like I said, from the circus. That would be the least freaky thing I’ve seen.”

“I like girls too, mind you, it’s just that he’s-why you askin’ anyway?” Bucky inquired, turning his gaze back to the fire, not willing to say much more out loud. Ears were everywhere in camp.

“Curiosity mostly. Wishin’ I had someone who’d miss me if it were me laying in this Italian soil is all.” Bucky nodded, not sure what to say to that. “Duesenberry had a wife and two kids.”

Bucky nodded again. That had been on his mind too off and on.

“I know the major or someone will write some pissant letter, but I thought we could do better than them. He was one of us, we owe him that much. Better than the damned telegram she’ll get first.” Both men gave an involuntary shudder at the idea of Western Union delivering their death notices to their families.

Dugan’s words made sense to Bucky if anything made sense in this crazy world. “Yeah, we’ll do it in the morning and send it out first chance we get.”

Dugan slapped him on the shoulder. “We should catch some sleep, Bucky. Got to start marching like little ants again tomorrow.”

Bucky sighed and stood up. Dugan shoved some dirt into the fire pit, banking it, and they headed for their shared tent. Jones was already asleep, sawing logs. It was odd having three cots setup when there should have been four; Duesenberry had been their fourth.
As he lay in the dark, listening to the unfamiliar sounds of the Italian countryside, so different from the sounds of the city he was from, and the familiar sounds of soldiers moving around for watches no matter the time of night, Bucky wondered what Steve was doing, was Steve okay, was he healthy or was he sick in some hospital, wheezing out his last breath?

Unable to let that thought go its inevitable conclusion, Bucky forced himself to level his breathing and eventually sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: German translation admittedly taken from Google Translate so accuracy likely has a lot to be desired.

_Guten tag_=Good afternoon.
_Wir sind Amerikaner, und Sie umgeben sind._-We are Americans and you are surrounded.
_Stoppen! Übergeben Sie und Sie werden nicht geschädigt werden._-Stop! Surrender and you won’t be harmed.
“What do you mean he’s not there?” Bucky gaped at their landlord. He couldn’t help it, he was so shocked.

The man shrugged and scratched a disgusting armpit. He’d been working on the pipes in the basement and smelled of sewage. “He packed up about three months ago. Took your stuff to your Ma’s that hadn’t been sent over there already. I helped him a little bit. He’s so damned small, you know. Gave me the radio, asked me to keep it if I wanted. I gave it to one of the other tenants who lost her husband and is down on her luck. Hope you don’t mind.”

Bucky shook his head even as he tried to process what the man was saying. “Did he say where he was goin’?”

“Nah,” the landlord shrugged. “Just said he got a job outside Brooklyn. Didn’t he write ya?”

“Mail’s sometimes really behind,” Bucky replied, distraught. “Was he okay? He wasn’t sick or nothin’?”

“Seemed most fit I’ve ever seen him,” the landlord responded. “Maybe your ma knows more?”

“Maybe,” Bucky said doubtfully. She hadn’t mentioned anything when Bucky was there. His furlough was only two days and then the entire unit shipped back to Europe, France this time. He was hoping for tonight with Steve, to make sure his imagination hadn’t run wild that Steve found someone else or was dead and he’d not heard.

Ma would have told him if Stevie was dead, he assured himself, after saying a distracted good bye to the landlord.

“Be carefully over there, Bucky!” the man called and Bucky gave an absent wave over his shoulder in acknowledgment.

He trudged back to his ma’s apartment where she sat him down with a worried cluck. “You’ll get one of his letters,” she assured him.

“But why wouldn’t he tell you where he was goin’?” Bucky felt like he was whining.

She shrugged. “He’s always been independent, doesn’t want to worry folk, burden them with his troubles. Maybe he tried to stop by when he left and I was out,” she finished lamely. They both knew that excuse was weak but they both grasped it.

“Yeah, that’s it, he’s got a job in the city with his art and time just flew by,” Bucky theorized. “I just wanted to see him before I head back over. I leave tomorrow, Ma,” he added forlornly.

“If I see him, I’ll put a flea in his ear for you,” promised Mrs. Barnes. Her eyes welled with tears. “You’re a man now, I can see it in your eyes, my boy.” She hugged him and he let her, breathing in her comforting scent of lavender and soap, feeling the arms that had soothed bumps, bruises and caused a few of both when he deserved it tighten around him. “I hoped to never see that look in your eyes, that loss, that sadness, that hurt but it’s there now. Please be careful, my love, for me and for Steve. We couldn’t do without you.”
“I love you too, Ma,” Bucky choked and hugged her tightly back. She felt frailer than he remembered. “You take care too. I’m gonna take you dancin’ when I get home for good and we’re not gonna stop until they kick us out.”

She gave a tearful laugh. “Off with you,” she scolded. “Go have some fun.”

He shook his head. “I just want to sleep in my old bedroom surrounded by all the things that make what I’ve done worth it, Ma.”

Tears spilled over her cheeks at his words and he brushed them away with his fingers gently. Then he went upstairs, stretched out fully clothed on his old bed that was too short for his tall frame and stared at the ceiling until the world faded away.

‘Where the hell could Steve have gone?” was the last thought he had before oblivion took him.

One months later
Some empty land in France, maybe Belgium

Dugan earned the nickname ‘Dum Dum’ not because he was stupid but because he was like a missile that wouldn’t explode but still did a ton of damage just landing in the middle of you. As Dugan came into the hole some mortar shell left behind, Bucky swore he could feel the weight of Dugan’s body hitting the ground more than the vibration from the shells.

“There’s gotta be at least five mortar companies out there,” Dugan shouted over the din of said mortars falling from the sky like oversized bottle rockets.

Thinking quick Bucky told Jones, the black man clutching at the transceiver and panting from his own mad dash for safety, “Radio B company, tell them we need cover.”

Jones held up the portable radio, a smoking hole in the middle of it, some of the wires looking like slag with each explosion of mortars lighting the sky. “That might be tough!” Jones said with an air fatalistic sarcasm.

“Bucky! Behind you!”

His instinct for survival kicked in at Dugan’s shout and he turned, shooting over the lip of the makeshift fox hole, taking out some the encroaching German soldiers easily, too easily for his peace of mind but he didn’t have any peace at the moment and neither should they.

He could see more Germans in the distance, what could be dozens, hundreds of them. “Here they come!” he shouted, his voice going gravelly.

“I hate these guys,” Dugan advised everyone and no one in particular. Bucky glanced over and felt like laughing hysterically as even in the darkness he could see Dugan shoving a finger through a bullet hole in his bowler hat (not regulation but no one was willing to put him on report for it).

An honest to God chuckle did escape Bucky’s lips but it was quickly cut off by bullets whizzing past his ear. He at least was wearing a regulation helmet, for all the good it did. Couldn’t see a damned thing in it and he’d see men still take a bullet to the head with the damned thing on. Of course he’d seen some live afterward, but not all.

With reflexes honed to razor sharpness, Bucky returned fire, taking out enemies in his scope one at a time, smooth and clean. While he was peering through the crosshairs a couple more disappeared...
in this blue lightening …Bucky rubbed at his eyes and peered back through the lens again and watched more German soldiers, well, disintegrate in blue lightening.

What the hell?

He pulled the rifle from his face and watched blue bolts shoot everywhere at the German enemy soldiers coming over the hills in the distance. They just vanished…poof! He shared a confused look with Dugan and Jones. As one they stood up, peering into the darkness like three morons.

Dugan, his tone massively confused, said, “That looks..new.”

There was a rumble of what sounded like thunder to their right and they turned to look, stepping from their improvised fox hole to peer into the darkness. Thunder would match the lightning but Bucky knew that wasn’t normal thunder. It sounded like a tank.

It was. It came over the hill and it was at least three stories high. He’d never seen the like.

They stood there, staring at it stupidly. They weren’t sure if it were friend or foe but they got their answer soon enough.

The long barrel of the tank’s cannon swiftly turned and faced them. Bucky’s reaction was instinctive. “Down!” he screamed and shoved Dugan and Jones backward.

The cannon fired a shot that shook the countryside more than any of the mortars that had fallen. Blue streaked over their heads and landed in the tank brigade they left mired in the mud some ways back. The bolt of blue exploded and sizzled, screams could be heard from the men around and maybe in the tanks and Bucky felt like he should be wetting his pants. Instead he hefted his rifle, looking through the scope for any human being sitting on the giant monstrosity.

He took one out, then two more coming up behind the tank. They weren’t wearing typical Nazi uniforms.

“Who the hell are these guys?” Jones’ voice was high pitched with his fear and panic. At least he could talk, Bucky thought. He wasn’t sure he could.

“Not friendly, I’m thinkin’!” shouted back Dugan. “Shoot the bastards and ask questions later if we’re alive.”

They fired until they were surrounded and then they fought hand to hand until they were captured. Right before Bucky took a rifle butt to the head his last thought was ‘Guess I’ll never have to worry about what happened to Steve’.

The radio in the lab was playing some sort of classical music, soft and soothing, when they drug Bucky in, fighting the whole way. A little mousey man who looked like he was scared of his own shadow looked over as the five guards strapped Bucky onto the lab table.

The mouse spoke in German to the guards, who gave a salute, shouted ‘Hail Hydra!’ at him and marched away with crisp clicks of their shiny boots.

Mouse man walked over to Bucky and peered at him myopically through his spectacles. “Not the best specimen I’ve had recently but not the worst,” he remarked in accented but clearly understandable English. “What is your name, please?”
Bucky spit in his face, splattering the round spectacles with spittle.

With a disapproving moue of disgust, Mouse man fastidiously wiped off his classes and his face with a damp towel. “Very rude,” admonished Mouse. “I am Dr. Arnim Zola. Your name, please?”

Bucky frowned. All soldiers had been told that if they were captured the only information they were to volunteer was name, rank and serial number. It irritated him that it was just what the little shit wanted and he was loathe to oblige. He wasn’t an idiot. None of the other men taken from the round cells below ever came back and Bucky knew he wasn’t going to either. He was not, however, going to cooperate any more than he had too.

“Name, please?” Zola’s voice turned hard and when Bucky still refused to respond, the little doctor picked up a needle and held it up for Bucky to inspect. “This has a serum that will force you to answer my questions. Give me your name and I won’t use it.” When all he got was a mulish look and lips that were pressed tightly closed, Zola sighed unhappily and shoved the needle unceremoniously into Bucky’s arm, causing him to yelp.

The doctor turned away and fidgeted with various instruments as if killing time. Bucky didn’t feel anything at first but then a sensation like being drunk overcame him. He tried to blink and focus better but things were a little hazy, dreamlike.

Zola came back to his side. “Your name, please?” he repeated for the umpteenth time.

Bucky tried to fight replying but it came out anyway, garbled. “James Barnes, Sergeant 107th…“

The doctor beamed at him. “See how painless that could have been? And where are you from, Sergeant Barnes?”

Before Bucky could reply they were interrupted. “Why this curiosity, Dr. Zola?” The new voice reminded Bucky of a snake’s hiss. The English was as perfect as the doctor’s, with only a trace of a German accent to it. The consonants were crisp and precise.

“I like to know,” shrugged Zola.

“There is a reason you do not name farm animals,” the other voice stated and Bucky snarled, causing the voice to chuckle. “He does have spirit, however, I will give you that. Give him the injection at the low dosage, let’s see how he handles it.”

The damned radio continued playing some soft symphony in the background while Bucky screamed over it. Injection after injection was shoved into his veins and fire flooded through him instead of blood and poisonous gas seemed to replace the oxygen in his lungs. He howled, clawing to get loose from the bonds holding him to the lab table.

He dreaded hearing the two men’s voices discussing what they were doing him like he was a rat instead of a man but he dreaded hearing the radio even more. It was an unending cacophony of sound, assaulting his ears, filling his mind with screeching violins and bellowing trumpets. He was sure nothing changed except maybe the composer. Near as he can tell, no one moved toward the radio to adjust the dial or volume but it sounded like it was going to crack his head open from the sheer force of sound.

Deep down he knew whatever they did to him distorted the beauty of the music into some sort of nightmare. He wanted them to kill him. He wanted the pain to stop, the noise to please… just….stop.

The two men were satisfied, for now anyway, with whatever they were doing to him and his
responses and they left him alone.

With the radio.

He began babbling to block it out but all he could think of was his name and serial number so he just repeated it over and over and over and over and over and…

“Bucky?”

Whatever was in that last vial Mouse Doctor Zola pumped into veins was some good stuff because he could hear Steve’s voice clearly over the noise from that purgatorial radio.

“My God, what did they do to you?”

The voice he was hearing even sounded like he was concerned, almost frightened. Bucky continued mumbling but he let this Steve voice drown out the radio instead. He let his head loll to one side weakly and blinked. Damn, now he was hallucinating?

“Bucky!” The voice was more insistent and he felt the straps loosening around his body. “It’s me, it’s Steve!”

Bucky gave Steve a wobbly smile, managing not to giggle. Best hallucination ever. Not only was Steve here but he was gorgeous the way Bucky always saw him in his mind. Tall, strong, broad shouldered enough to hold the world on them, blue eyes piercing and strong jaw firm and those lips…He moaned. God, how he missed those lips!

“Steve?” he managed to get out. Hallucination Steve was pulling him into an upright position, hands running over his body for injuries. He would never hallucinate that. “It’s really you?” he said disbelievingly.

He staggered to his feet and looked…up. Bucky blinked a couple more times to make sure he wasn’t really dreaming.

“I thought you were dead,” Steve was saying, holding Bucky up like he was the weak one.

Bucky grabbed Steve’s biceps and squeezed to ascertain he wasn’t really a dream, still looking up into his friend’s familiar, if healthier features. “I thought you were taller,” he managed to get out in disbelief.

Steve was distracted, looking around, blue eyes detailing everything he was seeing, filing it away with that artist’s eye that Bucky so admired. At the moment though, Bucky was more concerned with Steve not disappearing.

“What happened to you?” he asked, dumbfounded, as Steve began hauling him away from the lab table and toward the door.

“I joined the Army,” Steve quipped. His tone was playful but Bucky knew Steve well enough to know there was a lot more beneath the tone.

The building rocked a little bit and Bucky finally heard explosions in the distance. At least he couldn’t hear the damned radio anymore. He was steadier on his feet and it went against the grain to lean on Steve. Steve couldn’t handle his weight, he couldn’t…oh yeah.

They staggered into the hall. “How’d it happen?” Bucky slurred.
Steve gave a noncommittal shrug, turning his head this way at that at every sound. “Oh, you know, needles, big huge lab, lots of lights and fireworks and government types watching.”

Bucky digested that for a moment. “Did it hurt?” he asked, staggering a bit into the wall before righting himself.

“A little,” Steve answered. He seemed to be looking for something but all Bucky could see was Steve.

“Is it permanent?” That was the big question and Bucky wasn’t really sure he wanted it to be yes or no. He liked his scrawny artist with fists of fury if not accuracy, but this Steve…he grinned goofily to himself…this Steve was nice.

“So far,” replied the taller, broader shouldered Steve, the chin strap to his helmet swinging by his square jaw and chin in what Bucky could only call a ‘heroic’ way as he continued to look right and left.

Bucky couldn’t help it. He whistled appreciatively and Steve, startled, looked behind him, blue eyes wide. “Can’t say I disapprove,” Bucky told him and there was Steve’s smile, flashing briefly at him, heartbreakingly familiar. There was relief in his eyes too, as if he’d feared Bucky wouldn’t like him anymore.

The thought that Steve could ever doubt him made a surge of adrenaline pump through his body and Bucky managed to pull himself upright, keeping up with Steve as the taller man moved eventually into a giant hangar bay as big as Dodgers stadium.

The two of them walked along the balcony area, for lack of better term, staring wide-eyed at the array of planes, tanks and other military vehicles. A familiar voice that made Bucky involuntarily twitch sang out almost ecstatically, “Captain America! I’m so pleased you have come! I am big fan of your films.”

“He runs the place,” Bucky said in a low tone to Steve. “I think. The other guy’s a doctor, real fond of poking you with needles with liquid fire in them.”

He saw Steve slide a concerned look at him briefly before returning his gaze to the two men on the other side of the bay. Bucky hoped Steve wasn’t going to do anything stupid because he wasn’t sure he had the energy to back his play.

The explosions began to get a little closer and bigger, causing Bucky to grab onto a rail for balance, something he had a low commodity of anyway.

Steve stepped forward onto a catwalk, bantering with the uniformed nut and Bucky suppressed a groan. His eyes caught those of Zola the mouse doctor, who peered curiously at him as if still evaluating his physical condition and Bucky couldn’t even suppress the shudder he felt.

The two men on the catwalk exchanged punches and Bucky grinned when Steve actually shoved the other guy with a powerful thrust of his legs to the other side. Zola the mouse hit a lever, causing the catwalk to part in the middle and retract to each side.

More bantering was exchanged that Bucky was too fuzzy to follow in detail but he got the gist that the lunatic in the black uniform and Steve had the same…whatever made them broad shouldered, tall and powerfully built. However when the lunatic pulled his flesh mask off to reveal a red skull face, Bucky recoiled and managed to ask in horror, “You don’t have one of those, do you?”

God, he hoped not. Kissing Steve looking like that was going to put a damper on their relationship.
The horrified look on Steve’s face told Bucky the answer was no. Bucky was tempted to feel around Steve’s face, just in case. Maybe he didn’t know?

More words were exchanged and Steve was tugging on his arm as explosions erupted beneath them. Obviously the lunatic and the mouse doctor rigged the place to explode.

Steve motioned up some metal stairs. “Let’s go up!” he shouted over the explosions and Bucky nodded. Steve went first and Bucky gamely followed. He might be useless at the moment but if someone was going to shoot his friend in the back they were doing it through Bucky Barnes first.

They reached the very top and Bucky panted, “Now what, genius?”

Steve heaved a sigh of frustration and motioned to a metal support beam that went from one side to the other. It didn’t look safe but even Bucky could tell it was probably their only way across now. “You first,” Steve ordered and Bucky didn’t have the strength to argue.

He clambered over the railing and onto the beam, inching along, praying to God the spinning world of fire, explosions and whatever shit Zola mouse doctor poured into his body wouldn’t make him fall because it was a long… way… down.

The beam jerked and he glanced at the end he was working toward. The bolts were pulling loose. Determinedly Bucky quickly made his way as close as he could and launched himself like Superman to the side rails, grabbing them with both arms as the beam fell away. Explosions rocked the building and Bucky, halfway over the rail, was knocked the rest of the way over with the earthquake like motion of the explosions.

He quickly assessed the situation and thought ‘Fuck this shit’. “There’s got to be a rope or something,” he shouted across to Steve who was looking like a cornered cat in a roomful of dogs.

Something went across Steve’s face that Bucky had seen a hundred times before but wished he wasn’t seeing now. It was his “I’m going down with the ship” look, usually reserved for when he was getting ready to start a fight that he knew he hadn’t a prayer in hell of finishing.

“Oh no you don’t,” Bucky said to himself even as Steve shouted back, “Go! I’ll catch up!”

Bucky gripped the railing and all but snarled back, “No! Not without you!” Had Steve learned nothing after all their years of friendship?

However, Bucky’s rage at Steve’s martyrdom complex quickly gave way to awe when he watched Steve push aside a heavy steel bar like a stubborn tree branch, take a few steps back and ran to the edge before vaulting himself into the air.

“Holy shit,” breathed Bucky and then screamed “No!” in agony when Steve was engulfed in a flame spurt halfway across. He managed to dart out of the way in time for Steve to land with a thud and a roll, patting out a few flames on his pants once he was upright again.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, Jesus and Joseph of Nazarus,” blasphemed Bucky in a way that would have earned him all the penances he’d ever earned in his entire life in one fell swoop.

Steve gave him a cocky, if self-conscious, grin. “Nice, huh?” he asked sheepishly. All Bucky could do was nod a little; he was still too stunned to do much else. “Come on, Buck, let’s get out of this furnace, find the rest of the men and get the hell out of here.”

“They are in a prison cells down-“ Bucky began but Steve cut him off with a wave a long-fingered hand.
“I already got them out. They are the ones that started raising hell earlier.”

Bucky blinked and said, “Oh.” He nodded after he thought a moment. “That’s good. You see a big tall guy with a bushy mustache and a bowler hat?”

Steve was ushering them along and they found stairs at the end of the building so they started downward, clutching the hand rail with each explosion. “Yeah.”

“That’s Dugan, ‘member I told you ‘bout him?”

“The circus guy?” Steve asked, catching Bucky when he tripped.

Bucky looked down into Steve’s face and pressed his lips to the other man’s, savoring the feel, knowing that it was real, Steve was real. “Yeah, that’s him,” Bucky murmured, licking his lips to savor the taste of Steve. He felt like he was staring at Steve like some lovestruck schmuck but he couldn’t help it.

“I guess I was wrong then,” Steve remarked with a grin that Bucky recognized and adored. It was the grin that said ‘you’re gonna love the punchline, pal’.

“’Bout what?” Bucky asked as they started their descent once more.

“He won’t break me in half if he sneezes,” Steve called over his shoulder.

Bucky couldn’t help it. He laughed.

Chapter End Notes

All of my lovely readers, commenters and kudo makers are given showers of fireworks, chocolate and thanks. :)
“You’re a liar, Barnes, and I’m gonna pummel you within an inch of your life once the medics clear you for duty.”

Bucky stiffened as Dugan’s words sunk in. He turned around from where he’d stopped to rest his confiscated (it’s not stealing if it’s the enemy’s and he’s dead) rifle on the ground to watch some guys in worse shape than him go to the rest spot.

“What’d I do?” he asked in surprise.

Dugan nodded over in Steve’s direction. He was talking with some of the men, laughing with them and inspiring morale in a way that Steve never seemed able to do before. The men were staring at him in awe, as if he were too good to be true. Bucky could understand it; he was in the same damned boat.

They’d been marching most of the night to get as far from the Hydra base as possible before stopping to rest. The sun was peeking up over the tree tops, its fingers of light ghosting over everyone’s exhausted faces. Steve looked fresh as a daisy barring the soot on his face and his torn clothes, putting hither and yon to deliver water, bandage a wound, or pass out rations they looted before they left.

“You told me he was a skinny, 100 pound asthmatic artist,” Dugan accused. “He don’t look a thing like that.”

Bucky nodded wearily. “I know. Thought I was hallucinating when he found me in that lab.”

Dugan scowl converted swiftly to concern. “Hey, you okay? What’d they do to you? Should I have blown up more shit in revenge?”

Bucky gave his friend a wan smile. “Nah, I’m good, I think. I’m sure the medics and scientists will want to take more blood than a swamp full of leeches when we get to safety. Just a little tired is all.”

Dugan looked like he wanted to protest but didn’t. He sat down on the ground next to Bucky instead and dug into his pocket. He pulled out a ration packet labeled “Stange-Frucht”.

“Let’s see what it is,” the big man said and tore open the packet.

It was a brick, kind of orangey and smelled … well, Bucky couldn’t determine. He tore a chunk off and bit into it. “At this point, I’d eat a New York pigeon,” he said and Dugan grinned.

“I think it’s supposed to be orange flavored,” the mustached man said after a few minutes of thoughtful chewing.

“Hit it on the mark about as well as ours do,” Bucky noted. Dugan grunted.

“Good to know no matter what side a war you’re on, the food’s still shit.”

Gabe came over and collapsed on Bucky’s other side, leaned over and grabbed what was left out of
Dugan’s hand. “Thank God, I’m starving. I’m willing to eat my sister’s cooking about now.” He took a bite and almost choked.

“He’s still spoiled on his mama’s cookin’,” lamented Dum Dum with a shit-eating grin. “What? You don’t appreciate Kraut food, Jones?”

Jones didn’t even look up from the bit of fruit bar he was peering at as if trying to find actual fruit. “Only sauerkraut and it better be fresh. There’s a special place in Hell for assholes like you, Dum Dum, bashing on my mama’s cooking,” he replied and Dugan chuckled.

Bucky grinned but his grin slid away when Steve walked up a bit hesitantly.

“Hi,” Steve said a bit awkwardly.

“So, you’ve punched Hitler over 200 times?” Dugan asked casually and Bucky gave a startled laugh.


“I’m part of the USO,” Steve confessed. “It’s part of the act.”

The three men just stared at him, dumbfounded. Jones found his voice first. “We got saved by a chorus girl? I am never living that down.” He shook his head in disbelief.

Dugan let roll a belly laugh that caused others around him to laugh and smile too. “Well, hell, sign me up for the USO, then! If kickin’ ass like he does is what they’re teaching them to do on stage? Shit,” he blasphemed in general.

Bucky stared at Steve. “They pumped you full of some crap to make you into this…” he fumbled for words.

“Super soldier,” Steve supplied helpfully.

Bucky felt himself getting a bit angry. “And then, after all that, you let them put you on a goddamned stage like some…some…”

“Dancing monkey,” Steve again supplied, his blue eyes wide at Bucky’s anger.

“Well, Jones, this is where we start rounding up the troops for more marching.” Dum Dum stood up, grabbed Jones by the collar and hauled him to his feet. They shambled off, shooing nearby men as they went to give Steve and Bucky some privacy for the tongue-lashing Bucky was about to deliver.

Bucky stood up. “You,” he hissed, giving Steve a shove, “are a fucking idiot.”

“No, I was too out of it to really do anything but marvel that you were there, in the flesh, saving me. I was ready to die, Steve,” he shouted, “and you come in neat as you please, acting the hero and all I could think was how good you looked, how nice and alive. We’ve been marching all damned night and I’ve had time for my head to clear.”

Steve looked around nervously and pushed Bucky to the side a bit more. “Do we have to have this conversation now?” he asked.

Bucky nodded. Shit, he was just warming up! “Yeah, I think we do!” he snapped. “It’s either that or
I punch your fucking lights out, you asshole!"

Steve blinked. “Why are you so mad? I’m not sick anymore, Bucky. My lungs are perfect, my heart is fine. I’m stronger, healthier and-“

“And not my Steve!” Bucky screamed. Was the moron not getting it?

The entire area went silent, faces turning to them in shock at the outburst, and Steve’s face darkened to a dull, mottled shade.

“So you liked the skinny, coughing, wheezing scarecrow who might not have lived out the next winter? Is that what you wanted? To come back to my tombstone?” He shoved Bucky back, a goodly push that sent the now smaller man a good many paces backward.

“Better than our apartment rented to someone else, my ma having no idea where you went and the landlord telling me all apologetic that you told him you got a job in the city,” Bucky snarled.

Steve’s face went from angry to confused. “You went home? When? Didn’t you get my letters?”

“Yes, I went home, right before they sent us to France. And no, I haven’t gotten a letter since you sent one that was 3 weeks old and saying you would do drawings for everyone. That was in Italy. We ain’t in Italy anymore, Steve, in case you hadn’t noticed.” Bucky leaned against the tree, emotionally spent now.

Steve made a motion to go to him but Bucky held up a warning hand to fend him off. “Bucky, I-“

Bucky looked up, feeling defeated, and whatever Steve saw in his face must have been awful because Steve actually flinched.

“I didn’t realize you might not get my letters. And I didn’t tell your ma what I did because I knew she’d talk me out of it. I took the rest of your things over, telling her I was going to get a smaller place is all. After that I-“

“Up and fucking disappeared on me,” Bucky sneered. He straightened and stalked over to Steve, who drew back a pace at Bucky’s approach. Bucky pulled the jacket aside a bit to see the ‘uniform’ Steve was wearing. “What the hell is that?”

Steve flushed. “My stage costume,” he mumbled, looking aside in a way that was very reminiscent of the old Steve.

“What? You’re a superhero or something?” Bucky mocked.


“I thought you didn’t want to collect scraps for the war effort,” Bucky sneered, hating himself for his tone but he was just so hurt. Steve flinched again at having his own words thrown back in his face. “How is this different?”

Steve gave some thought to his reply, which mollified Bucky as much as the response. “Not much,” Steve admitted and then his tone hardened as did his features, “but that’s about to change, assuming they don’t throw me in the brig or something for going off alone to rescue everyone.”

Bucky sighed, slapped his friend in the chest. “They can’t court martial you, idiot. Your goddamned Captain America, remember? Come on, let’s get marching.”
Steve took a bit to catch up, slinging a pack and a couple rifles easily over his shoulder. “So we’re good then?”

“Not until you help me crawl into a large bottle of bourbon first chance we get and drag my ass back to my bunk afterward,” Bucky told him seriously and Steve nodded.

“Deal,” the blonde said.

“You’re still a fucking idiot but I love you anyway,” Bucky groused and then gave Steve a grin, which was returned with much relief.

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The cheers he’d begun for ‘Captain America’ still rang in his ears. It hurt like hell to say it but Bucky had to admit, Steve earned them. He’d looked totally overwhelmed by the attention. It was easily the most attention he’d ever received his whole life, Bucky reflected a bit resentfully.

He was in the mess hall, pretending to eat. Colonel Phillips generously let the hall continue serving food for any stragglers coming in. Some of the men went to get medical attention first, then food so he wasn’t completely alone. A lone radio was sitting on one of the tables and a couple guys were trying to find something that resembled English and only finding French programming. Every once in awhile they’d stumble across something German and the men would heckle.

“Sergeant Barnes!” The tone was authoritative and he stood up and saluted with the other men as Colonel Chester Phillips came stalking in, hands behind his back, file folder in one hand, squinting at the world with what seemed his perpetual look of “why the hell am I doing this” pique.

“Yes, sir!” Bucky barked. He’d seen the colonel a few times when the SSR came around and kind of like the gruff older man. He didn’t take shit and was willing to throw a punch if needed to make a point. A boy from Brooklyn could respect that.

“Your friend,” the colonel spat, but there was a tell-tale twinkle of approval in his eyes that belied his tone, “is a monumental pain in my ass.”

“Yes, sir,” Bucky could honestly agree, still ramrod straight at attention. “He’s a pain in everyone’s ass on occasion, sir.”

“Sit your insubordinate ass down, Sergeant,” Phillips ordered. “You look half-dead. I’ve seen corpses that look better than you.”

Bucky sat and took a generous sip of what passed as coffee. The colonel got his own cup of coffee (there was always coffee) and sat across from Bucky. He scowled at the radio when Hitler’s voice came on and the men continued to mock, assured that the colonel wasn’t there for their hides.

“Hate to say it, boy, but you’re off duty for awhile.”

Bucky shrugged. He’d figured that out.

“You get to play human guinea pig like your friend, only we aren’t pumping stuff in you but taking it out. You and all the released prisoners are getting a nice few weeks R & R in London.” Phillips slapped the folder he was carrying on the table. “Full debriefing and physical for all of you but you are special, so you get the full star treatment.”

“Yay,” Bucky replied glumly.
“Them’s the breaks,” the colonel said in a somewhat sympathetic tone. “I just want to know what the hell is in the water in Brooklyn to make you kids tougher than you look.”

“Stupidity mostly, sir,” Bucky answered honestly, a wry grin on his face. “We’re just stupid. Water’s not any different in Bronx or Queens. We’re just plain too dumb.”

The colonel nodded wisely. “Fine line between it and bravery, just don’t cross into stupid too often and we’ll get along fine.”

Bucky gave another small smile. “Yes, sir.”

“We fly out first light.” Phillips slapped the scratched table with the flat of his palms as he stood up. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go chew out your friend for being an idiot and lecture him on taking risks.”

“If it makes you feel any better, sir,” Bucky told the colonel as he rose to salute the officer goodbye, “I gave him an earful already, but it was mostly about volunteering to get turned into a dancing monkey.”

Phillips gave a snort. “I wanted him sent to Alamogordo. He went with Senator Brandt. He looks good in tights but I think that’s over.”

“I’ll make sure of it, sir.”

Phillips eyed him speculatively and respect that Bucky hadn’t seen before entered the colonel’s sharp eyes. “You do that, soldier, you do that.” He saluted back and left the mess, leaving Bucky with the morons still heckling the radio.

Bucky opened the file and found it nothing but information on Hydra. After flipping through a couple of pages, he glanced up and saw the colonel talking to an knock-out brunette with red lips and a body that made the drab brown uniform she was wearing look sexy. He vaguely remembered Steve talking to her when they had arrived at camp.

Phillips looked in Bucky’s direction and he swore the man just turned fox, his look was so cagey. He felt a maniac’s grin spread across his face in acknowledgment of that look and Phillips gave him one approving nod before turning away.

Bucky looked back down at the file and felt like laughing. They were going to go hunting Hydra. He closed the file with a snap, picked it up with his half-eaten tray of food. He dumped the tray and put everything else where it belonged for cleanup. He stopped at the boys over the radio, who looked up at him a bit awed.

“Fuck Hitler and Hydra,” he spat at the radio and the two men gave nervous chuckles.

Bucky headed for his bunk and a little bit of rest, mind whirring at what he thought…no, knew he knew.

The colonel was going to ask Steve and Bucky to cross the line between stupid and brave. This war just got fun.

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“I like being flat on my back as much as the next man,” Bucky said conversationally, woozy from the lack of blood and therefore not guarding his mouth as well as he should, “but normally I get a kiss first.”
Two of the lab coated scientists froze but the other one, the rich boy Bucky remembered seeing introducing the flying car what seemed a lifetime ago, gave a long loud laugh. “I like you, Barnes,” Howard Stark said, before he pulled the needle the rest of the way out, filled with blood.

“I’d like you better if you’d stop that,” Bucky told him.

“Last one,” Stark assured him. How the hell did the man look so fucking debonair in a basement that had occasional showers of concrete and dirt when a bomb went off during a blitz strike? “Okay, you’re good to go.”

“Go? You took half my blood and you just want me to-“ Bucky stopped talking when Stark jerked him upright and the spinning sensation stopped. “Whoa.”

Stark nodded sagely. “Yeah. You’ve got some modified version of the serum Dr. Erskine used on your friend Rogers. Not exactly the same, because this is off the one Erskine originally came up with while being bullied by the Nazis sometime ago, but it’s close.”

“What’s it doing to me?” Bucky asked. “I played lab rat because I got sick. They always took the sick ones away since they couldn’t do anymore work,” he added when Stark looked confused. “I don’t feel sick anymore.”

Stark’s eyes turned speculative and then he shrugged. “Won’t know til I play with the samples, plus your buddy brought me the power source of those fancy Hydra guns too so I got my plate full.”

“Am I just done for the day or done period?” Bucky asked, pulling his shirt back on. He did not miss the appreciation of a couple of secretaries hovering in the doorway but wasn’t up to flirting at the moment. Probably a sure sign something was wrong with him. He always flirted.

“Done period, but don’t disappear just in case.” One of the other scientist’s spoke up.

“But I can go get drunk off my ass?” That was the pressing question of the moment.

All three scientists, Stark included, which was funny considering Stark’s reputation, hesitated. Finally Stark gave in. “There’s this pub about two blocks away, The Singing Vagabond.” Stark added with a grin, “Britain has the best names for their bars.”

Bucky returned the grin. “Noted. Steve owes me an entire bottle of bourbon and I’m making sure he’s going to be good for it.”

Stark waved him away, mind already returning to his experiments and Bucky made good his escape.

Steve was as good as his word. As soon as enough soldiers were ensconced within, the bartender turned on the radio but turned it off as soon as someone started tinkling on the out of tune piano. Bucky couldn’t tell what was being played and frankly didn’t care. As soon as the two of them sat down, Bucky started in, one tumbler at a time.

“So the colonel talked to you?” Bucky asked. “What about?”

“Starting a special unit to go hunting Hydra bases,” Steve replied, tugging nervously on his uniform.

Bucky felt very underdressed. Apparently the ‘Captain’ in Captain America had been honorary but wasn’t anymore if the dress uniform Steve was smartly dressed in was any indication. Bucky tried
to be resentful about that but decided he sure as hell did not want to be a captain himself. If Steve wanted it, he could have it.

“Nice uniform,” he said when Steve slanted him a questioning look when he caught Bucky checking him out.

Steve grinned self-consciously. “Yeah, it’s officially Captain Steve Rogers, I guess. Oh, and the Colonel said you were ‘officially’ a sergeant, whatever that means.” He held out the bar and rocker patch and pins to Bucky, who took them reluctantly.

“Shit, means I’m not a non-com anymore. Made me a damned Master Sergeant,” groused Bucky in disbelief. “How’d he pull that off? I ain’t old enough!”

Steve shrugged unconcernedly. “Same way he made me a captain, I guess. Told them he was doing it and to shut up about it, I’m sure. Would you argue with him?”

“Ah, damn it.”

“Hey, at least it’s a higher pay grade,” reasoned Steve, sipping from his own tumbler of bourbon.

Bucky tossed his drink back, coughed once and eyed his friend mutinously before filling his glass back up again. “And?”

“More money to send to your ma.”

Bucky grunted. That was a good point.

“So who do you recommend from your squad for—‘ Steve started but Bucky talked over him.

“Jones, Dugan, that Jap guy, Morita? He stood up for some of the sick ones before they got hauled away. That Englishman, Falsworth, looks insane enough to go for it. So does the Frenchie, for that matter. They’re good.”

Steve eyed Bucky warily and Bucky burped in his face accidentally, then shrugged noncommittally at Steve’s unasked but obvious question. “I’ve been thinkin’ about it, okay?”

“That’s it? Just them?”

Bucky gave him a smile normally reserved for sharks. “Well, you and me. Ain’t that enough?”

Steve smiled, a slow smile that would have given Hydra the willies if they’d seen it. “I’ll see if they are agreeable.”

He snorted into his glass. “They will be. They’re idiots like us.”

As Steve walked over to the table where all of the men in question were sitting and drinking, Bucky admired Steve’s new and improved butt in the uniform. Sure the jacket covered some of it, but…Bucky refrained from a wolf whistle out loud, doing it in his head instead. He really hoped Steve took him to a bunk that had four solid, thick walls tonight.

Sure enough Steve was back, after opening a tab for them (Dum Dum was going to make him regret that, but Bucky wasn’t feeling forgiving enough to warn Steve about that), and getting their agreement that they were in.

“See?” Bucky chortled around his fifth (or was it sixth?) glass of bourbon. “They’re all idiots.”
Steve poured another splash in his own glass. “Yeah, but they’re what we need,” he said. “Plus you vouched for them. That’s good enough for me.” He sipped his drink and asked, "How about you, ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?"

Bucky snorted. "Hell no, that little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb to run away from a fight. I'm following him." He took another swallow of bourbon.

Bucky looked over his shoulder at the poster of ‘Captain America’ cheerfully saluting on the wall behind them with a white sticker over it that said ‘Cancelled until further notice’. “But you’re keeping the outfit, right?” he teased.

Steve looked too and grinned sheepishly. “You know what?” he said with a nod. “It’s kind of growing on me.”

Bucky eyed him a moment, taken aback, and then downed his tumbler of liquor. “I am not drunk enough for this shit,” he informed Steve woozily.

Steve eyed him in askance but was distracted when the furor that passed for singing died away. Both men leaned back and looked to the front to find out what distracted the men from wine and song and found a woman. Bucky’s eyes just about bugged out his head. The hot brunette, Agent Carter, if he recalled, was in red.

And not just red, baby. Fuck me red, right down to the shoes and nail polish.

Bucky’s face cracked into an automatic smile and he nodded perfunctorily to her. He wasn’t sure what her rank was, if any, but if she had Colonel Phillips’ respect it was probably safe to assume she could hand a drunk Brooklyn boy his ass.

"Captain," she greeted Steve, looking a little self-conscious.

“Ma’am,” he said as Steve said, “Agent Carter.”

She gave Bucky a quick glance in acknowledgment and Bucky suddenly felt cold. Those gorgeous brown eyes were glued to Steve and not moving from him at all. He felt like laughing at the irony of it but kept his trap shut…mostly.

“Howard has a few things for you to try,” she said, looking Steve up and down in a very interested way.

Bucky let his gaze run down her length while she was distracted by Steve. Wowza. He looked at Steve, catching the man doing the same thing and smirked. Had Steve found himself a date?

He froze inside, horror suffusing his body. *Shit. Had Steve found himself a date?*

While Steve and Agent Carter continued to visually flirt, Bucky allowed his mouth to run on autopilot, inviting her to dance but she’d have none of him, which was really fine with Bucky because all he wanted was Steve too.

When she sauntered away in that fuck me red dress with a swish to her walk that had half the men wanting to crawl after her on their knees begging for scraps, Bucky managed to cover the awkwardness of his jealousy with a lousy joke about being invisible.

Steve amiably patted his back. “Don’t feel bad, maybe she’s got a friend.”

Bucky flinched. He knew what Steve meant, joking payback for all those horrible double dates
he’d forced Steve on that was cover for what they were really doing behind their own closed door but still…

It hurt.

He sidled a glance at Steve who was staring pensively at the scarred wooden bar probably older than Brooklyn. “You like her?” Bucky managed to strangle out.

He poured the rest of the bottle in his glass and tossed a mouthful back. He wasn’t drunk enough for this conversation but apparently his dumbass self couldn’t keep his trap shut.

Steve gave a tentative nod.

“Go after her then, moron,” Bucky told him, trying not to let his hurt bleed into his words. He must have failed because Steve turned to him with an earnest face.

“Maybe one day,” Steve said, “but not tonight. I’ve got to take care of my best guy.” He gave Bucky a heart stopping smile, one Bucky remembered all too clearly seeing after he’d pulled a double shift at the warehouse before he shipped out.

It was the smile that said ‘I’m going to fuck your brains out as a reward’.

Bucky felt his heart hammer in his chest. He was fairly certain if something didn’t happen soon, he was going to embarrass the crap out of both of them and maybe get them court-martialed and humiliated all over America and Europe.

Steve leaned over a bit, making it look like they were being chummy. “I’ve been doing some reconnoitering, you know?”

“Yeah?” Bucky managed to say with what he hoped was the right level of interest and not enough to give anything away to by standers, innocent or otherwise.

Steve stared at him, those clear blue eyes mischievous as hell. “Found a nice, out of the way spot where we can discuss our plans further, if you don’t mind shop talk on furlough.”

Bucky tossed the rest of the bourbon into his mouth and swallowed, nearly choking. “Work, work, work,” he complained on a gasp, slamming the glass down hard enough he was surprised it didn’t shatter. “Damned slave driver,” he added.

He stood up a bit too fast and it was good thing Steve now had super soldier reflexes, otherwise Bucky likely would have spent the night unconscious after slamming his head on the floor. That got a laugh out of a few people and Steve made jokes about taking the drunk home.

Bucky gave a lopsided, drunken grin to Dugan, who gave him the thumbs-up as Steve hauled his drunken self past their table. If he was lucky, he wouldn’t pass out before he and Steve got to the long-awaited grand finale of this farce.

They stumbled out of the pub and Bucky slung two arms around Steve’s shoulders in a desperate bid to stay on his own two feet. Steve’s brow creased. “Are you okay?” he asked. “Bucky, if-“

“If you renege I will hang you by your balls until you bleed out your ears.” It sounded stupid and a bit desperate but his point was made. Steve gave him another goofy grin and continued to lead Bucky to…wherever he reconnoitered a place to play.

It was a few blocks away, a row of abandoned and shell-battered buildings. Their residents were
either scattered to the winds or in the countryside waiting on the bombings to stop.

Steve led him to shell of a house with not too many lights nearby. “This guy owns the lot and gave me a key to an empty apartment for the night. Said one night wouldn’t hurt.” Steve looked a bit shame-faced. “Told him I wanted to bring my girl someplace private since he recognized me from the posters and stuff. He was agreeable, just told me to leave the key under the mat in the morning.”

“So now I’m your girl?” Bucky teased.

Steve chuffed. “Well, I couldn’t say I was bringing my boy here.”

“So now I’m your boy?”

“Shut up, jerk.”

“Make me, punk,” Bucky replied, following their standard banter.

Steve unlocked the door. It was sparsely furnished and dusty but not bad for a night. Bucky’d been in worse.

“I know we came here to do,” Steve gestured awkwardly between them, “other stuff but I’ve never really gotten to ask...

Bucky looked at him, confused. “What?”

“How are you, Buck?”

Bucky jumped him, slamming the now taller man against the wall roughly. “All this time and that’s all you gotta say? Kiss me, you fucking idiot, before I explode!”

Steve shoved him away. “No!” he ground out. “This is not what I want.”

Bucky huffed, feeling rebuffed. “What do you want then?”

Steve seemed to hesitate then walked over to Bucky, placing his hands on either side of Bucky’s face. “You were my friend first, James Buchanan Barnes, before you were ever my lover. We’ve been separated for the first time in over a decade and for almost two years. I missed you. I just rescued you from some god awful torture chamber where you were half out of your mind. I want to make sure that my friend and my lover is okay.”

Bucky stood there slack-jawed, sobering up at an unfortunate pace. “I feel okay,” he finally said and then crushed Steve to him in a hug. “I missed you too, Steve Rogers, I missed you so much.”

Steve gave a relieved laugh. “Thank God, I thought we were gonna have to throw punches before we had a proper reunion.”

“You’re ruining it, Rogers,” Bucky said, his voice muffled by Steve’s uniformed broad chest.

Steve continued to laugh. “Sorry,” he managed to snort, which caused Bucky to laugh.

Once they managed to subside into the occasional giggle or chuckle, Steve crawled from where they wound up sitting on the floor and put his head in Bucky’s lap, toying with the fabric of his pant leg.

“I kissed a girl,” he confessed.
“What?” Bucky yelped. All he could think was ‘go Steve’ even as jealousy reared its ugly head.

“A couple actually, in the show. It was nice but it wasn’t you.”

Bucky’s mind worked furiously. “Did you-“ He lost his voice, images of Steve entangled in the arms of some unknown blonde or red head woman filling his mind. “Did you sleep with them, Stevie?”

“Stevie,” Steve breathed. “It’s been so long since I heard you call me that. And no, I didn’t. They wanted to, I wanted to but I’m yours, Bucky. It felt like it would be wrong, until you tell me I’m not yours anymore.”

Bucky choked out a sobbing laugh. “That ain’t never gonna happen, pal. I thought you were beautiful before. Now you are gorgeous.”

He leaned down and kissed Steve’s blonde hair gently. Steve rolled over, sat up and they leaned to each other, kissing as tentatively as new lovers. Once they broke apart, Bucky waggled his eyebrows. “One question, well, two actually.”

Steve looked apprehensive. “Yeah?”

“Am I still on top?” Steve laughed and nodded. “And are you as,” Bucky coughed suggestively as his fingers deftly started working on Steve’s coat, “healthy as you look because I am so gonna wear your ass out.”

Steve’s breath hitched and he nodded.

“Tell me,” growled Bucky, popping buttons out of their holes and shoving the coat back, spreading his hands over Steve’s broad chest. “Tell me what you want, Stevie.”

“You, Bucky,” Steve breathed, twitching as Bucky’s thumbs brushed his nipples through the shirt. “You.”

“You got me, pal.”

Bucky knew their first time in so long was going to be rough, that it was gonna hurt Steve but he found out that Steve came prepared with a little tub of Vaseline. When Bucky raised an inquiring eyebrow, Steve gave a helpless shrug that finished removing his still starch-crisp army drab shirt.

“A couple of the guys backstage in the show were, well, together and when they found out I was curious they’d flirt and tease and drop hints on how they did it.”

Bucky filed that information away.

“I want our first time together in so long to be as perfect as we can make it,” Steve was saying.

“Then shut up and kiss me,” Bucky told him. Steve obliged and Bucky felt his insides heat, felt his balls grow heavy with desire and felt passion cloud what little judgment the bourbon left.

He pushed Steve to the floor and began to memorize this new body, every muscle, every nerve ending that twitched at the touch of his hands or mouth, and he marveled at the chiseled demi-god Steve had become.

“It’s like your Hercules or something,” Bucky said in wonder and Steve gave a groan as Bucky palmed his balls through his underwear. “I have my own Greek hero laid out like a banquet.”
“Hardly,” Steve tried to scoff but wound up gasping it instead.

“Less arguing, more moaning,” Bucky ordered.

“Yes, sir,” moaned Steve and then sighed when Bucky did what he’d been dreaming of in every bomb shelter, fox hole and shit pile from Italy to France: he took Steve in his mouth and hummed his contentment.

Soon he had Steve thrashing, begging and gasping for release but Bucky was having none of it. He wanted them to come as close together as they could. “Don’t touch!” he slapped Steve’s blindly grasping hand away when Bucky propped his legs over his shoulders in his favorite position to have Steve.

With Steve’s long muscular legs draped over his shoulders, Bucky made sure he was slick enough with the Vaseline and slid gently into Steve, relishing the tightness, the warmth and the pleasure that came with it.

It was a lot easier with the Vaseline, he had to say.

He began to move, losing himself in the movement of sliding in and out, watching Steve’s eyes open and close involuntarily with each movement as they had done before. When he felt the tension building, he grabbed Steve’s dick, milking it softly, the hard length like silken steel in his hand. Steve moaned his name, stuttering over the ‘b’ and his muscles clenched around Bucky.

He was lost.

He was home.

He pounded into Steve, letting instinct take over, pulling on Steve at the same time. He came with a warbling cry and Steve was half a heart beat behind him, which was good because Bucky wasn’t sure he could keep his hand moving much longer after that.

He slid out of Steve and just collapsed where he was. They lay there in a stupor for a few minutes before shifting into a more comfortable position.

“That was..” Steve murmured drowsily.

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed lazily.

“Can we do it again later but this time with me on my knees and you behind me?”

Bucky’s dick twitched and his mind filled with visions of Steve’s glorious ass spread before him.

“I am so going to Hell,” he lamented, hugging Steve close, “and I really don’t give a shit.”

They breathed and touched occasionally in the dark before Steve finally said, “Is this okay now?”

“Mmm?” Bucky couldn’t think too coherently beyond new positions that they could do.

“Me, like this?”

Bucky’s brain skittered to a grinding halt and images of his frail Stevie, so shy and delicate came to mind. “I miss that Steve, sure, but I think I could love this Steve just as much, maybe more.”

He felt Steve’s smile against his neck. “Good.”
Bucky frowned as a thought occurred to him. “Are you sure you don’t have one of those red skull faces under that mug?”

“Jerk,” Steve mumbled. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“I mean, I’d still kiss you and all but it’d be hard going.”

“Asshole.”

“That’s better.” Bucky held Steve tight and felt like everything was going to go his way in this fucked up war now. He had Steve, nothing else mattered.

Chapter End Notes

Not sure if I'll get to post anything tomorrow before I leave for the holiday to a place with no internet. So this might be last post until Monday.

Happy Fourth of July to my America readers!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Last one from Bucky’s POV for awhile.

It was hard to stay apart and even harder to be together. The Howling Commandos, as they were
dubbed (Falsworth thought it sounded dashing and dangerous) were constantly on the move in their
hunt for Hydra. Bucky’s days were filled with planning and then creating Hell on earth for Hydra
and his nights were either spent on the cold hard ground with more rocks and sticks than any
modern man had a right to sleep on or tucked away in a basement flat Steve rented in various
places that the Strategic Scientific Reserve unit (or SSR) setup base.

The Allies were moving through Europe at a good clip. Reports were being confirmed of atrocities
to Europe’s Jewish and Gypsy population, as well as the prisoners the Nazis took from Allied and
Soviet forces. Both Bucky and Steve wrecked a dingy flat in their rage at the news footage they
saw. Dum Dum, apparently having some Irish-Gypsy background, disappeared for two days and
came back looking like he’d fought an entire brigade of Nazi troops single-handedly. No one said a
word, not even Col. Phillips, who looked grim but unsurprised at the news.

There was an early cold front crisping the air as they marched through the woods looking for an
underground Hydra bunker in Hungary. Snow dusted everything and it was only late September.
Everything looked neat and tidy even if it was a tall forest they were marching through.

All of them were spread out, Steve in the front, as usual. They’d been on edge for about half an
hour now, sensing something just beyond but not quite sure what. Steve held up a fist and they
scattered like cockroaches. Bucky ducked behind a tree, slamming his back against the bark.
Thankfully his coat was quilted and warm, otherwise he might have scuffed his back up on the
rough bark.

Steve was frowning, Bucky could see his lowered brows beneath his stylized helmet. ‘Supersoldier
sense tingling,’ he thought humorously and then froze when he heard a very soft ‘crunch’ about
five feet to his left. Another crunch, equally soft against the light snow, drifted to him from his
right.

Shit. He was surrounded.

Steve was looking in the opposite direction when Bucky saw a rifle barrel on his right rise between
some scraggly shrubs. A fucking ambush, is what it was. Enraged, Bucky looked left and saw the
same tableau, pointing at Morita.

Damn it.

He thought quickly, heart pounding in his ears and adrenaline making him want to hyperventilate.
He silently drew his knife from its sheath on his belt. He’d taken to wearing one every once in
awhile and had been practicing throws to get some decent accuracy. The guy on the left was closer
so the asshole on the right was getting the knife. Besides, Steve’s reflexes were a hell of a lot better
than Morita’s. If Bucky could throw Steve’s attacker off even a hair, Steve’s chances were much
better at dodging or deflecting with that shield of his.
With the release of his breath, Bucky threw the knife at the bush hiding Steve’s sniper followed by a leap that landed him smack on top of the one getting ready to shoot Morita. Two shots rang out, both missing their targets. Bucky’s howl of battle rage echoed the still forest, causing everyone to whip around.

Steve was on his sniper in a flash, smashing the man who came sliding out of his shrubbery hiding place with Bucky’s knife in his upper arm. Bucky and the other one rolled around for purchase of the soldier’s rifle, smearing themselves in half-frozen mud and snow.

Bucky finally wound up on top with the better grip on the rifle. Blood continued to pound a vicious tattoo all through his body, making it hum. He felt himself detach somehow in his mind, like he was drifting away, watching himself fight his opponent as if from a distance. He jerked the rifle from the other man’s grip and tossed it away. With a snarl of rage, he punched…and punched…and punched…

Hands pulled at him, voices speaking to him but Bucky comprehended none of it. This fucking coward was going to bushwhack his friends and he’d be damned if he was going to let that go unchallenged. He pulled away from those trying to restrain him and got another punch in, shattering his victim’s nose in a vicious crunch before iron bands went around his upper arms and chest, literally dragging him away, still snarling in his violent madness.

“Bucky!” Steve was almost shouting at him. His face swam into Bucky’s view and strong gloved hands captured his face, forcing him to look at Steve. “Stop it! Stop!”

Bucky growled and thrashed against whatever, or whomever, was restraining him.

“You better do something other than that,” Dum Dum’s voice sounded in his ear. “He’s getting hard to hold.”

Steve looked conflicted and then hauled back and punched Bucky right in the jaw. Bucky jerked and felt reason return slowly, leeching back into his consciousness and whatever mental drift he’d been in allowed him to return to his body.

“S-S-Steve?” Bucky gasped, sagging into Dum Dum’s arms like a limp rag. He felt rung out, exhausted.

“Are you okay?” Steve was shaking his fist as if punching Bucky injured him.

Bucky considered that a moment and then shook his head. “No, I’m sorry, I don’t know what happened. I saw them, saw they were going to shoot you and Jim and I couldn’t-“ He choked, unable to breath and tried to struggle against Dugan’s hold for a different reason. “Can’t-breathe-“ he gasped and felt Dugan’s grip ease a bit.

He collapsed through the circle of Dugan’s hold to the ground and curled up, head on his knees, rocking back and forth. “I couldn’t let them shoot-“ he heard himself repeating. “I couldn’t let them-“

Steve crouched next to him, hand on his shoulder but Bucky refused to look up. “We’re fine, Buck, you stopped them. We’re fine, see? Jim’s okay, I’m okay, we’re all okay.”

Morita stooped down. “Thanks, Bucky,” the other man said seriously, placing a hand on Bucky’s other shoulder. “I didn’t even see him. I’m fine.”

“Oh, God,” Bucky moaned and rolled his head to one side in time to throw up. Everyone jumped out of the way.
“Never thought I’d ever see something like that,” he dimly heard Falsworth say, his crisp English accent a bit blurred from the cold. “Berserker rage.”

“What?” asked Jones. “What’s that?”

“The old Norse stories talk about men who go into a battle rage so intense that they attack any and everything no matter if it’s friend or foe, some sort of bloodlust that the primitive part of the human brain slides into. Never seen it before, thought it was a myth,” Falsworth explained.

There was contemplative silence and Bucky felt his stomach roil again. “Jesus,” he muttered. “Now I’m a fucking animal, is that it?”

He sprang to his feet and swayed a bit. Dugan kept him from stepping in his own sick as he did so and he shook the taller man off angrily.

Falsworth took a wary step back, not afraid but not stupid either. “No, I’m saying that you hear about men doing it, but I’ve never seen it. I studied a bit of psychology at university before the war, you know. It’s an instinct, built into our systems from back in the caveman days. Men, and women too I suppose, revert in times of stress or fear. A high end reaction of the flight or fight response.” His words were meant to reassure but they missed the mark.

“Goddamn Hydra turned me into a fucking animal,” Bucky moaned, leaning over and clutching his head in anguish, dizzy as the adrenaline began to subside.

They were all quiet, as if unsure what to do or say to assure him otherwise. To Bucky it was confirmation. He turned on Steve and flung himself at his friend and lover. “Kill me, kill me now before I hurt one of you, before I turn on one of you. Now!” he screamed.

Steve’s face, already pale, went ashen and he started to shake his head violently. “No, it’s okay, Bucky, you heard Falsworth, you-”

“I’m a goddamned animal, yes I heard!” Bucky shouted back. He felt control slipping and stumbled away, tripping over the Hydra soldier Steve downed and falling on his back, gasping for air.

He cringed when Dugan stood over him and picked him up. “Shut your hole, Barnes, you’re no more an animal than we are. You think we haven’t wanted to lose it with these bozos? Knock them around, teach them some sense?”

“I-I-I,” Bucky stuttered, cold now seeping into his body. He was never going to be warm again.

“You didn’t hurt anyone except the enemy like we’re supposed to,” Dugan gruffly spoke over his stammering. “Now calm the hell down or I’m dropping you in a stream after I chip the ice loose and let you cool off that way. Now take a breath. And another.”

Bucky drew in a shuddering breath with each prompt and felt himself starting to calm, felt the panic and the fear ease away, not gone, but no longer driving him, fueling him, as they had before.

After a few minutes, there was a nervous chuckle from Morita. “I think we found our base, boys.”

Bucky looked up and saw Morita pointing where three men could vaguely be seen edging toward them in the now falling snow. He hadn’t noticed it started snowing.

“Scatter!” Steve hissed. “Dugan, take Bucky and pull back for now.”
Bucky felt Dugan nod, felt himself scooped up like a child and carried away. The sound of gunfire made him jerk and Dugan whispered soothing stupid things at him. Bucky saw Dugan’s pistol tight in the big man’s grip but he didn’t have to use it.

The others were around them soon enough and Steve was strategizing. “Okay, looks like a small base otherwise we’d be up to our ears in them. Dernier, hand out grenades. We go in, blast around and I’ll try find some way to just detonate the place.”

“I’m good,” Bucky protested when Steve avoided him in the list of assignments. “I’m okay now.”

Steve hesitated and then shook his head. “No, Buck, you have to stay here. If you go berserk in there again...” He didn’t finish the sentence. As far as Bucky was concerned he didn’t need too.

Bucky set his jaw. “You sayin’ I can’t do my part, Rogers?”

Steve and the others flinched at his use of Steve’s last name in so impersonal a tone. The others figured out a long time ago that he and Steve were a couple. They’d kept the secret, especially after Dernier admitted he too favored men over women and he’d lost his lover to the Nazis, which prompted his involvement with the French Resistance. None of them cared; they were a team, a band of brothers. Sex and where they got it meant nothing. Bucky’s words, though, were laced with hurt and anger; there was going to be hell to pay later, everyone knew.

Steve looked Bucky in the eye, swallowed and said with steely resolve, “Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

Bucky felt like someone poleaxed him. He gaped a moment and then sank to the ground, sitting there while they continued their plans.

“What about Bucky?” Dugan asked.

“I will stay,” Jones said, giving Bucky a smile and a nod. “I’ve got the radio and I’ll make sure help ain’t comin’ for these clowns. Bucky’s got my back.” The last was said in a confident tone.

Steve gave Gabe a grateful look but Bucky knew pity motivated Gabe and resented everyone for it. All the men but Bucky and Gabe skulked away, leaving them alone in the falling snow.

They sat in relative peace, Bucky with his thoughts of resentment and feeling of betrayal.

“I always thought you felt more than most,” Gabe said conversationally into the silence.

“What?” Bucky snapped, raising his head to glare at the handsome black man fiddling with dials on their top of the line transceiver. Nothing for the best for them now that they were SSR’s private Hydra hunting corps.

“I said I always thought you felt more than most, more sensitive, y’know?” Gabe repeated with a bit more explanation.

“So that explains me going apeshit and losing my mind?” Sounded like pity-tripe to Bucky.

Gabe shrugged then held up a finger in a ‘one moment’ gesture but he relaxed after a couple minutes of listening. “It could. Everyone reacts differently to what we’re doing, y’know? Remember the guy that Patton slapped for not wanting to go back into battle? Called him a coward and stuff? You think that kid was a coward for being scared shitless at being shot at? Remember how we felt those first few times?”
Bucky huffed. “What’s your point?”

“I’m saying we all deal with this war differently, Bucky, and we all have a mental end of the line where we just snap. Everyone has it, we’ve all done it. Its different for everyone. You think Dugan is an animal ‘cause he up and disappeared when we found out about those camps? You know he took that hard, you know he jacked somebody up bad. Is he weak?” Jones’ dark face was earnest.

“He didn’t do it where it could have gotten one of us killed,” Bucky answered bitterly.

Gabe shrugged. “It’s the brain, pal, you can’t tell it what it’s gonna do, it’s just gonna do it. We’re not blaming you, you protected us like you’re supposed to. Hell, next mission one of us could snap too. We’re under pressure, high stress, we’re tight, brothers and you don’t fuck with our brothers. Hold on.”

Bucky waited while Gabe listened for a few more minutes and then started to chuckle. “Idiots are actually freaking out over the line that the American Captain is here and kicking their butts,” he reported with a wide smile. “And the line just went dead. Somebody found ‘em and cut ‘em off.”

Bucky sighed and sat leaned against a tree trunk. Their surroundings were quiet for a bit and then the explosions started. He jerked in surprise, battle ready in a heartbeat. He glanced at Gabe, hoping that he didn’t look freakish but Gabe was taut like him, scanning the trees for enemies.

He did the same.

About twenty minutes later, the other Commandos, Steve in the lead, came skidding up to them, soot covered and grinning shit-eating grins.

“It was purty,” purred Dum Dum when Gabe asked how it was in there.

Gabe explained what he heard on the radio to the others, Steve looking nervously in Bucky’s direction every once in awhile. Falsworth stood next to Bucky, almost like a guard and he felt twitchy about it.

“Okay, let’s head back to rendezvous point,” Steve ordered, back in command once more.

He tried to fall back to walk with Bucky but Falsworth gave him a shove. “Go. He’s not wanting to speak with you right now, I think.”

Bucky bared his teeth at Steve resentfully and the blonde man backed away two paces before falling in with Morita and Dernier, his face a mask of confused hurt and rejection. Morita threw a reassuring smile over his shoulder at Bucky and they started to move.

“He’s the leader,” Falsworth began.

“I know, he’s doing his job,” snarled Bucky. “Still hurt.”

“It hurt him too,” Falsworth told him. “He cussed himself all the way in. I could barely hear him but he was doing it.”

Bucky’s growl was wordless but eloquent.

“Are you actually all right?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky confessed. “I’m calmer. I just-“

Falsworth nodded. “I know. We all have our breaking points, Barnes, and-“
“I’ve already heard this from Jones,” snapped Bucky and Falsworth raised his hands in an apologetic manner. “Thanks anyway,” he tacked on lamely. 

The British man sighed. “It will be okay. He’ll have to make a report, you know. That will kill him. It might get you put on report or maybe removed from duty for an evaluation. That’ll hurt him more. You two are close, maybe too close to be together on missions like this but it is what it is. I can’t see the two of you staying apart. That would kill you both sooner, I think.”

Bucky glanced at him in surprise. “How do you mean?”

“You love each other, not just as lovers, Barnes, but as brothers, blood brothers, in your hearts and your minds. If something happened to one of you, the other, I think, would never come back from that. And you wouldn’t be able to live with the not knowing, not being there if the worst did happen.” Falsworth seemed to convulse at the thought, whole body twitching. “I envy that, wish I had it. Why do you think none of us has said anything about the two of you? You read each other’s minds, you know what the other is thinking or is going to do at any given time, a well-oiled machine. You work too well together to tear you apart. I think that’s why he’s wary of you now,” he gave a nod in Steve’s direction. “It was probably the first time he had no clue how to handle you, to know what you were thinking and it frightened him that perhaps he was going to lose you.”

The lanky Brit gave Bucky a lopsided, sad little smile. “You were quite insane, screaming that they weren’t going to bushwhack your brothers, not if you could help it. It was obvious that whatever you saw them doing hit a nerve and set you off. I’ll wager my meager fortune that Rogers has never seen you react like that, even all those street fights the two of talk about.”

Bucky shook his head.

Falsworth clapped him on the shoulder in a commiserating gesture. “We’ll speak up for you, you know we will, but we want you healthy, we want you at our side until the end, my friend. We don’t want to lose you, or any of us. We’ll take down these Hydra bastards to the last man of us but I’d honestly rather it be them.” He eyed Bucky for a reaction. “I believe this is when Rogers would say ‘deal’?”

Bucky gave a bit of a laugh, his throat feeling coarse like sandpaper as the air moved through it. “Deal,” he agreed.

They met the rendezvous plane and Morita and Falsworth sat by Bucky, keeping Steve away with waves of their hands. Dugan and Jones took Steve in hand and Dernier was in between like a mediator as they strapped in. The plane took off and they were gone.

As the altitude pressure increased Bucky swallowed several times to pop his ears. Once they reached a smooth altitude they unbelted and stood up, easing muscles tense from battle. They weren’t in the clear, never that until they crossed back into Allied territory once more, but they didn’t have to be so on edge anymore.

“You okay?” Morita asked, lighting a cigarette and passing it to Bucky for a drag.

He took it, ignoring Steve’s frown. Steve hated cigarettes, a legacy from his days with asthma. Bucky took a puff, blew out the smoke, relishing the burn of the tobacco as he took another puff before giving it back to Jim.

“I’ll live,” he drawled.

“Thanks. I owe you one.” Morita was not one for small talk. Bucky wasn’t sure if that was an
Asian thing or just a Jim thing.

Bucky shrugged it off.

“I’ll name my first kid after ya,” Jim continued. “How does Dumbass Barnes Morita sound?”

Bucky choked on a laugh and slapped Morita on the shoulder, feeling more at ease. “Sounds good. I really hope it’s a girl,” he bantered in return. “She’ll be real popular with the boys.”

They bantered back and forth, Morita apparently deciding that being unconcerned about Bucky’s moment of insanity was the best course of action. At least for a little bit.

“You know,” Morita told the group amiably as they strapped back in when the plane hit turbulence, “in Japanese culture, a warrior has a code and shooting a guy in the back isn’t honorable. Taking out an asshole doing it is. Just so you know, Barnes, whatever shit the Brit over there spouts off about Vikings and all, you’re samurai to me.”

Bucky looked askance at Morita. “Considering we’re kinda pissed at Japan at the moment, is that good thing?”

Jim shrugged. “Hell, I ain’t never seen Japan. No one in my family has seen Japan since we left it the last century. I know about six words and two phrases in Japanese and none of them polite beyond ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’. But in answer to your question, yes,” he advised, “being compared to a samurai, being compared to warriors known for great honor and integrity above all else, that’s a damned good thing. Take the fucking compliment like a good boy, Barnes, or I’ll beat the shit out of you.”

Bucky laughed with the rest of them and then turned green with the rest of them as the plane hit more turbulence. Well, everyone but Steve, who just sat there, clutching his harness and staring mournfully at Bucky like a lost puppy.


Bucky subsided but refused to look at Steve again, brushing past him when they landed and disembarked. He refused to sit next to him when they loaded on the truck to take them to base.

“I have to go make my report,” Steve told them in a heavy, tired tone. “Dismissed but no R&R for now.”

Everyone knew why and no one said a word. The other Commandos let Bucky storm off to his quarters, a cell in an abandoned monastery of some sort. About an hour later there was a firm tap on the door and Bucky opened it. The skinny little corporal with a large Adam’s apple that was Col. Phillips aide de camp was staring at him in awe before remembering to salute.

“The colonel would like you to join him and Captain Rogers in the debriefing room, Sgt. Barnes, sir,” the corporal stammered.

Bucky sighed and shrugged his coat back on. They’d have to walk across a little garden area to get to the debriefing room, which was actually the former dining hall for the monks. He never did find out what happened to the monks who used to live here.

He and the corporal didn’t say a word the entire walk to the other building. Out of the corner of his
eye he saw Howard Stark and Peggy Carter hovering in a corner area of the dining hall, watching him curiously as he approached Steve and Phillips. He gave Phillips a crisp salute and Steve a less crisp one to make sure his point was well-made.

Phillips’ eyes narrowed and his lips compressed but he didn’t say anything about Bucky’s insubordination to a superior officer, even if that officer was his best friend since childhood.

“I understand there was an incident, Sgt. Barnes,” Phillips inquired. “Care to tell me about it?”

Bucky stayed at attention and refused to let his gaze slide to Steve. “In private, if you don’t mind, sir?”

Phillips eyed him a moment and then nodded. “Everyone dismissed.” When Steve hesitated, looking like he was going to protest, Phillips scowled at the blond giant. “You’ve had your say, Captain, let the sergeant speak for himself.”

Bucky had no idea what Steve’s face looked like as he still refused look at his friend. He heard murmuring from Peggy and Steve’s brusque, “I don’t know,” to her before heavy wooden doors centuries old closed them all off.

There was a long moment of silence before Phillips heaved a sigh and motioned for Bucky to sit. “At ease, Barnes, I’m not going to court-martial you. You think you’re the first soldier who’s lost it when he saw one of his buddies go down, or get ambushed?”

Bucky sat, still stiff. “No, sir, but I put the others in danger and-“

Phillips waved a dismissive hand. “I’m not saying don’t be careful,” he interrupted, “but I know you young kids think that you’re immortal or some such garbage. That showing any weakness is the end of the world. I’m here to tell you, Barnes, it’s not. Was it reckless? Hell yes, but the question is can you control it if it happens again?”

Bucky shook his head. He’d already asked himself that question a million times and came up with the same answer.

“Then that would be a problem.” Phillips frowned, pacing a bit as he spoke. “You’re a good man, Barnes, a good soldier; I’d hate like hell to lose you. Your team would hate to lose you too but you have a decision to make. If you think you’re a risk to their safety and our mission’s safety, I need you to make the hard choice and step aside. I can give you an honorable discharge or reassign you, however you like.”

Bucky felt despair wash over him. Everyone would know why he was discharged. Maybe it was arrogance but he’d feel like a coward, a fool, if he took the discharge. The thought of some stupid desk job made his stomach turn, watching his friends, his brothers-in-arms, Steve walk out the door mission after mission and knowing he wasn’t there beside them.

“Any other options, sir, as those are unacceptable?”

“If I put you in for psychological evaluation, everyone will know. It could affect your career in and out of the army. Rogers asked me to avoid that option unless there’s no other choice.” Phillips turned and looked at him directly, those cagey fox eyes assessing him. “Or-“ The colonel’s voice trailed off in thought.

“Or?”

Phillips shrugged. “We’re the SSR, Barnes, do you know how long we’ve been sliding scientific
bullshit past the brass and the idiots in Washington?"

“I’m guessing quite some time, sir, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

“We’ll do our own evaluation of you. If you’re cleared by our people, as far as I’m concerned, this was a onetime incident. If it happens again, I discharge you, no fuss, no muss, full honors. Or stick you in a desk job out of the way but still useful.”

It was a hard bargain to make for a man used to action and adrenaline rushes but after a bit of thought, Bucky realized it was the best Phillips could do without jeopardizing everyone else. Bucky Barnes was not his only concern but it was nice that the old fox was concerned.

“Agreed,” Bucky acquiesced.

“I’m putting the team on R&R until you complete the SSR’s evaluation. They probably need it anyway. You’re one of the strong ones, Barnes, so if you felt the strain to that point, they are close too, I’d wager. Paris is secure. I’ll ship the lot of you there once you’re cleared and we’ll sent scout teams to the other Hydra bases to keep tabs on Schmidt’s activities in case we need to pull everyone in a hurry.”

Bucky nodded, but he wasn’t sure if he needed to agree or disagree with the plan.

Phillips patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. “Tell the men a week in Paris is in their future. You report to Stark’s lab first thing in the morning. I’ll make sure his monkeys are out of there for some privacy with the counselor.”

Bucky stood up and saluted the colonel. “Thank you, sir,” he said with heartfelt gratitude.

“Don’t be hard on Rogers, Barnes,” Phillips added, returning the salute. “It tore him up to report the incident. I had to drag it out of him. If I may, off the record?”

Bucky nodded at the inquiring look the colonel gave him.

“You two are more than just friends. I’m not asking you to confirm that, I don’t need you too and I frankly don’t give a damn. It hasn’t affected your working relationship as far as I can tell until now.” Bucky nearly panicked at the words. “But go easy on him. I know you’re feeling like he betrayed you, but you also know he had to tell me. It’s his job, his duty, to see to the welfare of the mission and his men. It’s not an easy job and this is something he never thought he’d have to do with you of all people.”

Bucky thought he nodded but wasn’t sure when the colonel gave him a dismissive nod. He saluted again for good measure and left the room.

He brushed past Stark, who tried to stop him with a concerned, “Hey Bucky,” and nodded brusquely at the corporal still staring at him with an awed look on his face.

He did come to a halt when Peggy Carter stepped into his path. He tried to side-step her but she blocked him smoothly. “We need to have a talk, I think,” she told him in her proper British accent.

Her face was unreadable but Bucky had a feeling Steve said or did something that finally clued her in about the nature of he and Steve’s relationship.

He let her lead him to a room, who knows what it had been once, with a couple short tables, ancient chairs that looked like they weighed a ton and honest to God electric standing candelabras. He waited until she sat, like the gentleman his mama taught him to be, and then took the other
They sat there awkwardly, Peggy fidgeting with the sleeve of her army brown jacket and Bucky staring over her head as impassively as possible.

“Steve said you had an…incident. I’m sure you’ve been asked this a nauseating number of times, but are you all right?” Her voice was soft and comforting.

“I’m okay. I’m not gonna snap again if that’s what you’re asking.”

She shook her head and the motion drew Bucky’s gaze to her face. She was beautiful, an understated beauty, not flashy like a movie star but not plain enough for the girl next door either. There wasn’t much lipstick left on her lips from where she’d licked or chewed it off and her brown eyes looked heavy and tired. There were circles under her eyes and they were a bit red, as if she’d been crying.

“That’s not what I’m asking,” she told him. “I know you all think you’re keeping it from me, and while I find it insulting to my intelligence, I appreciate the gesture all the same. You and Steve—”

She obviously couldn’t finish, going a bit pink in the cheeks as she made a helpless gesture that was very Gallic with her slender hands.

“Yeah, me and Steve,” Bucky echoed bitterly. “Maybe not anymore.” His gut clenched at the thought.

“Even before you left for the war?” she pressed. He nodded and resumed staring over her head. “I see.”

“Do you?” He didn’t mean his tone to be so sarcastic but it did.

“Actually, yes I do,” she snapped. “I understand you have to keep it secret, I do, but I—“

“But you’re in love with him too and want to know if you’ve got a chance with him?” Bucky finished for her, returning his gaze to her face. He felt like snarling. Steve was his, but then again, maybe not after today.

She gave him a helpless look, eloquent beyond words.

“Tell you what, he wants you, he’s all yours. You’re a hell of a dame, Peggy Carter, and Steve’s a moron to pass over you for a lunatic like me.” Bucky rose from his chair, towering over her but she didn’t look intimidated just uncertain. “I won’t keep him from anything that makes him happy. If that’s you, I will step aside and me and him never happened.”

She looked rightly skeptical. “Would you?” she asked softly. “I’m not sure I could in your place, Sergeant.”

Bucky let out a huff of laughter, not the least amused in its tone. “I like dames too, so does he. As far as I know, I’m the only man he’s ever been with. He looks at you as much, if not more, than he looks at me. Trust me, I know. I notice everything he does but his friendship means more than just me fucking him or whatever. If he wants to back off me and him that way, then it’s done. He’s my pal, til the end of the line, we used to tell each other.”

Forcing himself to do it, he held out a hand and she took it warily. He pulled her from her chair and he cupped her face. She fought a flinch and Bucky knew that if anything happened to him, Peggy Carter could more than handle anything Steve Rogers could throw at her in his grief, in his rage or in his determination.
“If he goes after any woman other than you, Peggy Carter, I’ll personally kick his ass,” he told her honestly. “Hell, if you’d look twice at me, I’d go after you myself.”

She gave him a small smile. “You’re not my type, I’m afraid. I always liked the gawky artistic types.”

“Me too,” he told her, voice sliding into an automatic teasing tone.

She put her arms around his waist and squeezed. “Take care of yourself for him, for you and for me. I couldn’t bear picking up the pieces of Steve if he lost you.”

“I’ll try,” Bucky told her, returning the hug, finally feeling like he and she had come to an understanding about Steve. What that was exactly he wasn’t sure but they felt more comfortable with each other than they ever had before. “We are in a war and all.”

She laughed and released him. “Go rest.”

He saluted her smartly which caused her to roll her eyes even as she smiled in a pleased fashion. He gallantly let her leave first (his mama’s manners forbade otherwise) and headed back across the sparse square ground to the other building housing their bunks.

He opened the door to his room to find Steve sitting on his bed, reading a book he’d pilfered from Bucky’s pack.

“Technically this is trespassing,” he intoned blandly, closing the door behind him. Steve didn’t look up. “I forgot how much you love Kipling,” he said. “I never liked the prose but then you understand Shakespeare and I don’t get one word in ten.”

Bucky took the book from Steve, glanced at it and saw Steve had been reading the story of Rikki Tikki Tavi, the pet mongoose who saved his family from a cobra. He tucked it back in his pack and folded his arms, staring at Steve, heart hammering.

“I had to,” Steve began.

“If I hear one more person either ask me how I feel or tell me you ‘had to’ I’m going to go berserk again.”

Steve’s face turned mulish for a heartbeat before smoothing to cold impassiveness. “What did you and the colonel discuss?”

“R&R for everyone in Paris for a week after I have an evaluation.”

Steve stiffened and grief marred his features. “Bucky, everyone will know what happened. They might discharge you, they—“

“I’m doing it with SSR scientists on the down low. I pass, I’m back in. I don’t pass, I’m discharged with honors and sent home. Or maybe a desk job.”

Bucky watched as Steve tried to pace the dinky little room, but neither of them were small men and the room was tiny, meant to be used for sleep and private contemplation only. Bucky refused to move, causing Steve to brush against him, which made electric sparks dance between them at the occasional touches.

Finally Steve stopped pacing and turned to Bucky, face like stone. “I see,” he said. “I take it,” he swallowed hard, “that we’re through then?”
Bucky felt rage suffuse his body. “Why? Because we had a fight? Because you doubted me? Because you turned on me?” he snarled.

Steve’s face mottled with anger and he poked a finger in Bucky’s chest. “I didn’t turn on you, James Barnes. I had to do what I had to do. It wasn’t easy. It made me want to throw up, seeing that you wouldn’t look at me, wouldn’t let me even touch you! The guys defended you, you know. They refused to let me go in there alone to make my report. Everyone damned one of them had an explanation, went to the mat for you. I didn’t even have to. They did it. I just stood there like some damned useless lump feeling like I was … was a tattletale or something for doing what I had to do as leader.”

Bucky said nothing. He had nothing to say. It was all true, he had no doubt.

“You think I liked telling on you? But I couldn’t lie, Buck, what happened was dangerous for us all! It doesn’t matter if one of the others did the same, I would have had to report it.” Steve shoved both hands through his short blond hair, his eyes wild and conflicted. “You scared me.” Steve’s voice broke. “I couldn’t reach you. You weren’t hearing me. You looked at me like you didn’t know me.”

Bucky felt a chill roll through his bones at the words.

“I wanted to hold you, comfort you but I couldn’t.” Steve tore at the captain bars on his jacket, ripping the patch off and throwing it. Being only a scrap of fabric it didn’t go far but the gesture was made. “I have never hated what I was more than in that moment. I couldn’t do anything because I was the captain.” He said the rank scathingly, almost hatefully. “My friend, my Bucky,” his tone lowered, “my lover, was in pain, fighting some demons I couldn’t see and I couldn’t do anything to help because it would give us away. I hate this,” he ended in a roar that left Bucky wide-eyed in shock.

The two of them stood there, staring at each other. Finally Steve collapsed back on the bed, making the ancient rope that held up the cheap mattress on the equally ancient bedframe creak with the force of his weight.

“I love you, Bucky,” Steve whispered. “For a moment you stared at me with your eyes all wild and unseeing, I thought maybe I’d lost you.” He took a shuddering breath. “I’d rather see you not here than like that again,” he confessed. “Back in Brooklyn, hating me forever than to ever see that again.”

Bucky walked over to him and folded his arms around Steve’s head. The other man rested his forehead into Bucky’s waist and wrapped his large arms around him, holding tight as if afraid that if he let go, Bucky would be gone forever.

“I love you too,” Bucky said. “Til the end of the line. I know you did right, but it still hurt. Every emotion I had was raw and to the surface. I don’t know what happened, Steve, I can’t explain it. I can’t guarantee it won’t happen again. What you did felt like you had no confidence in me, and maybe you didn’t and rightly so, but at that time it was the worst thing that you, my lover and friend, could have done. I wish we could go back and find a way to turn it around but I don’t know how that would happen even if we could.”

He felt Steve’s shoulders shake, heard a muffled sob, and knelt down, cupping Steve’s tear-stained face in his hands. “Til the end of line, pal, I swear it,” Bucky promised fervently. “Now the bed is about as comfortable as the floor, and apparently everybody and their damned dog knows what we do at night. As long as we’re discreet and don’t flaunt it, I don’t think anyone would mind you being here all night.”
Steve tried to shake his head but Bucky wouldn’t be denied.

“I need you, Steve,” he said earnestly. “Please. I need you to be here now when you couldn’t before, even just to hold me and kiss me. We don’t have to do anything else. After all,” he added slyly, “after I pass whatever bullshit Phillips is going to put me through, we’ve got a week in Paris. Ooo la la!”

Steve gave a half-sobbing, half laughing wheeze and brushed a sloppy kiss on Bucky’s mouth. “Okay,” he whispered. “Let me get my pack from my room and I’ll be back in two shakes.”

The other man left the room and Bucky sat on the floor, staring pensively at the wall. He looked around and wished for something to make noise. A soft knock on his door made him stand up to open it.

Peggy stood there, looking apprehensive and a little green. She held something out to him, a box. Bucky took it, confused.

“For tonight and as long as you need it during your,” she fumbled for a word, “recuperation.” Then she turned and fled seconds before Steve came around the corner from where his room was located.

Steve stopped and looked at him. “Where’d you get the radio?”

Bucky smiled a little sadly, wishing for all the world that neither he nor Peggy Carter were headed for sure heartbreak over Steve Rogers. “A friend,” he answered. “Come in.”

The radio played soft music, nothing they recognized and didn’t care, as they stretched out on the floor next to each other, face to face. They touched, caressed and kissed but never said a word. They let their bodies talk for them and soon the radio and exhaustion lulled them to sleep.
Chapter 8

It took two weeks for Steve to realize that the brief flash of emotion in Bucky’s gray-blue eyes as he fell was peace. Maybe a hint of satisfaction too. That was confusing, as it made no sense and the idea that Bucky wished for his death tormented Steve almost as much as knowing he was dead, gone forever. His friend, his tactical right hand, his confidant…

His lover.

He’d tried getting drunk without success; to drown out Bucky’s brief scream of terror as the bar his friend grasped to keep from falling to his death gave way just as Steve’s hand brushed Bucky’s. It was a nightmare Steve knew would never go away; a pain and guilt that would haunt him for the rest of his life, however long it might be.

The serum, so useful in maintaining his metabolism and health, was useless in trying to drown grief in a bottle of Bucky’s favorite bourbon. For good measure, Steve varied the liquors: gin, scotch, wine, rotgut, vodka, beer…none of it seemed to matter and none of it seemed to help.

Peggy’s words of praise for Bucky left a sour taste in Steve’s mouth. His conflicting affections for them both made him feel guiltier that he still wanted Peggy even as Bucky’s body remained lost in some frozen alpine ravine.

He buried himself in work, planning and creating strategies on destroying Red Skull’s secret facility as revealed by the captured (at a high price) Dr. Arnim Zola. Steve was in the room with the man once and had to leave after ten minutes lest he walk over and just snap the little ferret’s neck.

No, not ferret. Mouse. Bucky always sneeringly referred to Zola with the moniker of ‘Dr. Mouse Man’.

The radio played some big band music softly in the background. Steve stared at the papers and plans and maps in front of him, constantly distracted by a memory here or a thought there of Bucky, life with him in the past and now without him in the future. The door opened and he looked up. Peggy stood there, looking beautiful and as sad as he.

He hadn’t thought she and Buck were close. He knew they sensed they were rivals for his affections, but she looked as guilty as Steve felt. He wondered what the two talked about on the few times he caught them together after Bucky’s incident (as Steve called it in his head). He tried to smile at her but it came out wobbly and half-hearted. Hers was returned in the same fashion.

“The mail came.” She walked over to him. “I know you called Sgt. Barnes mother personally but,” she pulled out a small stack of envelopes, “mail for him just arrived. I didn’t know what you wanted done with it.”
Steve stared blankly at the envelopes, all labeled from Brooklyn. He took them automatically as Peggy passed them to him and he stared at the name of the senders: Mrs. Barnes, of course, but also Father Christie, Bucky’s parish priest in Brooklyn, old Mrs. Slomski who always made the best bread in the neighborhood and a few other of their neighbors in the apartment. Tears stabbed Steve’s eyes and he found himself gasping for air. He hadn’t known Bucky wrote all those people letters but from the pile of multiple letters from some of the recipients there had been long term correspondences.

Someone singing Cole Porter’s “You Do Something to Me” came onto the radio and the words seemed so appropriate to Steve. He missed Bucky so much, more than he’d thought he would and that was saying something. The words were his life as Bucky came into it and he didn’t know how he could go on without Bucky in it.

> Since you came my way  
> I am bound to say  
> Things I once thought gloomy  
> Now both bright and gay

Peggy stood there next to him, listening to the song, watching him. He could feel her dark brown eyes sadly cataloging everything.

“I’m sorry,” he managed to say. “I just-“

“I know,” she told him simply. “I told him once that I didn’t know how we would get on without him. I was telling the truth and I meant the ‘we’ as you and me, not just the Commandos or the SSR. However, you do need to do something.”

Steve looked up at her, unashamed at the tear tracks on his face.”What?”

“You need to go through his things to find out what to keep for yourself and what to send home to his mother.” Peggy cupped his jaw with her hand and leaned to kiss him softly on the side of the cheek. “One more hard thing for a captain to do, I’m afraid. And perhaps it will give you a measure of closure, resolve to do this next big task, to get the last of the mission done. He would have wanted it ended, you know.”

Steve wanted to snarl and howl, rage and rant but he didn’t. She was right. With a heavy sigh, he stood up, clutching Bucky’s unopened mail and walked to the small room off the side of the planning room in their little bunker in London. There Stark kept all of the Bucky’s things. He had boxed everything up one day, saying not a word, handling Bucky’s belongings as if they were rarest crystal.

Peggy stood in the doorway a moment to watch Steve and then quietly left him alone once more. He appreciated it. He needed to move on eventually, he knew she would be waiting and he felt no pressure at her patience for him. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t right for anyone but it was life and that’s how it was going to be.

There were two boxes and two duffle bags of Bucky’s things to go through. Most of the boxes were equipment and ammunition for his weapons. One duffle was clothes, his scent still clinging to the garments. Steve buried his nose in them, inhaling the scent of cinnamon, Barbasol and Ivory soap as well as the hint of something that was uniquely James Buchanan Barnes. He took Bucky’s summer Commando jacket uniform as a memento, brushing gentle fingers over the few rents and worn spots in it, especially on the elbows were Bucky would rest his arms holding the sniper rifle in readiness to take out anyone stupid enough to go after one of his brothers. Or Steve.
In the other duffle were books, letters, papers and other documents. He found Bucky’s will (everything to his mother and Steve equally) which he tucked into his pocket to turn in to the colonel, journals and little remembrance notes of events that Bucky would scribble down which hurt to look at now. He set those aside to send to Mrs. Barnes with the books.

The letters Steve opened randomly, reading news from home, some of it he knew and heard when Bucky would read the occasional letter out loud, some he knew nothing about and always assumed the gossip from home came from Mrs. Barnes’ letters.

Some were funny anecdotal memories from home:

_You were always such a rascal, James, wrote Mrs. Slomski, but I never had to worry about you. You could always take care of yourself, and our little Steve. I’m so glad you two are still looking out for each other. I remember that time when the two of you were trying to climb that fence around the corner lot to get a ball you’d tossed into that grouchy Mr. Thomas’ yard._

Steve smiled at bit at the memory. Mr. Thomas had a dog almost as mean as he was but Bucky had won the dog over long before with choice scraps he’d nick from the butcher shop. Bucky was the one everyone went to when the ball in their makeshift ball field on the empty corner lot went into Thomas’ tiny back yard guarded by his mean dog.

_James, I’m praying my letter finds you well. We lost a few more of our parishioners and I am always relieved it’s never you. In answer to the question you posed to me in your last letter, no, I do not think God will forsake a soldier for taking a life, or many lives. God understands duty, understands the sacrifice of the portion of your soul you say is gone forever because of the actions you must take. Do I like the war? No. None do, but to not have gone would have cost far more than, pardon my phrasing, a few meager pieces of souls. It’s not what you were wanting to hear, I’m certain, but you of all my flock, my dear boy, would prefer my counsel be of honesty and not just solely of comfort. You were always a strong boy and are now a strong man. No matter your personal feelings toward God and your place in the world, rest assured, God can be nothing but pleased with the man you have become: a protector, a survivor and a man of honor and duty. I will light a candle for you this Sunday but will only let your mother know I light for you as per your request. Find no shame in your fear, James, find courage in it._

Steve wiped away more tears. He’d known Bucky had issues with his faith and his purpose in the world religiously but it surprised him that Bucky maintained correspondence with his priest, having never confessed much affection for the priest or the religion into which he was a reluctant part of.

He read a few letters from Mrs. Barnes, which felt a bit like snooping, smiling a bit here and there, hearing her voice speaking the admonishments or praises in the letter.

_Do be careful. I know you will be too busy watching Steve’s back than to pay attention to your own. I miss you, my little boy. Oh, I know you’re a man now, but you’ll always be my little boy forever so let a mother be a softie, as you would say._

One letter however, dated and likely received before Bucky’s ‘incident’ made Steve’s blood run cold and his mind whirr like one of Stark’s machines. Could this have been a catalyst that caused Bucky to lose control that horrible afternoon?

_My dearest James,_

_I try to write to you with news of home to make you feel better but unfortunately I cannot do so this_
time. There is no easy way to relay what I have to tell you so I will just state it bluntly.

Your father has been found. I received a telegram requesting I make a phone call to a police department in Virginia. The sheriff there asked if I was the wife of a man by the name of Joseph Andrew Barnes lately of Brooklyn and Shelbyville, Indiana. When I stated I was, he told me that they arrested a man a couple of weeks ago who murdered another in a most brutal fashion. When they were interrogating him, he confessed to many other murder. Your father, apparently, was one of them. According to the sheriff I spoke with, this man confessed to following his victims when they got their pay each week and killing them when they were alone and unaware, stealing their money and hiding the bodies.

Your father never left us, James, he was stolen from us. They said the man told them Joe was heading into town as he always did to post a letter and some money like he did for us every chance he could. I know you, and I must confess I, had so much doubt and resentment about his disappearance, thinking the worst of him but in the end, he was still trying to do right by us. I am not certain I can forgive myself for my horrible thoughts against him as I watched you grow up without a father to guide you.

You deserved to know. Father Christie stated that we must find comfort in the fact that he is at peace now, despite the chaos left behind in the manner of his life and death. I know I will find it a bit hard for a while to come to terms with that and I’m certain you will as well.

I wish I had more cheerful things to tell you, James, but I find I cannot at the moment. I hope my letter finds you safe, though, and know I love you more than words can ever express, my brave, wonderful boy.

Steve stared at the words on the beige stationary paper, a border of delicate pink and yellow flowers edging the paper in a delightful feminine way that reminded Steve forcefully of Mrs. Barnes. Bucky never mentioned his father’s fate, never said a word. Other than that horrible afternoon, there was no indication that anything had changed in James Barnes’ life at home.

He felt like someone sucker punched him in the gut. It was hard to breathe, like an asthma attack. Bucky kept this secret from Steve. He didn’t think they had ever kept secrets from each other, not like this. They hadn’t shared details of certain things that were a person’s private self but the two understood that there were those private, internal moments. This, though, this was huge. Bucky spent most of his teen years resenting his father’s absence first for work and then when he disappeared.

My God, it explained Mrs. Barnes’ reaction when Steve personally phoned her on the little community line her apartment building shared. She had been silent for so long Steve was afraid the call had been lost. Then in a tired, thin voice, she asked him specifically how her son gave his life for his country.

“Like a hero, Mrs. Barnes,” Steve remembered telling her, continuing on with a bit of the details of the fight on the train. “He died as he lived, protecting my sorry hide.”

There had been a hint of pride and sorrow in her voice when she chided him. “That couldn’t have been too hard of a sacrifice for him, Steve Rogers, and well you know it. He loved you, he found no hardship in protecting his friend.”

“I can’t bring him home,” Steve said around a hard lump in his throat. “We tried to find him, but the train was moving too fast, we didn’t know the exact location but we looked everywhere we could and we-“
“I will have the father light a candle for his soul and for yours, Steve, though I know you aren’t of the faith. It doesn’t really matter where his body is, we know where his soul is going and that’s all that matters.”

Steve had wanted to confess more but didn’t. He promised to send Bucky’s things to her, that he would be careful and come home himself and that he missed her and how sorry he was before he hung up the phone. Now staring at the letter in his hand, he realized Mrs. Barnes had nothing left. She had no husband or son, each taken away from the world so early, so violently, at the whim of a madman.

His hands clenched, unwittingly crushing the letter. Fury raged through him, pouring fire into his veins like molten lava. He’d had enough of this war and it was time Steve Rogers, Captain America, ended this once and for all. Before anymore was lost, was sacrificed.

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Peggy Carter watched as the remaining Howling Commandos toasted their fallen captain. She was tucked in a corner of the little makeshift bar, Allied forces cheering their hard won victory around her, the Commandos the only stoic sentinels in the place. She felt coiled like a taut string, ready to snap, break and unravel, useless and unwanted.

Steve was gone, long before he crashed the plane into the icy nothingness of the Arctic. Maybe he never would have really been hers, even had they been able to keep their dancing date. The lost look in the man’s blue eyes spoke volumes of what the war stole from him. She took a measure of pride in the fact that in his compass was her tiny little picture before she realized her picture was there but Bucky Barnes was in his arms.

She tried to resent the other man for that, charming rogue that he was, but she couldn’t. They were so obviously well-suited she couldn’t begrudge them their affections no matter how much it hurt her. She had felt guilt at Bucky’s death, blaming herself as much as Steve blamed himself, but in the end her own words to Steve brought her comfort.

“Did you love your friend?” she remembered saying. “He must have thought you were damned worth it.”

Both of them were worth it and the world was much poorer for their absence, but not their sacrifice.

Resolute, Peggy picked up her tumbler of bourbon and walked into the midst of the now sitting Commandos. A couple attempted to get up when they saw her but she waved their gallantry away. She sat in a chair she pulled up next to Dum Dum Dugan and held her glass out.

“To Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, loyal friend and compatriot.” The men looked at her a bit uncomfortably but raised their glasses all the same.

“Bucky, a good friend and a good man at your back,” Dugan said.

“To Bucky and Steve, the best of friends,” Falsworth stated where only they could hear, after a searching glance at Peggy, “and lovers.”

“May they rest in peace,” murmured Gabe Jones.

“And may they raise hell whenever Heaven needs it,” Morita finished.

“Salut!” Dernier cheered.
They drank. There was nothing more to say.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Post-CATWS, not quite how I envisioned it was going to go. Radio is going to play an eventual important role so don't go thinking the title's jacked up somehow. LOL.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Who the hell is Bucky?

Steve Rogers thought the sight of Bucky falling to an icy cold death was his worst nightmare, even after all these decades, though seeming only a few scant years to Steve’s mind. He was wrong. That was a nightmare. To look into the face of the man you loved, held, felt and gave passion, lusted over, worried over, fight with and for and see that man had no idea who you were and who he was.

Who the hell is Bucky?

That was a nightmare.

S.H.I.E.L.D. was gone, smoldering in the ashes of three helicarriers, and as Hydra-infested as its carcass was, Steve regretted it some. S.H.I.E.L.D. did good work over the decades, he knew, but the good wasn’t outweighing the bad. Not if James Buchanan Barnes, his Bucky, could stare at him with such soulless eyes, such cold unfeeling features and know nothing of Steve and their life together.

For weeks he’d been tracking, trailing, hunting and, finally, giving up. He could feel Bucky out there but he was damned if he knew where the man was. It was if Bucky was on the periphery of Steve’s vision but when he would turn around (metaphorically and literally) there was nothing there. A ghost, Nat called him, and that was indeed what he was.

Eventually with all the hullabaloo, finger-pointing and hyenas fighting over the carcass of S.H.I.E.L.D. Steve opted to take up Tony Stark’s offer of refuge at Stark Tower. He had left New York because he could stand the memories; now he left Washington D.C. for the same reason. At least the memories in New York were poignant and not the culmination of a nightmare he never dreamed he’d be living.

You are my mission. The words had been torn from Bucky’s throat, a desperate cry to maintain some semblance of familiarity to the man. In those tormented blue-gray eyes, Steve saw the conflicted desolation in Bucky’s soul. No matter how many times he denied it during their fight, Bucky, deep down in his heart, remembered something and that spark hopefully would start a fire in the frozen depths of the monster that Hydra made of his Bucky.

Steve now stood in the darkness of Stark’s tower in the quarters assigned to him. He stared out over the city as incoming clouds moved toward New York, lightning flashing in the distance, the roll of thunder not yet drowning out the noise of several million people living their lives. Lights from neon signs, street lamps, towers of business and private residences, and billboards lit the
metropolitan like the middle of the day, oblivious to the coming of the day’s end.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, a sensation he was used to even though it was still foreign to his antiquated idea of technology. Steve lived in this new modern world long enough to be used to the technology.

*Come here. Want to show you something.* It was a text from Tony.

Steve was conflicted about Tony Stark, even though he considered Tony a valued friend and ally. The man reminded Steve forcefully of his father Howard in so many ways but he wasn’t Howard. So often it was clear Tony had little affection for his father, despite their similarities, in the remarks Tony would make or how defensive he became when Steve would occasionally talk about Howard. He didn’t know the circumstances but Steve gathered Tony’s childhood had been a bitter one because of Howard: neglected or disregarded, or perhaps Howard hadn’t known how to connect with a child, even his own.

*On my way.* He texted back, fingers sliding efficiently over the keyboard on the screen. If only they had that type of communication during the war. Of course, if they had it, Hydra would have had it too.

Steve made his way to Tony’s private residence on the top floor. The door opened automatically with a respectful greeting from JARVIS, the artificial intelligence program who ran not only Stark’s home like a butler but also served as Tony’s office assistant, lab assistant, and sidekick inside the mechanical suit that turned Tony Stark into Iron Man. It was so lifelike that Steve always thanked the program, forgetting it wasn’t a real person.

“Thanks, JARVIS,” he said.

“My pleasure, Captain.”

“What’s 4-F?”

Tony came round from the large bar area at one end of the room, carrying an ever present drink in his hand. Not terribly tall, with a swarther complexion than his father but the same sharp eyes that missed nothing, square jaw that could set in a determined, implacable way, Tony Stark used to make Steve want to punch him through a wall. Now, Steve found in Tony an ally he couldn’t do without, someone who would occasionally make fun of Steve’s ignorance of the modern world but always one of the first to help him figure it out.

Steve frowned at the question. “In the military? It was the rejection code given to men unable to enter service, usually for medical reasons. Why?”

“I just found this,” Tony tossed Steve an envelope, “in a pile of mail my PR people sent up to me.”

Steve opened the envelope and pulled out a photocopy of an article published about the Howling Commandos right after the Captain America exhibit opened at the Smithsonian Museum. A photograph of each of the Commandos was featured in the article; Steve had been pleased with the reporter’s equal attention to his brothers-in-arms instead of focusing entirely on ‘Captain America’.

On Bucky’s picture someone hand wrote “4-F” across it in red marker ink.

Steve looked up at Tony, bewildered. “I don’t understand.”

Tony took a sip, ice clinking in the glass. “I have a couple theories, if you want to hear them?”
Steve nodded, flipping through the pages as he listened. They were photocopies but the backs of the pages were blank, with no other writing on them. The envelope was the plain, nondescript variety. The stamp was like any stamp you could get at any post office in the country. The post mark was New York.

“Either someone in Hydra is playing mind games, entirely possible since that is their favorite thing to do apparently,” Tony stated and then took another drink as if fortifying himself.

“Or?” Steve prompted.

“Someone has figured out Barnes is the Winter Soldier. This might be a warning in a power play against you.”

“To what end? Blackmail? Ransom? Could they have him?” Steve stared at the 4-F marring Bucky’s black and white features. It was his military profile photo, nothing special about it. Tony shrugged. “Who knows? Opening gambit, could be anything, could be nothing.”

“Let’s keep an eye on it then,” Steve suggested. “See if something else pops up against one of the other Commandos, me or in reference to the Winter Soldier.”

Tony gave a shrug and hesitated again, which was unusual for him, not being the type to embrace ‘subtle’. “Romanoff didn’t tell me much and you haven’t said much either. I know what the history books say, what his file says, but I think there’s more to James Barnes than just ‘your best friend’.” He air quoted the last.

When Steve raised an eyebrow in inquiring challenge, Tony put his hands up in a non-aggressive gesture.

“I’m not judging, Cap, I’m the last one to judge. I think I’ve got it figured out and honestly, I don’t care, makes you more human to me, I suppose, but what if someone has figured out about you and Barnes in the past? This could potentially be a threat against you.”

Steve wandered over to the sunken sitting area and sat down heavily on one of the seats. He tossed the envelope and its contents on the table in the center and shoved both hands through his hair. He stared at the floor, thinking hard.

The world changed its views toward sexuality since Steve’s day. Men married men and women married women now. There was no fear of prison, asylums or death for their sexual preferences.

“How could they think I would care now?” Steve asked.

“You’re still a symbol of the old-fashioned values that many Americans hold sacred. The war hero Grandma and Grandpa talked about coming out as being gay could be a public nightmare for you, more than you have now. It’s accepted, sure, but there’s still a lot of backwash against it too. Probably will be for years to come, Steve. Everyone was sure it was the downfall of America when blacks and whites attended the same schools but after a few years when America didn’t explode into a fiery ball at the hands of a disapproving God, people gave up the bitching about that and turned to bitch about something else. They may think it will be your knee-jerk reaction to hide it.”

Steve looked at Tony. “I don’t think that’s it.”

Tony stared back at Steve for a long moment. “But you and he were…?” his voice trailed off questioningly.
“Yes,” Steve murmured. “It’s why the future hurts so much to be in. I wanted to die, Tony, I didn’t want to live without him. I couldn’t tell Peggy, but I think that maybe she knew somehow. Then I woke up, I was here in the future and I didn’t have him. He was dead for almost eight decades. You have no idea the pain…” His voice trailed off and he felt Tony’s gaze on him, searching his face for something but Steve didn’t know what.

“But why 4-F for Barnes?” Tony finished his drink and crunched on a piece of ice before continuing. “He was obviously fit for duty, had no history of mental illness and you two kept your relationship secret so no one could claim him disqualified for moral reasons.”

Arrested by Tony’s words, Steve looked up sharply. “What did you say?”

“That Barnes was healthy,” Tony began to elaborate.

“No, you said he had no history of mental illness, but that’s not true.” Steve stood up so quickly he banged his shin on the low coffee table.

Tony’s dark brows furrowed. “He did have a history of-?”

“He had a moment of battle rage, I guess you’d call it, on one of our missions. It was kept secret from the army. Colonel Phillips had him evaluated by our own people, I mean SSR, and they considered it a onetime incident, a breakdown from mental and physical stress. What we were doing was dangerous and, to be honest, foolhardy even if was necessary. Our stress levels had to have been through the roof. He mentally snapped one mission and killed a man just by beating him to death.”

“That’s not in his file,” Tony told him.

“Not in his Army file,” Steve corrected, “but I’ll bet S.H.I.E.L.D. knew because it would have been in Bucky’s SSR file. And everything S.H.I.E.L.D. knew, Hydra knew and is public record now.”

“Maybe that’s what the 4-F is referring too?” Tony asked speculatively.

Steve sighed and shrugged. “Who knows? As you said, we need more data.”

Tony laughed. “Listen to you, collating data like a modern man.”

Two weeks later, though, another plain envelope merely addressed to Captain Steve Rogers, Stark Tower arrived, this time with a single sheet of paper with a typed question and instruction. Tony put all his people on the lookout for just such an envelope in case more arrived. There had been a few false alarms but Tony and Steve could tell this one was the link to the article.

*What was my mother’s name? Answer via NYT classified personals to Yasha.*

“Yasha,” Natasha Romanoff told Steve when he showed the note to her, “is a Russian version of James.”

Steve went light-headed at the words. “Could he be remembering?”

She shrugged, her eyes troubled. “Possibly.”

“Should I answer?”

Nat stared at him as if he were insane. “I don’t know, Rogers, should you?” She tapped him in
rebuke on the back of the head.

He did in the next day’s classified personals.

_Yasha: Winifred. You called her “Ma”._

Another letter came a week later, with another question and similar instructions.

*What was my favorite color? Answer same as before.*

“My God, is he trolling you for information?” raged Tony after Steve resolutely put in the answer as requested in the newspaper. Tony had not taken Steve’s obvious distress well. “Callous bastard!”

Steve ignored his friend’s ten minute rant on Bucky’s questionable ancestry. Yes, he felt hurt at the impersonal communication but the fact that Bucky knew that Steve would respond gave him hope. Obviously the man was searching for not only his identity but something more. What it was, Steve didn’t know, but he thought he now knew who sent them the 4-F stamped picture.

_Yasha: Red._

Sam Wilson sent a text three nerve-wracking weeks later that he received a question, post-marked from England and on plain and unadorned stationary and envelope like the rest.

*Who was my favorite author? Reply Yasha Daily Mail.*

Steve flew to London before he published the answer. Why he couldn’t explain but he felt he had to be in the same city. He could feel Bucky there as much as he did in New York.

_Yasha: Rudyard Kipling, specifically Rikki Tikki Tavi. Why are you in London?*

He received no answer and after a week, he flew back to New York, dejected. Two weeks after his return Steve found an envelope sitting on his table at his favorite diner in Manhattan. He had gone to the restroom and returned to find the envelope propped against his cup. He looked around for any sign of Bucky there was no one remotely like him in the vicinity.

*I went to London to remember. Did I have a dog or cat?*

There was no instruction on replying. Stumped, Steve wound up scribbling his answer beneath the typed question and returned daily to the diner, making sure to go to the restroom at least twice each visit to give Bucky time to find him and respond.

*No but you always fed any strays when you could. Do you remember me?*

The pretty blond waitress who always served him brought his food a week after the envelope disappeared from his table. On the tray with the food was a business card with a question handwritten on the back appeared within with just an email address: yasha @ searchmail.com. He asked her where it came from but she looked perplexed. She didn’t know, Steve could tell, which meant Bucky was there, watching him, and slipped the card on the tray as she moved past the other man.

*Where did we live?*

Steve sent the old tenement apartment’s address to the email but noted that the building wasn’t there any longer, the building torn down and replaced by others. His request for confirmation that
Bucky remembered him went unanswered. The simplicity of the questions made Steve wonder if Bucky’s memories were returning in large chunks, leaving out the small details that made a person...well, a person.

4-F

The three typed symbols stared Steve in the face one morning. He set his coffee cup down, hit reply and answered.

_I’m not sure what you are implying. What was done to you does not make you unfit. Are you unwell, injured, mentally or emotionally distraught? I suspect yes, but that doesn’t mean you are unfit and therefore rejected. I don’t know what, if anything, you remember, but please, come to me. I want to help you, even if it’s just to answer more questions. Let me see you._

Three days later Steve walked into his quarters in Stark Tower to find James Buchanan Barnes asleep on his couch.

Steve’s hands shook as he carefully set his keys on the table by the front door, trying not to let them clatter. It didn’t make a difference for Bucky’s eyes opened and he stared directly at Steve, tense but not bolting. The expression was probably one similar to that of a deer about to be struck by a truck.

“I’m glad you came,” Steve said simply in as welcoming a tone as he could manage. Bucky continued to stare at him. “I’ll bet Stark would like to know how you got in but we’ll deal with that later.”

Walking slowly, unthreateningly, Steve wandered to the kitchen, feeling Bucky’s eyes on him. “Want a beer? I was going to have some Chinese delivered. Want something?” He kept his tone casual, as if it were everyday that his best friend, presumed dead, crashed on his couch in a high security building he broke into, potentially homicidal and half out of his mind.

When Bucky didn’t answer, Steve grabbed an extra brown bottle of beer anyway, popped the metal lids and sauntered over to where Bucky was watching him warily, still lying down, unmoving. Steve set the bottle in front of Bucky on the coffee table and plopped himself lazily into a chair opposite, giving the other man a lopsided grin.

Silence reigned, beyond Steve’s occasional swallowing noises as he sipped his beer. He let his gaze occasionally stray to Bucky, quirking an encouraging smile, before letting his gaze wander elsewhere as if them sitting there like this was the most normal thing in the world.

“I am craving some fried rice,” Steve finally said into the silence. Bucky hadn’t touched the beer and continued to watch Steve in wary regard. “Maybe some fried wontons. If we knew food like that existed back in the forties we’d have been in hog heaven.”

Bucky didn’t twitch.

“Something wrong with the beer? It’s the only brand I have but I can order in whatever you like,” offered Steve, before he took another sip. “It’s not half-bad, not great, but not half-bad. Better than some of the swill we used to have.”

The metal arm reached, almost reluctantly, for the bottle, gripping the long neck and bringing it to Bucky’s mouth. The other man sniffed it cautiously first, as if attempting to detect poison and then took a very small, careful sip. Bucky’s face, beard about the same as on the helicarrier, gave one twitch at the taste as if it didn’t agree with him but he took a bigger drink as if proving he could do
it. A defiant gleam flickered through his eyes and Steve squashed a triumphant grin.

“You want the same as me? I’m buying,” Steve asked. “I think it’s my turn to buy anyway. You got those god-awful snails in Paris. It shouldn’t count, but since I ate the whole thing because you dared me too I’ll let it slide this time.”

Something skittered across Bucky’s face, an emotion that Steve couldn’t identify, so short was its lifespan on Bucky’s hard features. Had Steve’s words connected with a memory?

“I’ve got a menu if you aren’t sure what you want,” Steve offered and that got a reaction. Bucky’s head dipped twice in a nod and, with a slap of his knees and a cheerful smile, Steve stood up, rummaged through a pile of papers on the coffee table and slid the menu for a nearby Chinese restaurant over. “I think its American food in a Chinese style to be honest. Probably doesn’t have a thing to do with what they eat in China other than the rice,” Steve babbled while Bucky’s eyes switched from the menu to Steve’s face.

The silence was starting to get on Steve’s nerves, as was Bucky’s unchanging expressionless face.

He started humming a tune from a more recent Broadway show that Pepper talked him into escorting her to. It had been amusing and he’d enjoyed the mocking of Hitler in it. As a gift, Pepper bought him the soundtrack. He broke into the words, keeping his voice low.

> That face, that face, that dangerous face
> I mustn’t be unwise
> Those lips, that nose, those eyes
> Could lead to my demise.

He felt a blush heat up his face as the most perplexed expression crossed Bucky’s face as the man stared at him in disbelief.

“I know. “ Steve confessed, “I still can’t sing. You’ll like the musical it’s from though. It’s pretty funny.” He coughed to cover his embarrassment. “Did you decide what you wanted?”

Something akin to despair crossed Bucky’s face. “4-F.” Bucky’s voice was a croak. He’d likely not spoken to anyone in at least a week, maybe longer, and it sounded like it.

Steve picked up the menu from where Bucky put it carefully back onto the coffee table and looked at what the menu said. There was a 4-F but it was more accurately listed as entrée item F-4 Hunan Pork. Was Bucky fixated on the rejection code because he felt he wasn’t right?

“Got a taste for spicy?” Steve asked rhetorically and was inwardly thrilled when Bucky gave another nod. “Great! You finish your beer and I’ll order. The guards downstairs are used to having someone send for me when I order take out.” Steve gave the other man a sheepish look. “I order out a lot. Still can’t cook worth a damn.”

Something that might have been the beginning of a smile ghosted over Bucky’s face before vanishing into blankness once more. Steve stayed within hearing range so that Bucky wouldn’t think he was talking to anyone other than the Chinese delivery. Last thing he wanted was Bucky to think Steve was contacting back up and vanish once more into the city.

By the time Steve returned to his seat with a “They’ll have it here in 45 minutes” half of Bucky’s beer was gone. Steve had no idea when the man drank it and he’d kept Bucky in his periphery vision.

“You need a place to crash?” Steve asked. Another nod. “No problem, pal, I got plenty of room. I
have some clothes that will work until we can take you shopping,” he continued but was interrupted by a frantic shake of the head, long brown hair, clean but tangled swinging around Bucky’s face at the motion. “No clothes or no shopping?”

“Shopping,” Bucky replied, finally sliding his eyes away from Steve’s face. His voice was rough and dry sounding despite having the beer. “Surveillance in shops, they will see the arm.”

“Ah,” Steve nodded sagely, mentally kicking himself. “Good thinking. Well, we’ll figure something out. Maybe I can find a tape measure and get your measurements and go for you?” Bucky quirked an eyebrow at that but said nothing.

Silence resumed, broken now only by two men sipping their beers. With each minute ticking by, Steve realized that Bucky was relaxing. It wasn’t drastic but the tautness in his face and hands, easing in the shoulders and legs proved it.

“I don’t want to get you mad at me but are you hurt?” Steve took the last gulp of his beer and grimaced. “The last bit always tastes awful.”

Bucky finished his in a large gulp and gave Steve a sneer of triumph. “No.”

“Do you want a bath or shower before we eat?”

Bucky’s head tipped to one side almost like a dog but he answered Steve with another question. “Did you love me?”

Steve froze, hands sinking into the suede covering of his chair. His eyes were caught in Bucky’s forthright gaze. “Yes,” he managed to say croakily, taken aback by the question but knowing the answer was going to be the deal breaker in whatever move or decision Bucky made next. “More than anything in the world, I loved, do love, you. I never stopped, even when I woke up 75 years later.”

Bucky looked skeptical a moment but nodded his acceptance of the answer. “The woman, Peggy,” he began but stopped, uncertainty spreading over his face as if whatever he was remembering he doubted its authenticity.

“I loved her too but not as much as you, not like I loved you. Nothing happened between Peggy and I even after you died. Or I thought you died. I wasn’t far behind you, you know, I went after Schmidt almost immediately. His little toady took away my Bucky. The man was going to pay for that.”

“Dr. Mouse Man.” The correction was made almost involuntarily and then Bucky’s whole body tensed, his eyes went the size of saucers and he…well, the only word Steve could use and be totally accurate was ‘spasmed’ off the couch.

Steve jerked at the movement but forced himself to remain seated. Bucky was looking around wildly. Steve thought he knew why. Arnim Zola made the Winter Soldier, likely enjoyed what he did to Captain America’s friend. Any lip and sass Bucky gave the Swiss doctor was likely punished and, knowing Bucky, there was probably a lot of both. Memories returning reminded Bucky of the penalty of mocking Dr. Zola and he was reacting accordingly, waiting for the punishment that was sure to come for his defiance and disrespect.

“Yeah, Dr. Mouse Man,” Steve agreed and Bucky whirled to him in dismay. “He uploaded himself onto computer terminals about thirty years old and then Hydra bombed the crap out of him. Well, me and Natasha but we were where they hid him. He is scrap metal and incinerated audio tape
now, buddy, thanks to his own organization. Dr. Mouse Man is Dr. Mouse Pudding.”

Bucky’s reaction was unlike anything Steve had ever seen. His head was shaking back and forth in denial even as he started to laugh with near hysteria. His hands clenched in the air at chest level as if grasping for something. He began backing away from Steve, from the couch, stumbling when he hit the two steps that led into the kitchen. He bumped into a small island on wheels that Steve used as extra countertop space. The little counter moved and he fell, still laughing, eyes wild and unseeing.

Steve stood up and rushed over, not thinking but froze when a knife flashed in Bucky’s flesh hand, the sharp tip of a K-bar pointed directly at Steve’s groin. They stared at each other. Bucky’s hysteria dissolved at what he perceived as a threat from Steve.

“You used to be fond of that part of my body,” Steve told him huskily. “I’m rather fond of it too. You might be fond of it again. Let’s not damage it.”

Doubt flickered in Bucky’s eyes and the knife vanished somewhere within his baggy clothes once more. Steve amiably held out a hand to haul Bucky to his feet and, after a long moment’s consideration, Bucky took it.

The man weighed nothing. Steve felt like he just pulled up a feather. The only weight Bucky seemed to carry was his metal arm.

Steve couldn’t help it. He let his concern show through. “When was the last time you ate, Buck?”

Bucky’s head tipped to one side once more and Steve wondered if Bucky was processing the question analytically or questioning Steve’s sincerity. Hell, maybe it was both.

“I don’t remember.” His nostrils flared and almost involuntarily Bucky swayed toward Steve, breathing deeply. “You smell…different.”

Steve blinked. “Different?”

“You smelled of cedar, soap and-“ His brow creased. “Bergamot.”

Steve gave a jolt of surprise and chuckled. “You always smelled of Barbasol, cinnamon and Ivory soap.”

“Why bergamot?” Bucky asked. The more he spoke the less gravelly his voice became.

Steve shrugged. “I got fond of a tea when we were in Britain called Earl Grey. I drank it a lot. The cedar I think was part of the aftershave I used then. I can’t find it now.” He hesitated. “I know you have a lot of memories chasing around in your head, Buck, and I know it must be confusing and disturbing that you can’t pinpoint things but please, you came to me because you know you can trust me. I love you. I would never hurt you, never use you, never force you to do anything, be anything, you don’t want.”

Bucky’s jaw clenched and he gave one, terse, reluctant nod of acknowledgment.

“You need a bath. You stink of sweat and God knows what else. I won’t go anywhere except downstairs to get the food when it arrives. I won’t let anyone in. I won’t let anyone hurt you, but you need to take care of your physical needs. Let your guard down for just a little while and eat, sleep.” Steve knew his tone was pleading but couldn’t help it. “I’ve got your back.”

Those eyes, once so full of emotion and life even through the hardships of a brutal war, fixed on a
point passed Steve’s left shoulder, dead and empty once more of anything. Bucky nodded impassively and Steve decided it was better than violence.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, causing him to jump a foot. Bucky also jumped, quickly scanning around for a threat. Steve dug the phone from his pocket and held it up sheepishly. “Food’s here.” He pointed toward the bathroom. “Bath is that way. Shirt and sweat pants that should fit you are in the bottom drawer of the bureau in my bedroom. A brand new package of underwear is in the top drawer.”

Steve took a chance and turned his back on the other man, sauntering to the door with a wave over his head. “I’ll be back in three shakes. You won’t notice I’m gone, I promise. Get cleaned up and we’ll figure out what to do next over some Chinese.”

He felt Bucky’s eyes focused between his shoulder blades until the door closed behind him. He leaned against it, rolling his shoulders and head to ease the muscles.

Bucky exuded violence, carefully controlled admittedly but any prey animal in his vicinity could pick up that Bucky was a predator, a hunter. Steve had been fighting against his instinctive fight or flight response to Bucky’s mere presence.

‘My God,’ Steve thought with a shudder, ‘what did they do to him?’

***

The name slipped off of Rogers’ tongue so easily but still seemed dangerously foreign even as it made his head ache and his heart beat a bit faster. Memories came and went, slipping through his mind like water through his fingers. Flashes of scenes here, photograph still shots there and always pain with them.

His questions answered through the newspapers jogged some memories. With his mother’s name, he investigated, found Winifred Barnes’ grave and stood staring at the simple gravestone for an undetermined amount of time. He felt nothing, remembered little except a smell: lavender and soap. It caused his eyes to tear. He looked for a grave marker for a father and found none, which bothered him a little but he quickly discarded the sensation.

With the color red, visions of blood and lights caused him to run. Run, run, runrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrunrun. He found himself in some field with sleeping sheep dotting the bucolic landscape. His feet were blistered, his sides heaved like a race horse and his hands were scratched and bruised.

It took him awhile to return from that episode, crouching in alleyways, snapping and snarling as vicious as any stray dog, not sleeping, eating from garbage cans and bathing in rain water. He remembered something from those instinctive reactions though and after some reconnaissance (and theft), he made his way to England, barely keeping himself together through the long flight with a screaming baby right behind his seat and snoring seat neighbor. The babe was helpless and no threat, just annoying. The seat neighbor was easily ignored, especially since he was the one who spiked the man’s drink with a sedative that made the stewardess think he was a drunk.

Once in London, he sent off another letter request as something occurred to him. It had been a long flight and the magazine assortments had done no justice to the first twenty minutes waiting for takeoff let alone the entire flight. The in-flight movie occupied his mind enough to not think too much if he could help it. He meditated the rest of the time.
The answer to his next query prompted him to purchase an electronic device that stated it was a phone and accessed the internet that paid by the month with a card. He removed the GPS chip easily enough and looked through the internet until he found Rudyard Kipling's *Rikki Tikki Tavi.*

It was an insipid story, so naïve…yet full of heroism and loyalty. He read it over and over and over. Then he read other stories by the same author about a boy raised in the jungle of India by wolves. That he could relate to, even if the prose was still a bit naïve.

Stories of animals made his flesh hand itch to bury it in soft fur and hear the rumble of a purring cat or the happy whine of dog. It prompted his next question which had a surprisingly disappointing answer.

He watched, stalked and hunted Steve Rogers for over a month all over New York City, marking his habits, his routines and the people he associated with on a daily basis. Breaking into Stark Tower had not been easy, mostly through a lot of sleight of hand or outright theft of id cards and pass codes. Stark was one tick short of paranoid, which he approved of.

Now, having confronted, of a sort, his prey, he felt conflicted. Steve offered him a beer, chatted at him congenially, answered the question that drove him to be here in the first place, to confirm a memory of skin against skin, and now was bringing up dinner and giving him a place to hide from Hydra.

He didn’t want to go back to Hydra, or the KGB, or S.H.I.E.L.D. or anyone. He didn’t want to be the Asset, he didn’t want to be the Winter Soldier, he didn’t want to be anything except safe.

He found himself under hot water, scalding his skin, with no recollection of getting there. It was becoming a common problem, these blank spots. They should have worried him more than they did.

He heard outer room’s door open, his enhanced olfactory senses smelling the rice and spices of what Americans considered Chinese food. Finishing his scrub down and rinsing shampoo from his hair, he turned off the water, towed himself down efficiently before wrapping it around his waist.

He stepped in front of the mirror over the sink and stared into it.

He was safe nowhere but maybe here, if Steve Rogers was to be believed. He could be this James Buchanan Barnes that he resembled, that he remembered in bits and snatches of illusive memory. Even if it wasn’t true, something in the blond man’s honest blue sky eyes made him want to be Steve Rogers’ Bucky very, very badly. Made him want to try.

*Who the hell is Bucky?* He remembered saying those words, an echo of a more recent memory wiped away, or at least attempted to have been wiped away.

He stared hard at the face in the mirror, imagined a world without this Steve Rogers in it and saw his face contort in pain.

“I will be Bucky,” he snarled at the face in the mirror and exited the bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

The tune Steve was humming/singing is "That Face" from *The Producers.* (goes off
singing "I wanna be a producer..."
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I make absolutely no claims to knowing much about PTSD other than what I’ve read. I have never suffered from it and, may the Goddess bless me, I never will. Depression after my father's death was bad enough. I have STRONG respect for those who do suffer it, no matter how they come to it, and persevere, survive and THRIVE with it. THOSE are heroes in my book too because getting over the trauma is a process neverending. I’ve known enough Vietnam veterans to know that. And our current veterans should get kudos for meeting that enemy headon.

Thus if I get anything wrong in these next few chapters, pardon my ignorance, chalk it up to someone lucky enough to NOT suffer PTSD but know that it’s ignorance not disrespect when something doesn't jive just right. I don't plan on going into too much detail in any case. Better writers out there than me are tackling that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He did what?”

Steve winced as Tony’s last word nearly came out as an indignant shriek. CEO of Stark Industries and Tony’s lovely lady, Pepper Potts, had her hand over her mouth in equal dismay at the news that Steve received a visitor without JARVIS or any of the security of Stark Towers the wiser. Her strawberry blond hair haloed her head angelically from the stream of sunshine through the large windows.

“How-Who-When-?” Tony was sputtering incoherently as he circled the room in an erratic pattern that was making Steve dizzy following him. He stopped, clapped his hands once and said, “JARVIS? Is there anyone in Captain Rogers’ rooms?”

“Not according to my sensors, sir,” JARVIS intoned apologetically.

Tony whirled on Steve accusingly. “How’s he doing that?”

Steve shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know how you scan for people as it is, let alone how he’s dodging your scans, Tony!”

Tony glared at him a moment longer and then huffed a little laugh. “Well, as soon he gets out of his wild animal phase and is somewhat domesticated, let me know. I want to pick his brain and take apart that arm.”

Steve started to snap something and realized that Tony, while being serious, was offering the proverbial olive branch. He was saying, in his way, that he was willing to let Bucky remain, hidden and protected.

“I will,” he promised and Tony winked at him, earlier pique gone. Steve turned to the woman now eyeing Tony in exasperation. Apparently he wasn’t the only one who could be thrown by Tony’s quick mood shifts. “Pepper, we need to figure out clothes for him. I can’t exactly take him to a mall.”
Pepper tapped her well-manicured right index finger to her bottom lip exactly twice and then gave a decisive nod. “I will find a measuring tape and you get his measurements. We’ll have some clothes made up for him.”

“Nothing fancy,” Steve warned. “Who knows what he’ll do to them if he has violent outbursts or something.”

Both Pepper and Tony looked momentarily arrested by the thought. “Is that likely?” Tony asked, a flash of worry crossing his face.

Steve shrugged. “I’m going to assume he’s suffering from some form of PTSD. I’d be shocked if he didn’t. He was showing signs back during the war, but we didn’t understand it then. It was considered a weakness and, if the soldier refused to return to the battlefield or went AWOL, they thought him a coward.”

Pepper muttered something impolite but Steve only raised his hands placatingly. “Don’t shoot the messenger. Things are a lot better for soldiers now, no matter what they scream on the television. People understand the mental state more and give them better treatment than in my day.”

Tony, deciding that changing the subject was best, began issuing rapidfire notations for JARVIS. “JARVIS, we’re going to need to reinforce security on the captain’s floor. No one on that floor without Rogers’ express permission. We’ll need food, toiletries like shaving supplies, clothes, shoes and eventually whatever medication is prescribed for our uninvited, but welcome,” he added with a side glance at Steve, “guest. As soon as we figure out how you can access his existence, I want him monitored at all times. Until then, monitor the captain instead in case he’s injured by his friend. Steve is to have access to a personal money account for whatever is needed.”

“Tony,” Steve began but subsided when the billionaire philanthropist turned on him with a stern look.

“Is he your best friend?” Tony demanded. Steve nodded. “Are you my friend?” Steve nodded again. “Then he’s my friend. Shut the hell up. He gets the best help money can buy and God knows, money and brains I have in supply.”

“And ego,” Pepper added drily, “don’t forget ego.”

Tony waved away her words dismissively. “That’s a given.”

Steve and Pepper grinned at each. Tony wasn’t short on modesty either, in Steve’s opinion.

“I’m assuming we’ll eventually need a therapist of some sort. They will have to be vetted six ways from Sunday,” Tony was continuing on his list. “Make sure they have no Hydra ties and won’t divulge the nature of their patient to anyone, especially the military and the press.”

Steve smiled slowly. “I have someone in mind already.”

Tony looked startled but caught on quick. “Sam Wilson?” Steve gave one short nod. “Excellent. I know you trust him but I want to make sure. JARVIS, start a discreet background check on Samuel Wilson, United States Air Force, 58th Rescue squadron. Once he’s cleared, we’ll contact him regarding our guest.”

Pepper wandered over to stand next to Steve, sliding her slender arm through his to link them at the elbow. They watched Tony plot and scheme and plan for every contingency and fall out that could happen with Bucky’s deprogramming and rehabilitation.
“It’s going to be hard,” she noted.

Steve glanced down at her and then back at Tony. “I didn’t expect it to be easy.”

“No matter how hard we try to hide him, his existence will leak out,” she continued. “There may be only so much Stark Industry lawyers can do. Hydra is officially listed as a terrorist organization and Homeland Security may claim jurisdiction and forcibly remove him as a matter of national security. We may have no choice but to turn him over, Steve. I just wanted you to be aware.”

Steve felt cold. He hadn’t thought of that. “Then we’ll have to do our best to make him as secret as we can for as long as we can.”

“And don’t forget to label everything,” Tony concluded.

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS agreed but if the AI could sound exasperated, it did now.

“Anything else?” Tony asked Steve.

Since Steve had no idea what Tony had been ordering and organizing because he hadn’t paid any attention, Steve shook his head. He trusted Tony, and Pepper could reign in Tony’s more bizarre impulses, so Steve figured he could leave and go back to his quarters without worrying about someone inadvertently coming for a visit and getting eviscerated.

“Sounds like you have all the right plans in motion, Tony,” he told the other man. “I’ll go back and see what I can do until we can get a therapist here. Let me know when Sam passes your checks and I’ll call him. Right now I’m just treating Bucky like I would a wild animal.”

“Make no sudden moves, speak in quiet reassuring tones and offer food, water and necessities without strings?” Pepper guessed. Steve sighed and she took it as his agreement as he knew she would. Pepper was an expert at reading men, especially men used to command and power, and could manipulate them with her eyes closed and her hands bound behind her. She pulled him down for a peck on the cheek. “Good luck and let us know if there is anything you need.” Her voice was encouraging but had a hint of steel beneath the words.

Pepper Potts was not a woman to argue with.

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve acquiesced with a smile.

He left Pepper haranguing Tony about something he did to one of the fancy sports cars the man owned but Pepper liked to drive and headed to the elevator. He stepped in and knew JARVIS would take him to his floor automatically. The doors opened and he stepped out to a bizarre tableau.

Bucky was in the corridor in front of his door. At first Steve thought he was fighting an opponent, an intruder, but after two alarmed steps he realized Bucky was alone. Thinking maybe Bucky was in the grip of a nightmare Steve changed his movements to a sedate approach, watching.

Bucky turned, his movements economical, deadly but graceful like a predator cat. His eyes were open but distant as if focused inward. It took Steve a moment to realize that Bucky was engaged in shadow fighting. In and out the other man’s arms and legs weaved against a mental opponent, acting and reacting to feints and attacks. With a deadly swipe of the knives in his hands, Bucky stopped, chest heaving and staring down at what was likely his mental opponent’s dead body on the floor.

“You told them I was here.” The words came out harsh but resigned.
“Yes.” Steve saw no point prevaricating. “Stark is agreeable to help you...us.”

“Because of you.” The phrase was not a question.

Steve felt compelled to clarify. “Because he’s my friend, yes, and you are my friend. In his mind, that makes you a potential ally and friend and Tony goes to bat for his friends.”

Bucky said nothing, wiping a trickle of sweat with his right hand that was near his left eye. Still silent, he turned and headed back to the door of Steve’s quarters.

“Why were you fighting out here?” Steve asked curiously, following him.

Bucky paused before pushing the door open. “I didn’t want to break anything.”

Steve raised an eyebrow at that but didn’t remark further. He did note however to find a way to get Bucky either into the training room or have Tony build one on Steve’s floor. Either way, there would be interaction of people who might set off Bucky’s sense of self-preservation and cause him to attack what he might perceive as a threat.

“Tony’s blocking this floor to anyone other than me and you.”

Bucky interrupted. “His artificial intelligence security hasn’t even detected me yet. I saw it scanning the room earlier.” He sounded smug. “How can he guarantee I’ll stay here?”

“I told him you would. I gave him my word.”

Bucky gave Steve a sharp look and Steve returned it. He waited with heart pounding for Bucky to give a nod of acquiescence even though his lips were pursed and his eyes narrowed.

“Furthermore,” Steve continued, walking over to dim the windows to limit the light into the room a little from the panel on the wall, “anything we need, we merely have to let JARVIS know and we have it.”

Bucky muttered something in muted voice that sounded Russian to Steve but he didn’t know what the other man said.

“Do you remember Sam?” Bucky shook his head. “The man with the wings on the helicarrier?”

Bucky growled. “Yes. He was an adequate soldier.”

“He works for the Veterans Administration as a therapist for soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder.” Steve hesitated. “Do you know what that is?”

Bucky gave him a look just shy of being condescending. “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, is a psychological condition occurring after an experience or experiences of stress, such as wartime combat, physical violence or natural disasters. It is usually categorized by nightmares, anxiety attacks, depression, flashbacks, and avoidance of situations or locations that cause any of these reactions.”

His reply sounded as if it were a textbook response he memorized, not an explanation given in his own words. Steve mentally sighed; Bucky’s recitation was done almost sneeringly, as if he perceived anyone suffering from such conditions as weak, when it was actually the opposite. They weren’t weak, they were survivors and that made them strong.

“Well, he’s good at his job from what I’ve seen and heard. He can help us.” Steve started turning
anything that smacked of assistance or charity from ‘you’ to ‘us’ sensing that Bucky would take it better that way.

He was right. Bucky gave a curt nod and brushed his damp hair from his face. “That’s acceptable, if you think you need the help.”

Steve suppressed another sigh. “I think we both need it, Buck. Sam’s a good man, we can trust him.”

Bucky’s expression said Steve could trust Sam but he’d reserve judgment. Steve ignored it.

“Do you want some lunch? I have some stuff for sandwiches.” Steve changed the subject to something a bit safer.

“Da,” Bucky responded automatically and then amended, “I mean, yes please.”

Steve chuckled. “My Russian’s not so bad that I don’t know what ‘Da’ means.”

Bucky wandered over and watched with interest as Steve began to stack turkey, ham and pastrami on sourdough bread slices, adding cheese, tomatoes, lettuce and onion before slathering it with mustard the way a good Brooklyn boy should. He sprinkled a handful of potato chips in the corner of the plate that wasn’t covered by sandwich and brought from the refrigerator a giant jar of dill pickle spears.

“Pickle?”

Bucky nodded warily, watching with continued interest as Steve stuck one on each plate. It was as if he were cataloging every motion Steve made for future review. “Beer?” Another nod and Steve handed Bucky a plate of food and brown bottle of suds. The other man doggedly followed Steve into the living room, where Steve clicked on the television before settling down on the sofa. Bucky lowered himself gingerly beside Steve, not too close to crowd him but close enough that Steve could feel the other man’s wary tension.

Steve bit into sandwich and groaned with pleasure. Other than coffee, he’d skipped breakfast and knew Bucky had nothing to eat all day himself. No coffee either. How had the man functioned all these years, when Bucky used to be non-verbal before his first cup in the morning?

In mid-chew he noticed Bucky watching him and not the television or even his plate of food. He arched an inquiring eyebrow, finished chewing, swallowed and asked, “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Must be something, otherwise you wouldn’t be staring at me like I’m a two-headed calf at a carnival.”

A twitch lifted Bucky’s mouth just a fraction at the comment. “Your reaction is strange,” he confessed.

“I know for a fact you haven’t eaten all day either. At least I had a cup of coffee this morning. Eat and let’s see how silent you can be with all that scrumptiousness in your mouth.” Steve challenged.

His ploy worked. Bucky bit into his sandwich, blinked at the flavors assaulting his taste buds and chewed with a vengeance. He had half his sandwich eaten before Steve finished two more bites of his own.
“Yeah, who’s got the strange reaction now?” Steve laughed. “God, don’t choke on it. No one’s going to take it away from you.”

Bucky slowed down, chewing thoughtfully between swigs of beer or the crunch of a potato chip. Steve idly flipped through channels, avoiding news stations for now and finally, unthinkingly, landed on a documentary of America in the Pacific during World War II.

The Commandos entire focus had been Hydra, and Hydra primarily was in Europe, to their knowledge anyway, so his awareness of the Pacific theater had been basic reports of SSR fields units there, news bulletins and whatever the papers reported. The fighting for Americans in the Pacific continued well after the Germans surrendered and since he was already part of an Arctic ice flow, Steve didn’t know how it all ended until he woke up again 70 plus years later.

“Amazing that it took bombing two of their cities into oblivion for the Japanese to stop,” mused Steve out loud.

“Nagasaki was not the original primary target,” Bucky supplied, not even paying attention to the television, still crunching on a handful of chips. “Kokura was the primary, but previous bombings of nearby towns around Kokura negated the American pilots’ vision and a failed fuel pump on the Bockscar prompted them to drop the bomb on the secondary target instead.”

Steve stared at Bucky. The words were said so matter-of-factly, so coldly that Steve was flabbergasted. “Yes,” he allowed, “but I was referring mainly to the Japanese fighting ethic so different from our own that gave us the mindset to use such fire power against them to force a surrender.”

“Bushido,” Bucky replied. “The Way of the Warrior, the samurai.” He looked up, his blue-grey eyes intense. “What is more honorable? To serve loyally a bad master or to rebel against him because of the horrible things he does because it is the right thing to do?”

Steve paused, bottle of beer raised half way to his mouth. “For them or for us?”

Bucky’s eyes flickered uncertainly. “Us?” he queried.

“Americans, non-Japanese, whatever,” Steve clarified.

“Ah, gaijin, non-Japanese,” Bucky stated with a nod.

“To a Western mind, it is better to morally uphold right and wrong, to protect the weak no matter who the oppressor is, even your own master or lord. It’s not considered disloyal or dishonorable to do so. To be the kind of man that would bully, torture and subjugate the weak is considered the greater crime. To the Japanese mindset, at least in the old ways, as I understand it, loyalty and honor is everything. Once you gave your service to a lord or master, you served no matter if he was a good or bad man. You didn’t have to like what he did, but if you wanted to maintain your honor and your family’s honor, you did as you were told. Maybe the lord was evil and everyone knew it, but he was still the lord.”

Bucky nodded, an almost smug expression on his face. “I feel like a samurai sometimes.”

Steve’s breath shuddered in his chest. This was an important insight into how Bucky’s brain worked now. It went against the grain of everything he and Bucky had believed as younger men, more naïve men, but now…now they were different, lived different lives since that cold afternoon so long ago when they were separated.

“Your master, or masters,” Steve amended, “aren’t here anymore, but you didn’t commit ritual
suicide as many samurai were supposed to have done. Do you feel lost without them?”

A crease furrowed Bucky’s brow a moment as he thought. “I feel adrift, with no anchor. It’s disconcerting. It is why I sought you out. You came to my mind, in my thoughts, and gave me an anchor.”

Steve tipped his bottle in Bucky’s direction in a silent salute, but inside his heart was racing and blood pounded in his ears. Was Bucky using him as a substitute for whoever handled him in Hydra? He felt sick at the thought but could he use this to his advantage?

“You won’t hurt me,” Bucky continued, still immersed in thought.

Steve realized that Bucky was thinking out loud, working it out even as his mouth moved. It was such a Bucky thing to do, and so not a Winter Soldier thing, that he almost smiled. Almost.

“You won’t make me go into cryo. You won’t punish me if I fail a mission. You won’t wipe me.”

As Bucky listed all the things Steve wouldn’t do to him, his voice grew more certain with each item checked. Steve grew sick with each one, knowing Bucky had been subjected to them all, was remembering them all.

“You won’t try to drown me. You won’t beat me. You won’t starve me. You won’t make me lie in my own filth. You won’t make me slit the throat of a child. You won’t make me rape an unwilling woman or man. You won’t—“

“God! Enough!” Steve shouted, surging to his feet. “They—“ He couldn’t finish the thought let alone the sentence. His gaze was trapped by Bucky’s, one as horrified as the other was confused. “Fucking animals,” Steve cursed and slammed his bottle onto the coffee table, making Bucky jump.

Steve walked away from the couch, feeling Bucky’s eyes boring a hole between his shoulder blades. He stopped his pacing, put his hands on his hips, and let his head hang as he thought.

“Do you trust me, Bucky?” he finally asked. He heard a rustle. “Answer me. Do you trust me? I want to hear your answer out loud.”

“You will not make me—“

“Yeah I got that part.” Steve slashed a hand through the air to stop the renewed diatribe. “Do. You. Trust. Me?”

“I don’t know.” The answer was steady and honest even if it spiked through Steve’s heart like a knife. “I only know what you won’t make me do because you are not that kind of man. Things I don’t ever want to do again.” The voice turned small and Steve looked up from the floor to see Bucky shrinking into a ball on the couch, the plate of only a pickle spear remaining clattering to the floor.

“Bucky.” Steve couldn’t stop his voice from sounding anguished. He walked over to the other man, sat next to him and gathered him into his arms as much as he dared. Bucky stiffened in his embrace but didn’t pull away. “I won’t make you do anything. I may ask, I may whine and cajole and give you puppy-dog eyes but I won’t make you. Okay? And I will never ask you to do any of those horrible things to another human being.”

Bucky took in a shuddering breath.
“Do you understand?” Steve’s voice became harder. He wanted to make sure Bucky understood. “You have a free will.”

“I understand.” The words were spoken softly, almost with a questioning tone as if Bucky wasn’t quite certain he was giving the appropriate response.

“I mean it,” Steve added firmly. “If I overstep my bounds, you tell me and I’ll back the hell off. Getting you as healthy and whole as possible is now my primary goal. I want to get to know this new Bucky. I know the old Bucky and he was great but he’s changed into a new Bucky and I think he’ll be pretty great too if he’s given a chance.”

He pulled away to catch a flash of skepticism on Bucky’s face.

“I’m a different Steve than your memories might provide, so we’ll be getting to know each other all over again. Like friends from childhood meeting for the first time as adults.” The words were true in a sense but felt like sawdust in Steve’s mouth. They had been more than just ‘friends’ as adults and eventually, if they hadn’t already, Bucky’s memories would show him that.

He was startled when Bucky turned his face to Steve’s, leaned up slightly and brushed a soft kiss on the side of Steve’s mouth. “I understand,” he whispered against Steve’s cheek, the words firmer and his voice huskier, making Steve’s pulse race for a different reason.

Bucky pulled back, his blue-gray eyes taking in Steve’s flustered countenance with something very like satisfaction. “Can we watch something other than war things?”

Steve nodded automatically. “Sure. You have a preference?”

Bucky shook his head and picked up his beer. “Something stupid,” he suggested.

Steve laughed. “My friend, you just described most of everything on television in America.”

Chapter End Notes

The ‘riddle’ regarding a samurai’s honor I shamelessly lifted (but paraphrased as it was from memory) from one of the storylines by the brilliant creator/writer/artist Stan Sakai and his Usagi Yojimbo. Even if you don’t like comic books themselves, pick up Stan’s collected works at a library. You’ll be a fan in a heart beat. I guarantee it. How can you go wrong with a samurai rabbit with a strong sense of honor and a penchant for finding trouble whether accidentally or on purpose? He’s a lot like Steve, now that I think on it.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay. It's been real stressful at work and while I got a lot written on breaks and lunches, I wanted to heavily review everything. The boys have pretty much been telling me what to write and I'm gonna have to put my foot down in the next couple chapters and get back to the frigging angsty 'plot, what plot' trope I've been doing here. I was going to post last night but I left my flashdrive at work and had to go back and get it today. :)
Just to be ornery, Steve gave another languorous stretch before focusing his attention completely on Bucky again. “So,” he said conversationally, “you don’t sleep at all?”

Bucky tried to talk and finally had to clear his throat and lick his lips before he managed it. “Only when the body forces me too.”

The body. Obviously whatever reconditioning Bucky was subjected to in the past forced him to think of his mind and his body as separate entities, one physical, one intellectual and neither intertwined with the other.

“I see,” Steve answered though really he didn’t deep down. He couldn’t conceive of the body and the mind being so disparate that one functioned without the other’s consent.

“I meditate when I need extra boosts of energy,” Bucky continued, eyes still tracing the lines of Steve’s body hungrily. Steve was starting to feel like an antelope being eyed for a lion’s snack.

“So translation from new Bucky to old Bucky is ‘I work until I fall over’. That I understand.” Bucky eyed Steve with a bit of confusion before giving an insouciant shrug. “Hey, I’m getting the hang of the translations,” Steve protested when Bucky finally wandered out of the room. Steve hesitated just as Bucky’s hand was closing the door shut behind him. “You can shower with me if you want. Conserve that energy some more?”

The door jiggled a little and Bucky’s head popped back into the room, eyes wide and jaw slack. Steve kicked himself. That was a stupid thing to say.

“Really?” Bucky asked almost too eagerly to be normal.

“Um, yes?” Steve was beginning to doubt his sanity.

“I want to know how to use it.”

Steve blinked. “Use what? The shower?” The glare he received was designed to scorch and sear.

“No,” Bucky clarified as if speaking to particularly dimwitted child, “the electric razor.”

Steve had no idea how Bucky’s brain jumped from shower to razor. “Okay. I don’t use it much myself. Were you wanting to tame some of that beard?”

Bucky gave a terse nod and scratched at the underside of his chin pointedly.

“Okay, shower and a shave it is,” Steve agreed amiably, still a bit confused but also a bit eager to see the changes in Bucky’s body over the years.

Steve started the hot water (each floor had its own tank system for water, bless Tony’s hedonistic soul) and shucked his pants before stepping in. It took Bucky longer to remove the shirt and sweatpants he was wearing (had been wearing just those since his last shower in fact) and he clambered in after Steve.

“You step under the water. With that long hair you’re going to need more of it than me,” Steve told him and they brushed against each other as they shifted positions. There was no hiding that their bodies were interested in the other by the time they were done.

Steve sluiced the night’s sweat and dreams away with his liquid soap while Bucky washed his hair, wincing when the metal hand caught in the strands. When Steve handed Bucky conditioner the man stared at it blankly.
“What’s this?”

“Put it in and rinse it out after your shampoo. Makes your hair softer and untangles easier, according to Pepper.”

Bucky frowned as if doubting the veracity of someone by the name of ‘Pepper’ but did as he was told. He slicked it in, combed it through and huffed. “It’s not lathering.”

“I don’t think it’s supposed to,” Steve said unhelpfully.

Bucky rinsed it out and Steve couldn’t help but lift a hand to the wet, silky strands. “Works like a dream,” he said huskily. “Feels nice.”

“Mmm,” was all Bucky would answer. “Your turn.”

They swapped with the awkward, and arousing, shuffle, and Steve suffered through Bucky watching him wash and rinse his own hair. Steve even used the conditioner, though he normally didn’t with his short shorn hair, when Bucky dumped some in his palm.

Steve took a chance and turned his back to Bucky. “Scrub my back?” he asked guilelessly.

There was a long moment of silence in which Steve wondered if he was going to get his heart ripped out by a metal hand instead before he heard soap being dispensed into Bucky’s hand and felt the water warmed flesh hand slowly begin to rub his back and shoulders.

It felt heavenly. He moaned involuntarily and tilted his head into the spray almost helplessly. It had been so long since he’d been touched so intimately. The occasional hug, hand shake or one of the other Avengers slinging an arm around his shoulders or waist companionably was all he’d received since 1945.

“You like that.” Bucky’s tone was thoughtful and seductive.

“Yes.” Steve thought there was no point in denying it. “You can use both hands if the soap won’t ruin the prosthetic.”

The flesh hand stopped moving a moment and then the water warmed metal gently ghosted down Steve’s spine and he shook at the touch. “Bucky,” he whispered almost mournfully.

“You miss him, your Bucky.” The tone was matter-of-fact but with a twinge of…jealousy?

“Every moment since I watched you fall, every breath since I woke from my coma almost three years ago,” Steve replied honestly, ignoring Bucky’s separation of himself then and now. “You have no idea how much you meant to me, Bucky. That’s why I want to help you so much. I will never get the old us back but I want to try a new us just as badly.”

There was a thoughtful hum to that and Bucky’s hands continued to wash and knead with great care and precision. The hands stopped and there was a squeak on the tub flooring. “Wash mine next?” The words were spoken and there was a slight tremor of apprehension to them.

Steve was floored and flattered by the trust. He turned around, allowing the stream of water to sluice off the soap Bucky liberally coated his back with. He was presented with Bucky’s own back. Scar tissue around the shoulder spider-webbed into his entire torso, where the occasional pucker of a bullet wound, pale white stripes of what looked like whip lashes and the thin welts of healed knife wounds marred the perfection of Bucky’s skin. A mole here and there dotted the battle-hewn landscape just to give it variety.
Steve’s hands shook as he reached around for the soap dispenser. He poured on a generous helping, rubbed his hands together for even distribution and returned the favor. He kneaded tense muscles to relaxation, skimmed lightly over scar tissue bunched and mangled forever, and tamped down a rage like he never felt before. The things that had been done to his Bucky…if he could go back in time, he’d rip the spines out of all the sadistic bastards who took a good man and turned him into a mindless automaton killer.

Bucky didn’t flinch at any of the touches, leaning back into Steve’s hands as if starved for the attention, which he probably was. Another thing Hydra was going to answer for. Steve soaped and kneaded and lathered and murmured words of encouragement, telling Bucky how beautiful he was to Steve, which he was, and how glad Steve was that Bucky trusted him, which he also was.

Steve reached over his shoulder and removed the shower head wand and hose to rinse off Bucky’s back. With each scar revealed from the soap lather, Steve leaned over and pressed a gentle, butterfly kiss.

“What are you doing?” Bucky tried to look over his shoulder. He didn’t sound alarmed, just perplexed.

“Admiring the view,” Steve told him before giving a bullet wound scar a kiss. “Now shut up and get rinsed off.”

He continued the rinsing, which was quick, and the kissing, which was not. When Bucky couldn’t take anymore he turned around to face Steve, aroused and heavy lidded.

“Want me to do your front?” Steve asked playfully and after a moment of wide-eyed hesitation, Bucky nodded.

Steve put the shower head wand back in its wall holder, allowing the water to sluice over his back and shoulders once more. More soap went into his hands but Bucky grabbed the bottle from him before Steve could set it back on the shelf and poured some into his flesh hand. Soon both their chests were soaped and being petted, Steve enjoying the feel of Bucky’s muscular physique and Bucky…well, Steve wasn’t sure what Bucky was feeling but he was concentrating hard on it whatever it was.

A little frown creased his brow and Steve took a soapy forefinger and smoothed it out. “What are thinking so hard about, soldier?” he murmured. “Is it of national importance?”

“Is this…affection?”

Steve’s heart broke at the question. “Yes,” and then he giggled helplessly when Bucky’s metal hand skimmed over a ticklish spot on Steve’s rib cage.

The metal hand snatched back in alarm. “What was that? Why did you laugh?”

Steve’s heart shattered into tinier pieces. “It tickled, Bucky, don’t you remember being ticklish?”

Bucky scowled. “No.”

Steve skimmed a hand over a spot he remembered was ticklish for Bucky, causing the man to flinch and squirm, an involuntarily chuckle bursting through his lips. “That’s a tickle.”

Bucky looked up, his long hair slicked back, his face still bristly with whiskers and his eyes stormy gray. He leaned over and up, sealing Steve’s lips with his own for a brief, closed mouth kiss that made Steve dizzy.
“Is this affection?” Bucky asked against Steve’s lips.

Steve drew in a shuddering breath. “Yes and it’s also desire.”

There was another thoughtful hum from Bucky followed by his usual matter-of-fact tone saying, “Are we done now?”

It took Steve a moment but he finally got himself together enough to rinse them both with the shower wand, turn off the water and reach for towels. He handed one to Bucky, who briskly dried himself, put the towel on the floor as a makeshift mat to dry his feet before stooping (and giving Steve a nice, torturous rear view) to pick up the towel and wrap it around his waist.

He turned to catch Steve gawping, which made Steve blush and Bucky arch an eyebrow. Steve swore there was a knowing smirk attached to that raised eyebrow as well. Was he being played? Steve gave Bucky a suspicious look and thought he was but decided to play along to see what else Bucky would do.

He turned on the electric razor and handed the buzzing instrument to the other man. “Just run it over your whiskers on this setting, then move it to this one for a closer shave.” Bucky grunted acknowledgment and leaned over the sink to peer into the mirror as he began clipping his dark fuzz.

Steve grabbed his toothbrush and paste and escaped to get dressed and brush his teeth in the kitchen. While he was there he started the coffee as well. He sensed he was going to need the caffeine to stay one step ahead of this new Bucky Barnes. He had a feeling he was going to have to catch up quick to get ahead though.

Bucky emerged from the bedroom, clothed again in black sweat pants and a green t-shirt with the US Army logo on it, socks and his boots in hand to sit on the sofa.

Steve snapped his fingers and said, “That reminds me,” and walked over to a small table by the main door to pick up a small box. “Pepper told me to take your measurements and she’d get whatever clothes we thought you needed.”

The wary expression returned to Bucky’s face but he obligingly stood up as directed while Steve read the instructions on how to take proper measurements. Steve was conscious of the smell of Bucky beneath the soap and shampoo. To Steve it was a scent that always went straight to his head when they were together so long ago. Apparently it still did. Despite whatever was mentally going on in his head, the body was still Bucky.

Once the measurements were taken and scribbled down, Steve prepared two mugs of coffee, black, two lumps of sugar, and handed one of them off. “So, what do you want for breakfast? Eggs? Pancakes?”

“I was an ass to you sometimes.”

Steve hesitated, not certain what Bucky meant. “I don’t understand,” he finally confessed.

“Making you go on those double dates that treated you so horribly. I was an ass.”

“Uh.” Steve’s brain went blank. “It was camouflage, I guess you could say, to hide what we were doing at home.”

Bucky’s expression turned skeptical. “And you believed me when I told you that?”
“Yes.”

“You were a fool then and still a fool if you believe it now.”

Steve shrugged. “Sometimes. What, should I think you liked seeing me rejected by all those women?”

Bucky’s answer was unhesitating and certain. “Yes.”

Steve paused, working out where Bucky was going with this and coming up with nothing. “Okay, why then?”

“It meant that you were only for me and that the rest were too blind to see gold when it shone so brilliantly in front of their ignorant faces,” Bucky stated. His gaze on Steve was hard and triumphant. “It meant that you wouldn’t go to anyone else and that I wouldn’t lose you. It was a test.”

Steve sipped his coffee and cast his mind back to those awful, awkward dates. If what Bucky said was true, it would explain the expression that Steve could never quite pinpoint the emotion; it was satisfaction that Steve wouldn’t leave him. He felt poleaxed.

“Maybe,” he rejoined huskily, “it was you that was the fool and still are if you thought that anyone could measure up to you in my eyes.”

Bucky reared back at that, eyes wide and head tilted as if the thought never occurred to him. Perhaps it hadn’t, then and now, Steve reflected.

“Now about that breakfast?”

***

He watched Steve make scrambled eggs and bacon, putting the bread in the machine that made toast as directed, slathering butter from the refrigerator when the slices popped up with a cheerful ding! He sipped the coffee, which was acceptable and mentioned that he preferred tea now. After Steve gave him such a mock-scandalized look, Bucky let himself smile…just a little bit.

Steve glowed at that. So Bucky did it again, only a bit bigger. Steve lit up the room. Interesting that how Steve perceived Bucky’s mood modified Steve’s own. The dynamic was strange but somehow…familiar.

The blond giant insisted they eat at the table this morning so they settled into wooden chairs and ate off the wooden table. Well, plates set on the wooden table. Steve babbled about a variety of things, but mostly what kind of clothes the ‘new Bucky’ would prefer and what the ‘old Bucky’ liked. He ignored the new Bucky comments. He wasn’t interested in being a new Bucky. Steve was safety and he wanted the old Bucky from those decades ago so the old Bucky was what he would get.

If Steve was happy, Bucky was safe. It was a simple arrangement. Achieving the goal though was harder than he imagined it would be.

“You hated green!” Steve protested as they surfed, as Steve called it, various clothing websites that Pepper directed them too for choices. She assured Steve, and thus Bucky, that she would order the proper sizes from his measurements, they just had to pick out the styles.

Bucky tipped his head to one side. “Why?”
Steve groped for words and came up with nothing apparently when he confessed, “I don’t know. You never wore it, refused to even buy anything green. You liked red and blue when we could afford new clothes. You made me buy every color of blue imaginable.”

Bucky knew why even though Steve sounded baffled. “Your eyes.”

Steve shot him a look. “That’s what you always said. God, I was sick of blue all the time. And brown and gray.”

“How about yellow?” Bucky suggested and Steve grimaced. “It’s like sunshine, like gold, like your hair.”

“And makes me look horrible,” Steve countered firmly. “If you want yellow, go for it.”

Bucky twitched. Over his dead body. He must have said that out loud for Steve laughed uproariously and Bucky felt a curl of warmth in his belly at the sound. He made Steve laugh and laughter meant happiness.

“Okay, the hunter green and the dark blue of this style, the black and white of this one,” Steve began ticking off the item numbers from the online catalog. “We liked these pants and Pepper can figure out what jeans to buy. Don’t let her get the skinny jeans, they look stupid to me,” Steve muttered.

“They hug the leg and butt?” Bucky asked, casting his mind back to a different online store’s selection.

“Yeah those. They look uncomfortable.”

“I want one.” If Bucky had his way with them he wouldn’t be wearing them long anyway. He would use them to torture Steve’s imagination of what was underneath and then when Steve couldn’t take it anymore he would-

“Oh, okay, so what about shoes? Dress shoes are a given for later but we shouldn’t need them now. Sandals? Tennis shoes for sure, new boots, loafers or whatever they call them now.” Steve clicked on a link to a shoe site and squeaked in an unmanly fashion that made Bucky snigger to himself. “We’re men. How many kinds of shoes do we need?”

Bucky leaned forward to look at the offerings and was impressed. He started pointing at various styles and Steve dutifully clicked on them to show more details. Soon he had a list of shoes almost as long as the list of clothes.

Steve eyed the list and then looked at Bucky, who looked back at him smugly. “Why?”

The question confused Bucky. “Why what?” He didn’t like the dumbfounded look on Steve’s face. “Is this not what I should wear?” Had he chosen clothes Steve’s ‘old Bucky’ wouldn’t have chosen?

Steve shrugged. “Style is style, if you think you’ll be comfortable in it, then go for it. If how I imagine you’ll look in these are any indication, we’ll be beating people off you with a stick.”

Bucky was surprised. “My clothes would make them attack me?” He’d never heard of anything preposterous until he remembered city street gangs and their ‘colors’.

“No, they’ll be wanting to jump your bones,” Steve told him with a grin.
“Jump my-” It dawned on Bucky what Steve meant. “Oh, you mean they will find me attractive, will flirt and want to bed me.” Steve’s expression turned jealous. “I will tell them that I belong to you,” he assured the blond man next to him earnestly.

Steve gave him a suspicious look as if he suspected Bucky of fibbing but folded the list and put it in his pants pocket. “I’ll give this to Pepper in a bit.”

Bucky was alarmed. “You’re leaving? I want to go.”

“Er,” Steve hedged and Bucky felt a wave of rebelliousness crash through him. It must have shown on his face when Steve held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, but if you attack Tony in his lab, I’m knocking you unconscious and tying you down-“ He abruptly stopped and Bucky watched in fascination as anger suffused Steve’s features, turning them red.

“What is wrong?” Bucky asked, hesitantly putting his flesh hand on Steve’s shoulder in what he hoped was a comforting gesture.

“What I just threatened to do,” Steve muttered. “I won’t, you know. You had enough of that for a million lifetimes and-“

Bucky tuned out everything else Steve said, staring in wonder as the man ranted and raved at Bucky’s past treatment. As hard as it was for him to imagine, Bucky saw that Steve cared for his wellbeing, genuinely cared. Not because he was a weapon or an asset but because he cared.

“I know you won’t hurt me,” Bucky told him, interrupting Steve mid-rant,” however if I become a danger to others you must do what you must do to contain me.” He shrugged. “I will not think less of you.”

Steve’s mouth snapped closed so hard his teeth clacked. He glared at Bucky but somehow Bucky knew he wasn’t angry at him, just the circumstances that might force Steve to make such a decision. Finally Steve let out an angry huff and started walking to the door.

“Okay, come on, let’s take you on a test drive.”

Bucky was confused again. “A test drive? I don’t understand.” Isn’t that what you did with cars?

“You and me both.” That answer made even less sense but Bucky dutifully followed Steve into the corridor and to the elevator. Steve indicated to the AI JARVIS ‘Tony’s lab, please’ and the pleasant British voice chatted amiably with Steve, still unable to detect Bucky, which Bucky felt really smug about.

The elevator doors swished open and Steve stepped out, looking around. Bucky had no doubt that the AI monitored at least Steve’s side of the conversation and warned Stark of their intent to visit. He was correct.

A stocky but fit man, older physically than he and Steve, stood near the larger of four tables, hastily putting away what looked like weaponry. Bucky didn’t bother hiding his smirk this time. He didn’t need a gun or pointy object to kill Stark.

“So you brought your houseguest for a visit?” Stark turned to face them and scrutinized Bucky with interested but nonjudgmental brown eyes.

“Yeah,” Steve confessed. “I think he was getting cabin fever.”

Stark’s eyes lit up and turned predatory. “So, Barnes, you want me to look at the arm, see if there’s
anything wrong with it, or,” and Stark’s tone matched the predatory expression, “see if I can make it more comfortable.”

Since he didn’t feel discomfort with it, Bucky saw no point in the latter. With a quick glance at Steve, who gave him a reassuring smile, Bucky stepped forward and Stark eagerly latched onto the metal prosthesis and practically manhandled him into a nearby office chair.

“You won’t know I’m tinkering,” Stark told him.

“Tony.” Steve’s tone was a warning and Stark’s enthusiasm waned just a bit…for just a moment.

“I promise, Cap, I won’t take him apart at the seams until he’s ready,” Stark assured Steve with a charming rogue’s grin. Steve rolled his eyes and watched.

This was familiar to Bucky so he sat back and relaxed while Stark tinkered, occasionally barking at Steve to handle some tool or other. At least with Stark he wasn’t bound with steel bands to keep him in check. He looked around the lab with interest, cataloging automatically the locations of things he recognized and noted the things he didn’t for further analysis when he was more trusted in Stark’s inner sanctum.

“I see the hallmarks of someone’s shield edge colliding with some of these plates,” Stark muttered, giving Steve a pointed look.

“He was attacking, I was defending. I wasn’t aware I had to maintain the integrity of a metal arm on my best friend’s body in case you somehow wanted to take a look at it sometime in the future, Tony!” protested Steve with a smile. “Your desires weren’t on the top of my list.”

“It should be,” Stark told him snidely. “It should be for everyone.”

“You wish.” Steve and Tony both turned to smile at a willowy redhead who entered the room via elevator.

Bucky immediately formed his opinion and dismissed her as irrelevant: civilian lackey of Stark’s, corporate dress and high heels. No threat there.

“Ah, the lovely Pepper Potts. I have a list for you so we can spend more of Tony’s money.” Steve pulled the paper from his pocket and handed it to her. She looked it over, pale eyebrows climbing into her hair line.

“Wow, he has more fashion sense than you two put together,” she told Tony and Steve. Both men began protesting and Bucky’s interest in her perked up.

This was the Pepper that Steve talked about. As CEO of Stark Industries and formerly Stark’s public assistant cum babysitter she was a powerful business woman and, judging by how she was playing the other two men in the room, an excellent manipulator.

Not an easy mark, thus not to be dismissed as he thought previously.

Her attention eventually gravitated to him and she blinked in surprise only once. “You must be Steve’s Bucky?” She walked over, a long legged gazelle walk full of grace and hidden power. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Cap let you out for a bit?”

He nodded, saying nothing. Her eyes weren’t as blue as Steve’s but equally as sharp and compelling.
Definitely not an easy mark.

She waved the paper at him, smiling hugely. “Well, I’m always happy to spend Tony’s money on someone other than him and me. We’ll order these clothes for you and you’ll be getting more packages here in the next few days than a kid at Christmas.”

“That’s all I’m good for,” complained Tony, jamming something long and pointy in Bucky’s arm, causing sparks to shoot out for a brief moment.

Pepper leaned over and pecked a kiss on Stark’s cheek. “Not the only thing,” she told him in a more intimate tone, “but I keep getting distracted by the Hamiltons and the Benjamins you pay me to say that.”

Tony snorted and more sparks flew from Bucky’s arm, causing Pepper to take a step back with a sigh. “There’s no talking to him when he’s got something mechanical at hand,” she confided with a wink to Bucky before turning to Steve.

She linked arms with the blond man and drew him away, talking furtively and quietly but neither of their gazes strayed to him, even unconsciously, so Bucky concluded that they weren’t talking about him.

Steve gave a roll of his eyes and said, “Yes, Mom,” in a sarcastic tone that earned him a playful smack on the bicep before Pepper headed back to the elevator.

“I expect you to remember we have dinner reservations tonight, Tony!” she singsonged. “JARVIS, remind him two hours beforehand and nag him until he pays attention.”

“I will be happy to do so, Miss Potts,” the AI intoned with what seemed a bit too eager a tone for a computer program, even an advanced one.

Stark, Bucky noted, merely grunted, concentrating on the fireworks he was now producing at Bucky’s mechanized wrist. Steve wandered over to watch, smiling occasionally at Bucky, who tried to smile back but knew he failed when Steve’s eyes would wander away.

If Steve became disinterested in Bucky’s welfare, he would have nowhere to go. This was unacceptable. He was formulating someway to attract Steve’s attention again when actual pain filtered from his prosthetic into his brain.

He yelped and sprang from the chair, reflexively backhanding Stark viciously. Over Steve’s surprised, “Bucky!” and, as an afterthought, “Tony?” Bucky could discern Stark’s triumphant laughter.

“Yes! I knew I was genius but sometimes I amaze even myself,” crowed Stark, holding his jaw tenderly and dabbing a hand to his split lower lip.

Steve got between Bucky and Stark, glowering impressively at the smaller man. “What did you do?” he accused.

Bucky stared at the arm in wonder and leaned over to touch the chair. He sensed the heat of his body from it. He could feel the softness of the worn leather and the texture as well.

“He made it feel,” Bucky said in wonder.

“Bastards had this fantastic tech on him,” Tony explained, taking a hand up from Steve. Both men looked at Bucky as he walked around touching variously objects in discovery. “No one ever
bothered to open it to its full potential.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked.

“All the sensors Hydra put in there, they either had them dialed down to a minimum or not activated at all.” Tony gestured at Bucky, who faced them both, his brain crashing with the sensory awakening he’d been denied before. “All I did was tweak here, activate there, plug in a few things and voila! Sensory perception as acute as our flesh arms.”

Tony looked distinctly smug.

“What if it overloads?” Bucky thought that was a legitimate question but Stark waved it off.

“Easy peasy. I’ll just make adjustments until we reach the right comfort level. I didn’t turn everything up all that much but still…” Tony’s expression turned knowing but not condescending. “Nice, huh?”

Bucky brushed the metal hand over the wall, felt rather than allowed the prosthetic to dissect the stucco plaster with its knobbly texture. “Nice,” he agreed.

“You two may thank me later with a bottle of Scotch.” Tony turned back to the table where he’d been working when they arrived. “Now shoo. I’ve got work to do and a jaw and split lip to hide or Pepper will permanently maim me.”

“Tony, I-“ Steve started to say but Stark waved him off.

“I know, Cap. If he uses it against you, however, or any of us, I reserve the right pull the damned thing off his body and beat him with it while I’m in the suit.”

Bucky thought Stark might be joking but he could tell Steve didn’t take it as such. “You have that right,” Steve agreed, shooting Bucky a warning glance.

Bucky tried to look innocent but since he’d never been innocent to his knowledge he was sure that expression was ludicrous to behold.

“We came down here for a different reason,” Steve said and Stark turned his attention back to them.

“Yeah?”

“We need one of the spare rooms on my floor turned into a gym or sparring room. Something to maybe burn off excess energy without dragging him to the gym floor.” Steve gave Stark a look that Bucky didn’t understand.

Stark hesitated for just a fraction and then nodded carefully. “Okay, sure. We’ll discuss what you need tomorrow?” His expression was also complex, part consternation, part concern and some other emotions Bucky couldn’t interpret either.

Steve blew out his breath and Bucky sensed he missed something between the two men, some undercurrent or silent communication in their expressions. It made him uneasy…and possessive. He didn’t have that level of communication with Steve and he should. He knew he should.

The old Bucky would have.

He was really starting to dislike Steve’s ‘old Bucky’. The man had no sense, apparently. In this
world, you took what you wanted, when you could and were thankful to get it. The old-fashioned values of a gentleman’s honor had no place in the world in Bucky’s experience and admittedly limited memories.

He waited impatiently for Steve and Stark to stop their silent facial footsy and for Steve to pay attention to him again. That was the point of all this, after all. When Steve finally paid him attention, Bucky forced a beaming smile that made Steve’s footsteps falter and a confused expression cross his face.

Too much, too soon. Damn it.

“Ready to go back and watch bad television?” Steve asked, recovering from his confusion nicely.

“At least watch something that won’t rot your brain,” called out Stark.

“Says the man that listens to music that is mostly heavy guitar and a lot of screaming,” rejoined Steve, flipping Stark off over his shoulder. Bucky laughed. It was such an obnoxious thing to do and so seemingly out of character.

“I taught you that!” admonished Stark but Steve ignored him this time, shepherding Bucky to the elevator. After giving Bucky another thoughtful look before the door came open, Steve hesitated.

“Make JARVIS see you.”

Bucky tensed. “What?”

“You heard me. Let JARVIS sense you. Tony did you a favor with the arm. Return it.”

Bucky’s brain started twitching at the idea of Stark’s advanced security knowing his every move but he nodded, wanting to continue to acquire Steve’s good grace. Plus Steve had a point, naïve though it was.

He raised his voice, inwardly wincing at the gravelly tone and said loudly, “Winter Soldier Protocol One Niner One Seven Jig Baker Baker, osvobozhdeniye.”

JARVIS’ tone was dry when he immediately reported, “Security breach in lab, unauthorized entrant finally detected.”

Both Steve and Bucky gave Stark innocent looks when Stark exploded in a litany of questions regarding how Bucky accomplished that and commentary regarding their family history and legitimacy. Once he wound down, he snapped at the AI, “Authorize Barnes, James B in residence with the Captain to visitor status and access only, JARVIS, and if he sneezes in way that seems suspicious, tear gas his ass into oblivion and we’ll sort it out later.”

Steve sighed and Bucky maintained his innocent expression until the elevator door closed behind them. Both men immediately broke into what could only be classified as, well, giggles.

“I thought he was going to have heart palpitations right there!” wheezed Steve almost gleefully.

“Wait until I tell him how easy it was to circumvent the system outside the building using a paperclip, some copper wire and-“ He stopped when Steve shook his head frantically even as he laughed.

“Plausible deniability,” Steve gasped. “If you don’t tell me, I can plead ignorance. Eventually though you’ll have to tell him. That’s a dangerous breach that could affect everyone in the
“I’ll draw him a diagram,” Bucky drawled laconically.

“Not the way you draw,” Steve snorted. “Why you took art class with me, I’ll never know.”

“I liked watching your hands move over the paper,” Bucky said automatically, unthinkingly. He inwardly cringed. Where had that come from? That sounded weak and stupid.

Steve seemed unfazed however, even a little pleased at the confession. “I always wondered,” he mused. He then stepped out onto their floor when the elevator stopped and the door swished open once more. “So, what do you want to watch?”

Bucky dutifully followed Steve back to their quarters, feeling better about himself, the direction of his plan in conquering Steve Rogers and making a place in his world. There were no handlers, no scientists (other than Stark and presumably eventually Banner), and best of all, no mind wipes and cryo chambers.

Yes, if all continued as it was, his place would be secured in no time. Steve would have his old Bucky back like he wanted and Bucky would be safe once more. Mission accomplished.

Chapter End Notes

osvobozhdeniye—Russian for ‘release’, if Google translate is to be believed.

The current military alphabet (such as Whiskey Tango Foxtrot) is different from the one used during World War I and II. Actually the one used during WWI was different from WWII as well. I did not know this until I went digging to make sure I had my code right (did you notice what the initials indicated as well as the numbers?). I also didn’t know that the evolution of ‘niner’ was because ‘nine’ over grainy early radio transmissions could sound like ‘fire’ and sometimes you didn’t want that to happen on a battlefield, especially if it was your guys out there on the line. So there’s your history lesson for today!
“What is this?”

Steve looked up from his newspaper three mornings later to find Bucky holding…well, he wasn’t certain what it was himself, not at the angle Bucky was holding it anyway.

“What’d you get that?” Steve asked, holding out his hand. Bucky obligingly placed the small object in his palm. “Oh, it’s one of those MP3 gadgets. Instead of records, they put them on hard drives now and you listen to them that way.”

Bucky eyed it warily. “It looks like a bug, you should destroy it.”

Steve sighed and Bucky’s eyes flickered uncertainly. Steve had the impression that Bucky was not trying to fit into the modern world so much as trying to mold himself to fit into Steve’s world. Admittedly Bucky’s experience with technology and 20th & 21st century progress was less stunted than Steve’s but only when it came to military applications. He had no problem with RPGs, guns of any type, vehicles or surveillance equipment. Give him a microwave or tablet and he was immediately wary and suspicious.

“It’s like a radio, Buck,” Steve patiently explained. He was doing a lot of patient explaining and it was starting to wear on his nerves. Now he understood how everyone felt when he first woke and started adjusting to the modern world. He must have been like a 2 year old, constantly asking “what is this?” and “why?”

“A radio,” Bucky repeated skeptically. “How does it work?” Steve gave the man points for being open to trying new things though.

Thankfully Steve had an older model of the same gadget, which allowed him to navigate the screens easily enough. “Plug in the headphones and put them in your ears.”

Bucky did so, even more suspicious, and Steve hit the play button. When Bucky winced, Steve dialed down the volume but what he had heard was Glen Miller. After a couple moments Bucky jerked the plugs out of his ears in disgust.

“These things are just asking for you to be attacked. You can’t hear anything and it’s distracting,” he complained.

“You used to love Glen Miller,” Steve said, finding the perfect opportunity to test his theory on Bucky’s behavior.

The MP3 player was snatched from Steve’s hands and the plugs were back in Bucky’s ears in a heartbeat. “I still do,” he said a bit loudly over the music only he could hear.

“Mmhmm,” Steve nodded, unconvinced but not letting it show.
So it was true. Bucky was altering his behavior and his personality to mold himself into what he thought Steve wanted: the old Bucky. With a sick feeling Steve wondered if that included the mild flirtation they had in the shower a couple days ago and the idle touches Steve had been suffering through (suffering in the sense that he felt guilty reciprocating when he desperately wanted to). He wondered how he could reach Bucky and reassure him that his place in Steve’s life was not dependent on whether or not he was the ‘old Bucky’.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he jumped in his seat. Thankfully Bucky was facing away from him and missed it, otherwise the man would have done a perimeter sweep and dogged Steve’s footsteps for an hour afterward.

“Hello?” Steve glanced at the caller id as he hit the answer button so he knew who it was but old habits died hard.

“Hey, buddy, we did all that running around and I hear he just shows up at your front door?” Sam Wilson’s voice was cheerful but Steve sensed the undercurrent of concern.

“Well, more the couch in Stark Tower and less my front door. You should have seen Tony’s hissyfit when JARVIS had no clue Buck was here.”

“I’d have paid for that,” Sam chuckled. “You need my assistance?”

“Would you mind? Come up for the weekend at least. How’d D.C.?”

“Oh, you know, still politics and bullshit. A weekend in slumming luxury sounds good. Stark let me know I’ve been cleared by his people, which is nice to know, considering I didn’t know I was Hydra, but then I might not have known anyway, right?” The tone was joking but still that undercurrent of seriousness. The whole Hydra mess had been serious, after all.

“I’m sure we can squeeze you in,” Steve said drily. “No one is allowed on our floor without my permission, so text me when you get settled and we’ll get you access.”

“Stark thinks of everything,” Sam told him. “I’ve already got my own room, access to his superfine gym and a pretty little keycard.”

“Tony thinks of everything, or rather Pepper does.”

“A free flight to New York would be—hold up, got another call, might be important.” Steve waited for Sam to come back to their line (something that took him forever to figure out how to do) and turned in place to look at Bucky.

The plugs were still in his ears but Steve knew the music was off because Bucky was giving him a very apprehensive look.

“Okay, well apparently that was Stark Tower’s helicopter service confirming my pickup location and time of arrival in New York.” Sam sounded flabbergasted.

Steve laughed. “I told you, Pepper thinks of everything!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam said dismissively. “I’ll bring you some stuff to read over that might help you and depending on what we stumble across with your boy and some names of people better at this shit than me. You have a mild form of PTSD but you can manage it, being all supersoldier and stuff. Him and you, this ain’t gonna help your stress levels, Steve, so one thing I want to say for certain right now is that you have to take care of you first. He gets too much, you gotta leave. Worry about damage control later. You do him no good if you are out of it too.”
Steve huffed but Sam overrode whatever he was going to say. “You may be all superbuff but I’m serious, man. Go get a manicure, smash some punching bags together a few times, attempt to beat the snot out of the Hulk, whatever relieves the tension but you gotta get it done.”

“Yeah, all right,” Steve hedged.

“Talking to a brick wall, I swear,” Sam complained. “I gotta go, people coming in. I’ll see you boys tomorrow afternoon and we’ll plan pizza and beer.”

“Pizza and beer sounds great,” Steve agreed and they hung up.

He faced Bucky, who was staring at him, his face closed and eyes blank.

“This Sam is going to take you away.” The sentence was not a question, but a certainty.

“No, he’s coming to visit because he’s our friend.”

“Your friend.”

Steve shoved a hand through his hair in exasperation. “Do you remember what I said about Tony?”

Bucky watched him a moment and relaxed just a tiny fraction. “That Stark is your friend and I am your friend so that makes him my friend too.”

Steve nodded. “So?” he prompted Bucky to the next conclusion.

“Wilson is your friend and I am your friend so that makes him my friend too.”

“Next time you doubt any of that, I’m making you hand wash the dishes instead of using the dishwasher,” Steve joked. “And I’ll burn everything in the pan that night.”

Bucky continued to stare at him. “Why is he coming?”

“To see us,” corrected Steve. “He wants to hang out and relax and see if he can give us ideas on how to keep your progress going forward.”

Neither mentioned the nightmares and didn’t need too. Steve was relieved at first that Bucky was attempting to sleep when he hadn’t bothered before until one night just as Steve was drifting to sleep Bucky snuggled next to him. Bucky’s unguarded murmur of “I’m glad you have them too” made Steve feel all sorts of awful that either of them had to suffer them at all but took comfort in the fact that Bucky was glad he wasn’t alone in them. Perhaps it made him feel more…normal, if that was possible.

“I don’t want to leave and I don’t want you to leave.” Bucky’s tone was plaintive.

“I’m not going anywhere, Bucky,” Steve assured him though at the moment he’d love nothing more than a walk through Central Park to get the hell out of the tower. He didn’t dare leave Bucky, as the man did not take any long absences well and he didn’t trust Bucky in public yet.

“I’m tired of this music,” Bucky said instead, holding out the MP3 player. “Can we have Stark put something different on there?”

Steve took the player and popped one plug in his ears to start shimmying to the Andrew Sisters’ “Oh Johnny”.

He turned as he moved, spinning clumsily (Pepper tried once to teach him to dance, declared him
hopeless and forbade him from gracing his presence on the dance floor at any official Avenger public functions), and catching Bucky’s expression, full of longing and helpless rage.

He jerked the ear plug out and asked quickly, “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t do that in front of anyone else,” snarled Bucky, hands clenching into fists.

“Uh,” Steve said in confusion, “dance badly?”

“Show off your body that way,” Bucky snapped. “They’ll want you, you’ll see they are better for you than me, you’ll leave and I’ll have nothing again.”

A look of dawning horror spread over Bucky’s face, eyes widening and his mouth opened and closed helplessly. His expression clearly stated he couldn’t believe he said that out loud. Unable to look at Steve, Bucky did what Steve would politely call a retreat. What it really could be classified as was fleeing for his life, door to the bedroom reserved for, but rarely used by, Bucky slamming behind him.

“That was interesting,” Steve murmured. “Don’t you think so, JARVIS?”

“I couldn’t say, sir,” JARVIS answered apologetically. “However, I did record it if review is needed.”

“Oh yeah, review is needed,” Steve said. “Don’t lose that.”

‘Stupid.’ Bucky paced his bedroom, where he kept his clothes but rarely actually slept.

‘Stupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupid.’

The old Bucky was a sap and a naïve moron and it was getting harder and harder to pretend to be him. To mold himself into him. Bucky was only getting some recollections of his old life back and most of them consisted of him mooning over Steve but not doing a damned thing about it until it was almost too late. The moron.

“But I have to be the old Bucky,” he muttered to himself. “It’s what Steve wants.”

Are you sure? A little voice whispered in his mind.

“Yes,” he snarled at it. “He misses the old Bucky. I want Steve so I have to be the old Bucky.”

Are you sure he won’t like a new Bucky? A new and improved Bucky?

The doubt crept in, seeping in like a mold, wrecking his intentions and his self-imposed mission.

He has said repeatedly he wants to get to know the Bucky that’s here today. Don’t you believe Steve?

“He’s a sap too,” snapped Bucky, continuing is dizzying speed around the large room. “He’s too trusting by half. It’s a miracle the man is still alive.”

He’s not a fool, you know that. He’s an optimist. You used to like that about him.

“I still do!”
Then trust that he’ll like whoever you are now.

Panic sliced like a double-blade sword through Bucky’s little voice, constricting his chest, making it difficult to breathe. That was the problem; Bucky didn’t know who he was now.

“But what if he gets to know this new Bucky,” he whispered at the now dead little inner voice, “and doesn’t like him. Then what will I do?”

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Steve didn’t see Bucky the rest of that day, didn’t feel him slip into bed that night (and Steve was awake, he would have noticed) nor saw him at all the next morning. Knocks on the door was met with silence. He could sense Bucky on the other side, could feel the alert tension through the door but not once did the damned thing open and Steve was loathe to force it open for fear of wrecking any sort of trust between them. Bucky had a right to his privacy after all.

He ignored the niggling images of Bucky lying in a pool of blood from any self-inflicted harm he might cause himself. Besides, JARVIS would have told him if that happened.

When Sam finally arrived after four in the afternoon, Steve was a mess of self-doubt, self-recriminations and confusion. He gave JARVIS authorization to allow Sam onto the floor and when Sam entered Steve’s rooms, he stopped and gave the tall blond man a slow once over.

“What has he done or what did you do?” Sam’s dark skin contrasted with his pristine white shirt and dark slacks. He was dressed casual but still stood at a military attention that would likely be with him for the rest of his life.

“I don’t know, to be honest,” Steve admitted and explained everything that happened. “I’ve been having JARVIS record everything.”

“Including in his bedroom?” Sam’s brown eyes were narrowed and his strong features tightened with concern.

“Yes, that’s how I know he hasn’t tried to hurt himself,” Steve confessed.

“He knows that JARVIS is watching,” Sam reminded him, striding to the closed door on the other side of the living room area. “He knows anything he does will be reported.”

“Unless he’s circumnavigated JARVIS’ programming again.”

Sam shot Steve a sharp look, as if chiding him for his negative attitude.

Steve’s chin lifted defensively. “It’s been hard, Sam, harder than I thought it would be. At first it was deceptively easy until I figured out what his game was.”

Sam’s hand, curled to a fist to knock on the door, froze and turned slowly back to Steve. “What do you mean, his game?”

“He’s,” Steve gestured helplessly as he sought the right word, “molding himself, trying to square peg who is he now into the round hole of what he used to be seventy years ago. He thinks that if I get to know the new Bucky, if the new Bucky is given free reign, I won’t like him, that I’ll reject him and he’s smart enough to know that he’s socially defenseless. There’s no safe house for him now except me.”

Sam stepped away from the door completely and stared hard at it. Steve could see the thoughts and
decisions flickering over Sam’s face. The man was astute, clever and compassionate. His experiences, both personal and professional, were invaluable and an excellent source to troll through for strategies.

“Order pizza, I like mine with meat, meat and more meat. Cheese is not optional either, it’s required. You will pick it up. Get out of here, Steve. I want you gone at least an hour getting beer and pizza.”

Steve was going to protest but he saw the look on Sam’s face. It was resolute.

He lowered his voice. “You want to see what he’ll do if I’m gone?” Sam nodded and then made shooing motions.

Steve checked he had money in his wallet, grabbed the keys to a car Tony lent him (“You can’t do everything on a bike, Rogers!”) and went out the door, closing it behind him firmly and ignoring the pang that felt like he was screwing up really, really bad.

***

Bucky heard the front door open, knew that Sam Wilson arrived even before he heard the man’s voice, a bit deeper than Steve’s rich baritone, droning through his bedroom door. He sensed rather than heard the other man near his door not long after and felt the presence withdraw.

He heard the words ‘pizza’ and ‘out’ and ‘Steve’ and it took a moment to process that Steve was being ordered to leave. Before he could get off the bed where he’d been ensconced for almost 24 solid hours in a puddle of misery, he heard the door close with a firm thud.

Steve left him! Bucky’s mind couldn’t grasp it. He jerked open the bedroom door and glared at the black man staring him down with nary a flicker of dismay.

“Why did you make him leave?” demanded Bucky, allowing for the first time in months the dangerous gravelly voice of the Winter Soldier to crawl out of his throat.

Wilson’s brown eyes narrowed but he tipped his head back a bit and answered, “Because he needed to get out. He’s been cooped up in here with you, making himself sick. Is that what you want? Steve sick, unable to care for himself, let alone you?”

“I take care of Steve,” shot back Bucky. “I always did.”

“You mean the old Bucky did,” corrected Wilson, not unkindly.

Bucky managed not to flinch but just barely. “I take care of Steve,” he repeated stubbornly.

“Well, you’re doing a bang up job there, buddy,” Wilson told him, throwing his hands in the air. He spun on his heel. “When was the last time you ate? I need a beer. Steve got anything that passes as beer or does he still drink-“ Wilson gave a snort of disgust as he jerked open the refrigerator. “Yeah, he still drinks swill.”

Wilson pulled a bottle from the appliance and set it on the cabinet. He turned back to Bucky, who reluctantly followed him to the kitchen, loathe to let the man from his sight. “Are you hungry?” Wilson repeated more slowly.

Bucky shrugged. “Steve’s going for pizza. I heard.”

Wilson rubbed a hand down his face in consternation. “What is it with you 1940s people that make
you hard as rocks and sometimes as smart?”

Bucky glared at him.

“I’m here to help, you know. Steve said you said it was okay. Did I make the trip for nothing?”

Bucky fought the urge to fidget and won. Barely.

“Right.” Wilson handed Bucky the bottle. “I’m not a supersoldier and Rogers doesn’t keep a bottle opener. Open that for me.”

Gritting his teeth at how unintimidated Wilson was by his glowering, Bucky popped the metal lid off like a cork with his metal hand, sending it pinging around the kitchen like a ricochet.

Wilson watched it with interest. “Nice,” he drawled in bemusement.

“Glad I could amuse you.”

“God knows Rogers isn’t any fun anymore, what with his moping over you like some lovesick swain,” Wilson mock-complained. “All right, while your guard dog is out of the house, talk, scream, shout, punch but just not my nose please.”

“What?” Bucky was confused. “Here?”

“Where else? You want a Fruedian couch, me with a little notebook and soft waves crashing like music from the stereo? Yeah, here.” Wilson swigged from the bottle and wandered back into the living room area, drawing Bucky with him like flotsam after a boat. He plopped on the sofa and watched Bucky watch him. “You’ve got the usual, I’m guessing, nightmares, flashbacks, unpleasant stuff, I get that. What else?”

Bucky gave an insouciant shrug that he sensed didn’t fool Wilson for a moment.

“Man of few words, not the way Steve used to describe you.”

Bucky huffed and paced around the sofa a few times. “I don’t remember me,” he finally confessed, emphasizing the word ‘me’.

“To be expected, Barnes,” Wilson told him with sympathy, no trace of pity, and a gentle tone. “They violated your mind dozens and dozens of times. It was essentially mental rape. You aren’t going to get over that overnight or even in a month or two. Hell, maybe not in a year or two. You might never get everything back. Steve knows this. I know this. Everyone who cares about Steve and, by extension, you know this. We don’t expect miracles, man, we expect that you will not know things, not understand things, feel frustration and anger and helplessness at the things that were done to you. We expect you to be human.”

Bucky flinched, unable to stop it. “Everything in my head is like a directive still. A mission to be accomplished. Successful completion of missions provided me with safety, food, sleep, hygiene, sex, whatever. The only way I can function now is to make Steve my mission. If Steve is happy with me, I’m safe.” Bucky grew frustrated, knowing he was explaining himself badly.

Wilson sipped his beer and Bucky saw the moment the other man understood. “Steve’s your new handler.”

“Yes!” Relief flooded through Bucky. Finally! Someone understood his predicament.
“Steve’s not gonna like that term, Barnes.”

Bucky frowned. “Why?”

Wilson seemed to struggle for words. “Sit down,” he invited, “I’m getting a crick in my neck looking up at you and I’m not getting any younger.”

Bucky obeyed, nearly vibrating with excitement that Wilson understood and that Wilson would help him, he had no doubt. “Why won’t Steve like it? It helps me!”

“Yes, it helps you stay the way you were,” the other man told him. “He doesn’t want you to blindly obey, he wants you to think for yourself, decide what you want, what you like and have the freedom to do it when it’s convenient to you not when it’s convenient for him.”

“Like the old Bucky.”

Wilson sighed and leaned forward. “Yes, like the old Bucky, like me, like him, like Stark, like anyone who wasn’t used as-dammit. I’m doing this wrong. Okay, when you picked out clothes and you didn’t want to buy the red even though it’s your favorite color and you picked green when you used to not like it, Steve commented on it, right?”

Bucky nodded, remembering. “He told you?”

“Buddy, he has to have someone to talk to as well,” chortled Wilson. “You’re a handful and while he’s loving having you with him you make him crazy like all good roommates are supposed to.”

Bucky frowned at that but it didn’t sound negative the way Wilson told it. He did have some early memories of him and Steve in a tiny apartment occasionally fighting over doing dishes or leaving windows open or closed. It seemed plausible.

“While he was startled you wanted a color that you way back in the day wouldn’t have chosen, he went ahead and put it on the order list, right?”

Bucky nodded. “Yes.”

“And he didn’t complain, didn’t force you to not get it, right?”

“No.”

Wilson spread his hands in an obvious ‘well, there you are’ gesture. “He wants you to become your own man. He’s changed too from the Steve he was. He’s had experiences without you that has shaped and changed him, sometimes for the better and maybe a few habits that are for the worse. He doesn’t want you to be the old Bucky, he wants you to be Bucky. Only you can figure out who that is, from what you were, or what you remember you were, to what lessons and experiences you can remember from being the Soldier to what you are learning and adapting to now. Do you understand?”

“I think—” Bucky thought hard, remembering Steve’s various expressions, not only when he did something that the old Bucky would have done but also something different from the old Bucky. Sometimes he approved and sometimes he disapproved, Bucky recalled, in both instances. “I think Steve wants – I don’t know what he wants,” Bucky finally confessed, torn. “I don’t want him unhappy, because then—“

“He’ll want you to leave and you won’t have anywhere to go.” Bucky nodded forlornly. “Do you really think Steve is that kind of man, that kind of friend?” Bucky hesitated, his scant memories at
war with decades of experiences at the hands of others. “Okay, one thing at a time. You need to feel more trust in Steve. Let’s work on that.”

“I trust Steve,” Bucky retorted but realized almost immediately he’d responded too quickly.

“Not really, you don’t,” Wilson told him seriously. “You think you have to trust Steve because you still think of him in terms of superior versus inferior. There’s a difference. Trust is earned and given. What you are doing is obeying and not giving yourself a chance to think about why you’re obeying.”

“I don’t always obey,” Bucky muttered a bit rebelliously.

“But when you don’t you wait to see what Steve will do, right?” Wilson’s tone was knowing. “You wonder if he’s going to punish you, don’t you?”

Bucky shivered but nodded.

“And he never does, does he?”

Bucky shook his head.

“Barnes, he might be disappointed in you on occasion, as you will be in him. You may say or do something that makes him angry, whether it’s at you or the situation or circumstances that prompted you to act in a way that he disapproves of. You will have the same with him too. It’s the give and take of friendship, of a relationship of any kind really, that gives it dynamic, gives it flavor, makes it exciting and exasperating and wonderful and irritating and all the emotions that humans feel that you’ve been denied to feel for a dog’s age. We don’t expect you to get it right off the bat. We hope you do, but we don’t expect it. Do you get what I’m telling you?”

Bucky concentrated, focusing on his thoughts, now jumbled and confused, sorting them out and making them behave long enough for him to garner some semblance of mental balance. He must have been quiet for a while, he knew, but Wilson sipped his beer and waited with infinite patience which Bucky was grateful for. Steve wouldn’t have been so patient, eventually giving in to the need to smother, to hover and worry.

Wilson was refreshing and Bucky was suddenly glad that Steve invited the man to visit.

“I like you,” he confessed. “You understand.”

Wilson’s smile was as bright and cheerful as any Steve could deliver. “I like you too, what I’ve seen of you that wasn’t trying to throw me off a ship or shoot at me.”

Bucky gave him a guilty look but Wilson only laughed, reaching forward to slap Bucky’s knee in friendly gesture. “I’m just teasing,” he winked.

“Oh.” Bucky felt relieved. “I understood what you were saying but it’s hard to...” He didn’t know how to word what he was feeling.

“Oh, I ain’t gonna lie, it’s gonna be the hardest thing you’ve ever done, by far, I’m sure,” Wilson told him with brutal honesty. “It’s gonna hurt you, it’s gonna hurt Steve, it’s gonna hurt me and everyone else but you are worth the pain we’ll suffer once you finally start becoming whoever James Barnes is meant to be.”

Bucky nodded, his mind still processing. “Do you think Steve has the old-“ He stopped himself. “Do you think Steve has some of my old things?”
Wilson beamed at his correction from ‘old Bucky’ to ‘my’. “Ask him. If he balks at giving you your stuff, I’ll wallop him with an empty pizza box.”

“I don’t like the music on my player either,” Bucky plunged on, while he was confessing his sins. “But it upset Steve when I asked for different music.”

“Did your question make him angry or just confuse him?” asked Wilson interestedly.

Bucky thought back. “I-I’m not sure,” he confessed.

“Nothing to be ashamed of,” Wilson assured him. “We’ll load a whole buncha crap on there, you can listen to it all and find out what you like now. I like a lot of stuff, country, old rock and roll, jazz, blues, hip hop, soul…you name it I probably have samples of it somewhere.” Wilson drained his bottle. “I need another beer. You want a beer now?”

Bucky shook his head and looked at Wilson shyly. “I’d like some water though?”

“Water with a ton of ice coming up!”

Both men were sitting comfortably on the couch, discussing places they’d been (or rather places Bucky could remember being that wasn’t too traumatic) when the door handle jiggled and it opened to reveal Steve loaded with pizza boxes and Stark carrying in what looked like a crate of beer and other undetermined bottles of something.

“If there was pizza involved,” Stark advised everyone and no one, “I should have been consulted. I caught him heading toward one of the worst pizzerias on this side of town and he calls himself a native New Yorker.”

“I’m from Brooklyn,” Steve reminded Stark.

“And that’s not New York?”

“No.” Both Steve and Bucky stated with grave finality. “It’s Brooklyn,” Bucky added in a tone that indicated that Stark was dumb and should know better.

Stark looked between the two Brooklynites and set the box of booze down. “I’m out of my depth here, apparently.”

“This is unusual how?” Steve asked with a cheeky tone that made Bucky laugh. When Steve shot him a pleased look Bucky felt warmth spread through him. He made Steve smile again.

“And outnumbered,” Bucky added helpfully. He turned to Wilson. “Right?”

“Hey, don’t involve me. I’m from Harlem.”

“They had good music and literature, they were okay,” Steve chuckled and Bucky nodded.

“So Wilson’s on our team, three to one, Stark,” Bucky needled.

“Uh-huh, pissing match with you three? I’ve seen Rogers drink. Man doesn’t get drunk. I’m betting you don’t either. Wilson’s probably a mean drunk. Not going anywhere near that.” Stark started pulling out some beer. “I believe beer is required with pizza around here?”

Wilson looked at the label and sighed in bliss. “Ah, a man who knows his beer. Rogers drinks swill.”
“I know.” Tony grimaced. “No sense of taste.”

When Bucky remained silent as Steve continued to be ribbed by Stark and Wilson, Steve eventually turned to Bucky and said in a plaintive tone, “I could use some back up!”

“You drink swill,” agreed Bucky, causing Wilson and Stark to laugh. “But at least your taste has improved from the ‘30s and that rotgut gin you used to buy.”

Wilson and Stark’s laughter turned uproarious when Steve began to mutter in a mock-dark tone about ‘traitorous friends’ and ‘free rent’ and ‘last time I cook you breakfast’. Bucky hugged the sensation of belonging to him as Stark passed him Dutch ale and Wilson brought two plates loaded with pizza, setting one in front of Bucky and the other in front of himself. Steve and Stark sat in other chairs and the four men chatted and ribbed, teased and taunted, telling lies and stories so preposterous they couldn’t possibly be true in the time honored fashion that men do to bond.

“So Bucky and I were talking, Steve, and I was wondering if you have any of Bucky’s old things?” Wilson’s tone was casual and he actually waggled his eyebrows. “Something potentially embarrassing to you both, perhaps, that Stark and I can use as blackmail?”

Stark perked up at the word ‘blackmail’.

Bucky, belly full of good pizza and body pleasantly relaxed from the drink, food and company, almost missed Steve’s tension at the question.

“Is that a good idea?” asked Steve, giving Bucky a worried look.

“That he have his own stuff back? You have your stuff back. Was that a bad idea?” Wilson challenged and Bucky felt grateful that he did it because Bucky wasn’t sure he could have.

Steve hesitated and then nodded. “You’re right, I’m sorry.” He turned to Bucky, his face earnest. “I didn’t know how you’d react to your things. I didn’t want to hurt you more but if you want them, I’ll pull them out of storage. Some stuff I got from the Smithsonian and other stuff S.H.I.E.L.D. had in their old records that Fury got back for me. It’s not everything,” he warned, “but we didn’t have much to start with, you and I.”

“It’s okay,” Bucky assured him with equal earnestness. “I just want to see them. Maybe they’ll help me remember more or cement what I do remember.”

Stark grinned. “Look at you two, all domestic and heart to heart. It would be disgusting if Pepper and I didn’t indulge regularly ourselves.” He shifted his focus completely on Bucky. “Day after tomorrow I’ll have workmen on the floor to convert the room right next to the elevator into a sparring room for you two. It will have minimal gym equipment but it will have a mat and some punching bags so you don’t take out the wall if you get brassed off.”

Both men nodded, Steve looking pleased and Bucky wasn’t sure how he felt.

“I have been reliably informed by Pepper that the first of Barnes’ clothes and whatnot should be arriving tomorrow. I hope you have closet space.”

Bucky’s brow furrowed. “I have nothing in my closet so there’s plenty of space.”

“That’s good because Pepper went wild.”

“Tony,” Steve drew the name in a warning manner but Stark held up his hands in defeat.
“Argue with her, I’m just the money, remember?”

Steve sighed. “That reminds me, did you gift him with the MP3 player?”

“Yep! You like?” Stark turned to Bucky eagerly.

“I got bored,” he confessed.

“But it’s cool. I’ve got my laptop with a ton of stuff on there. We’ll load it with some new tunes, see what else he likes,” Wilson stepped in before either Tony or Steve could say something to floundering Bucky’s new sense of emerging confidence.

Stark, sensing something happened regarding the music, nodded amiably. “Buy whatever you need if some style strikes him. Hell, take him out on those websites that let you sample music. A lot of good Indie groups out there too.”

“Yeah!” Wilson’s brown eyes lit to an amber glow at the thought.

Bucky looked at Steve who was looking at him with a thoughtful expression. It didn’t seem like a disappointed expression so Bucky ventured a hesitant. “Okay, Steve?”

Steve smiled at him, honest and true, when he replied, “Of course it’s okay, Buck, why wouldn’t it be?”

“You just seemed surprised yesterday and I-”

Steve interrupted with a nonchalant wave of his hand. “I went through a couple months where I obsessively listened to Janis Joplin, The Doors and Led Zeppelin. Who am I to judge?”

“They are awesome bands though,” noted Stark, grabbing another beer from the near empty case and tossing it to Bucky. “Morrison’s voice practically drips whiskey.”

“That’s because he practically dripped whiskey from his veins too,” laughed Wilson.

Bucky, fidgeting as he lost track of the conversation about musicians he didn’t know yet (or at least he didn’t think he knew them), started picking up empty bottles, putting them back in their slots in the box and the plates, which he took into the kitchen. He was tossing the crusts (or pizza bones, as Stark called them) into the garbage bin when he felt Steve behind him and leaned in to the slightly taller man’s embrace when Steve’s arms wrapped around his chest.

“Better?” Steve asked huskily.

Bucky paused as he thought. “Yes, better,” he confirmed. “Wilson helped me.”

He felt rather than heard Steve’s release of breath. “I’m glad,” Steve murmured against the back of Bucky’s head, ruffling the hair a bit. “I just want you to know this, above all else, I will love you, Bucky, no matter what kind of good man you become and you will become a good man. Right now you’re hurt, you’re confused and I get that it frustrates you and makes you angry and defensive. I will be here, all you have to do is ask me, or Tony or Sam for anything you need or think you need and we’ll work it out, okay?”

Bucky nodded. Steve had made the offer before but now, after Wilson’s explanation, it seemed less an order and more of a request. “I’m sorry,” he murmured.

“For what, my Bucky?” Steve murmured back.
“Being such a pain in the ass.”

“Oh, you’re not a pain in the ass yet,” teased Steve, “but I’m hoping once you get better you’ll be a goooooood pain in the ass?” Bucky turned in Steve’s arms and saw the man giving him a suggestive leer.

Bucky smiled a little. “I loved you, didn’t I?”

Steve’s leer faltered and turned sad. “Yes.”

“I’ll love you again, I promise.”

“Wait to make promises when you’re better,” Steve protested.

“This one I won’t have trouble keeping,” Bucky assured him, putting his arms around Steve and hugging tightly. He vaguely heard Stark making gagging sounds and Wilson wolf-whistling. He ignored them, reveling in the sensory overload of both arms feeling Steve for the first time since the 1940s.

“Me either,” Steve agreed.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I got lazy and didn't edit this as hard as I normally do. Please feel free to point out any glaring mistakes, typos or outright 'that sentence made no sense, Wolfie". It's been a stressful week at work...and I've been indulging in reading a lot of Stucky to relieve stress rather than writing it. (guilty look)-Oh and more feels. I thought I was nearly done, but nope! Bucky had more feels coming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took Steve two days to get all of Bucky’s things being stored for him at the Smithsonian and somewhere in the bowls of Stark Industries. Steve received a couple small boxes of his own things back from the Smithsonian that hadn’t been used for the exhibit, soon to close. The two men, Bucky kitted out in new jeans, socks, shoes, shirt and even a hat, opened each box with a bit of apprehension.

“Wow, some of my missing sketchbooks,” Steve murmured as he dug in the bottom of one box and flipped through the books he found there. “I remember these. I did them the weekend of that big snowstorm in December. Do you remember? The weekend Pearl Harbor was bombed?”

Bucky frowned, trying to cobble memories together and gave a tiny nod. “I got a promotion?” he asked hesitantly.

“Yeah, I forgot about that!” laughed Steve. “I remember I gave you so much shit for that promotion too. It was longer hours for you, especially when a lot of guys signed up. Your enlistment delayed your basic so we got a bit of money out of those shifts until you finally went to camp.”

Steve went back to looking through his sketchbooks, pointing out a person here or a building there on occasion to Bucky.

Bucky thoughtfully picked up a book. It felt familiar in his hand and the weight was comforting. He looked at the spine. “The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling,” he read aloud. “I really liked Kipling didn’t I?”

Steve smiled a bit sadly. “Yes. I remember your ma saved up and bought you those for your birthday the year your father stopped writing. They were second hand, like everything we owned, but she was so proud of finding them and you would read sometimes after Sunday lunch your favorites.”

“Hmm.” He picked up another book, another Kipling. “I stole a copy of this in London,” he said, “but I gave it away after I read it.” He flipped to the first page of the story and read the jungle night song aloud.

“When Chil the Kite brings home the night
That Mang the Bat sets free
The herds are shut in byre and hut
For loosed till dawn are we.
This is the hour of pride and power,
Talon and tush and claw.
Oh hear the call!—Good hunting all
That keep the Jungle Law!”

He looked up to see Steve smiling at him, a reminiscent smile that curled warmth in Bucky’s belly and made his head light. “Good?” he asked huskily.

“You always had a great reading voice,” Steve told him. He picked up the collected poems and flipped through until he found what he was looking for. “This was your ma’s favorite for you to read. She said she remembered her mother reading it.”

Bucky began:

“If I were hanged on the highest hill,
Mother o’ mine, O mother o’mine!
I know whose love would follow me still,
Mother o’mine, O mother o’mine!

If I were drowned in the deepest sea,
Mother o’mine, O’mother o’mine!
I know whose tears would come down to me,
Mother o’mine, O mother o’mine!

If I were damned of body and soul,
I know whose prayers would make me whole,
Mother o’mine, O mother o’mine!”

Buck gripped the book hard, feeling the old board backing creak in his hand. “Would she?” he heard himself asked hollowly.

He felt Steve’s presence beside him, felt Steve’s arm go around his waist. “Yes,” Steve whispered in his right ear,” she would. She loved you, Bucky. A mother’s love goes through a lot more than any other love, I think. She’d already gotten the telegram when I called her. I tried to beat Western Union but I wasn’t fast enough. How’s that for advertising?” he joked lamely. “She was strong, said she was glad I tried to save you, that having my back, defending me was how you would have wanted to go, that I shouldn’t feel shame or guilt at not saving you.”

“You did anyway.” Bucky knew it for certain. He heard Steve say it often enough.

Steve nodded. “Yes. And she knew I would anyway but there was something inside her that couldn’t let another man who was someone’s little boy continue to suffer. She and I had been close after my ma died, she was my second mother. I’m sure it was a double blow to her that she lost us both.”

“I want to know how she died,” Bucky forced out. “I don’t remember her except her smell. I don’t remember her face, I don’t remember her voice, I don’t remember-“ His voice broke and he buried his face in Steve’s lap. “She was my mother,” he wrenched out, “and I don’t remember her!”

He heard their door open, heard footsteps but was too lost in guilt and grief to make out who it was. A woman’s voice, alto and strong, triggered a memory in him though and he sat up, staring at the red-haired woman in casual clothes watching them.

“I suggest you make that your first project then,” the woman told the two men.
“Hey Natasha.” Steve stood up and gave the woman a welcoming hug. “How’d you get onto our-you know what, don’t tell me. Peas in a pod, you and Bucky.”

“Natalia.” Bucky’s voice slipped easily into the Russian pronunciation of her formal name.

“Nat will do,” she told him. “Tony said you’re getting your memories back but it’s slow going. It will be.” She sat on the couch and picked up one of Steve’s sketchbooks, flipping through the pictures with interest. “Your style has changed, Rogers. It’s a lot more fluid. Still brilliant work though.”

Steve shrugged modestly. “It happens.”

“Being an artistic genius or the change in style?” The redhead gave Bucky a sly look when Steve got flustered at the compliment he couldn’t avoid. Bucky tentatively returned it.

“Why are you here?” Steve asked, grabbing his sketchbook back and hugging it to his chest possessively.

“Okay, and I thought Tony didn’t like to share his toys.” Nat gave Steve a teasing look and sat back, comfortable in Steve’s home and Bucky felt a moment of jealousy. He lived here and he wasn’t that at ease. She noticed and gave him a crooked smile. “It will take months, years, to stop jumping at every shadow,” she told him. “I’ve never gotten rid of the nightmares but sometimes I get a week’s worth of uninterrupted sleep so it’s progress. Everything else is either facade or I’ve reached the point of ‘don’t give a shit’.”

Bucky made a noncommittal hum while Steve gave her a repressive frown.

“I meant what I said about your mother, Barnes,” she told him. “Find out what happened to her. An obituary is the best place, depressing though that is.”

Steve got up and went to his laptop, handing it over to Nat. She powered the machine on and was soon clicking away on the attached keyboard. “Her name was Winifred Barnes, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, watching Bucky who watched Nat.

“Here she is. Holy…wow!” Nat gave a start that was entirely unfeigned and turned the laptop around so the two men could read. “I have a feeling Agent Carter was responsible for this.”

“Honored S.H.I.E.L.D. employee Winifred Barnes to be laid to rest in New York Cemetery,” Steve read the 1980 obituary headline of the New York Post out loud. His blue eyes went huge and Bucky was certain his were just as big. “Let me see that.” Steve took the laptop into his own lap and Bucky angled himself to read along with Steve.

“Winifred Jean Barnes, 82, mother to decorated World War II Howling Commando James Buchanan Barnes, died this past Wednesday in her home in Brooklyn. Her son, known as “Bucky” to many Brooklynnites and his fellow Commandos, died in service to his country mere days before Captain Steven G. Rogers, better known to the public both in the United States and abroad as ‘Captain America’, gave his life in battle during the second World War. Mrs. Barnes was known to be a second mother to Capt. Rogers and was asked to serve the Strategic Scientific Reserve, SSR, the forerunner to S.H.I.E.L.D. following the end of the war. She began in capacity of office worker due to her lack of office experience. Director Chester Phillips and later Director Margaret "Peggy" Carter both stated that Mrs. Barnes was considered a member of the family as much as her son and Capt. Rogers would have been. They left no one behind and often stressed that their hiring of Mrs. Barnes was not charity. This proved to be a shrewd move on their part, for her quick
wit, intelligence and sometimes no-nonsense personality won Mrs. Barnes many friends and allies amongst her peers both inside and outside of S.H.I.E.L.D., elevating her to handler to some of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s most respected agents in the field during the height of the Cold War."

Steve’s voice faltered a moment in awe and then he began to laugh. “My God, the woman that could keep us in line would have no problem with secret agents of any kind.”

Bucky continued to silently read as Steve continued to laugh and tell Nat the kind of woman his mother had been.

"Mrs. Barnes’ service record with S.H.I.E.L.D. was exemplary and earned her as many civilian awards as her son posthumously received in time of war. These awards include the Army’s Exceptional Civilian Service Award and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Commander Award for Meritorious Service. She continued her good work after her retirement in 1973 within the Brooklyn community through various fund raising and community events for the homeless and Brooklyn Children’s Hospital, where the former tuberculosis ward of the county resided and Mrs. Rogers, Capt. Rogers’ mother, worked and contracted the disease as well. She was considered an indispensable member of the community and was regarded with great respect and honor from all classes and races within that populous borough."

"Friends of Mrs. Barnes state she was in cheerful disposition the night before her passing, speaking of fond memories of her son, deceased husband, Capt. Rogers and others in her long and eventful life. Her passing was peaceful by all accounts. Services for Mrs. Winifred Barnes will be held at St. Brendan’s where she was a long time member of the parish. Mrs. Barnes follows her husband, son, and two daughters buried in Shelbyville, Indiana where the family originally lived. Services will be held this Saturday at Green-Wood Cemetery at 11 o’clock. Donations to the Brooklyn Children’s Hospital and Brooklyn Community Center are requested in lieu of flowers or other tributes."

He didn’t realize he was still staring at the screen blankly, until he heard over his shoulder Nat say, “What a remarkable woman your mother was, Barnes.”

“I want to go back to her grave,” he said numbly.

There was silence and then Nat said, “I’ll get a car. Steve, you and him meet me in front in fifteen?”

Steve’s voice was hesitant. “Yeah, sure.” Once the door closed behind the woman, Bucky felt Steve’s arms go around him again. “Are you sure?”

Bucky frowned. “I think- yes.” His voice was certain, he was certain. “She sent me a rosary in Italy. I couldn’t tell her that I threw mine away when I killed my first man, that I lost faith in that moment. I told her that I lost it so she sent me another.” Bucky looked into Steve’s worried face. “I remember that she always told me that faith saw her through the worst and that though my faith might be shaken I couldn’t lose it completely because it was bred into my bones.”

He saw Steve give an encouraging nod.

“She told me to write Father Christie and talk to him so I did. I think I confessed everything I did in war to him through letters. I didn’t feel I could trust the army chaplain for some reason. Hard as Father Christie could be, he was a fair and honest man.”
“I saw some of the letters he wrote you back,” Steve confessed, “when I went through your things after I thought you died. I didn’t know you having such a crisis of faith until then.”

“I think I had it before but the war just made it more-“ Bucky searched for a word and failed, shrugging instead.

Steve understood, as Bucky instinctively knew he would. “I know. Shall we go? Nat’s a woman who hates waiting if she doesn’t have to.” He stood up and held out a hand. Bucky took it and stood up too. They walked to the door. “JARVIS?” Steve said to the AI.

“Yes, Captain Rogers?”

“If anyone’s looking for us, we went to Brooklyn.”

“Very well, sirs,” the AI intoned gravely. “We’ll keep the light on for you.”

“Isn’t that a commercial?” Steve asked Bucky in an undertone as he shut the door behind them and headed for elevator. “Sometimes JARVIS has more of a sense of humor than Tony.”

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The cemetery was peaceful, as cemeteries are wont to be, with a light breeze blowing and few people visiting loved ones a few rows behind where Bucky, Steve and Natasha stood staring at a tasteful elegant headstone. Bucky had been here before, when he’d prompted Steve through the newspaper for his mother’s name. Now that memories of her were slowly sliding back into his mind, however, the name, the words marking her birth and passing meant more to him now.

“Hey, Ma,” he choked out and sat down on the grass.

He felt Steve and Nat move away to give him privacy, Nat asking Steve where his mother was buried and Steve’s reply of another cemetery in Brooklyn.

“I-I guess you know everything,” he murmured. “Probably wish your boy could have had better luck, huh? How’s the girls? They behaving? I bet they are now that you’re there.” He was babbling. He hardly remembered his sisters, all younger than he but only by one and two years. The youngest died when he was six. He had vague memories of being at the funeral. The other he remembered not at all. “Tell Papa hello as well and that I’m sorry.”

More memories came flooding into him as he spoke and he couldn’t stop the tears and the sobs from erupting. “I wish we had a place for him so I could talk to him proper and apologize for being such a rotten son for doubting him. I remember your letter now, telling me what happened to him. I’m remembering a lot of things, Ma, and it hurts-hurts so much,” he gasped.

“Bucky.” He heard Steve’s voice and latched onto the warmth of the tone, the pain of it as well, sensing he wasn’t alone somehow in his grief. “It’s okay, Buck. She knows, you know she does.”

How long they were there, he didn’t know and didn’t care. Once he got himself under control, Bucky cleaned up around the stone, promised to bring flowers next time, daffodils her favorites with some lavender too. He talked and talked and cried a bit more, emotionally spent before Steve and Nat drew him to his feet and forced him to leave.

He felt drained, physically and emotionally. He talked to Steve, remembering his mother’s cooking and summers at the park when Steve’s mother was alive and they had a bit of jingle in their pockets for sweets as boys. They told Nat stories on each other, some Steve reminding Bucky of and some coming to Bucky on his own.
They got back to Stark Tower to find Stark pacing the lobby like a worried father. “Where’ve you been?” he exploded. “I was worried sick.”


Bucky and Tony shared a grin and Steve just rolled his eyes. “Long story,” Steve told her. “I’m starved.”

“Yes, all this emo stuff has made me hungry too,” she agreed. “Thai?”

Steve shrugged but Bucky scrunched his nose. “God no.”

“You don’t like Thai?” All three of them looked scandalized.

“Do you know what the Thai eat?” he rejoined tiredly. “Way too many bugs.”


“Then order whatever you like for me. I’m tired. Can I go to bed?” He didn’t wait for an answer but took the elevator to he and Steve’s floor. He automatically went into Steve’s room and collapsed on the bed, burying his face in Steve’s pillow, inhaling the comforting scent of Steve until he drifted to sleep.

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“Uh,” said Tony, looking between Nat and Steve, completely perplexed. “What was that?”

“He’s getting his memories back,” smiled Steve. He felt his body hum with excitement. It had been an exhausting trip to Brooklyn but in the end, he thought, worth it. “Sam was right about Bucky’s stuff and we had a break through.”

“Yay?” Tony still sounded uncertain. “So more bugnuts now that he knows what his moral compass was like before they wiped him?”

Steve frowned. He hadn’t thought of that.

Nat shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. “Possible, more than likely actually, but Steve’s a big boy, he can handle him.”

Tony looked skeptical and Steve agreed with the assessment. Physically, sure he could probably handle Bucky if the gloves were off, so to speak, but Bucky would know that the gloves were on at least for Steve and if his conditioning kicked in and he was unable override it, Steve could be in a world of hurt.

“So why did you come to our floor uninvited, Nat?” Steve asked instead.

She nibbled at her lower lip indecisively before answering. “Curiosity mostly and I wanted to make sure everything is going okay. I know what it’s like to have people scrambling with your head. I wanted.” She huffed a laugh but it wasn’t humorous. “I wanted to look at the thing that was like what I used to be, I guess. It sounds sick to say it that way.”

“They did to you what they did to Bucky?” Steve hadn’t known that. He felt as if someone punched him in the gut.
Nat couldn’t meet his or Tony’s eyes, instead staring at the wall behind them. “Yes, the KGB thought Hydra had a good plan and began wiping their most effective agents and implanting them with memories for each mission.”

“Did they put you in cryogenic stasis as well?” asked Tony.

She shook her head. “Not that I remember, or have remembered anyway. Some of my memories are patchy at best, a bit too sharp at worst. Keep in mind, Steve, that Hydra had Barnes a lot longer than the KGB had me. The things they had him do, did to him as well, are likely so horrific he may be damaged for the rest of his life, however long that is.”

Steve had already prepared himself as much as he could for that. “I know. It’s hard to imagine what we’ll do, but I know the possibility exists. I’m hopeful whatever serum is in his system will counter some of it. I know that I’m being a hopeless optimist,” he added when both Tony and Nat gave him exasperated looks. “I can’t help it.”

“We’ll cure you of that early 20th century disease,” Tony assured him, with a grin and a slap on the back.

“He likes pie, too,” Nat said to Tony in a loud aside.


“Har har, you two, regular Laurel and Hardy, har har,” Steve bantered.

“Who?” deadpanned Tony, earning himself another smack.

“I prefer Keaton myself,” commented Nat, leading the way to the elevators.

“Buster was good,” conceded Steve. “I do like him better than Chaplin in some respects.”

Tony gasped. “Blasphemy!”

They argued about classical comedians all the way up, with Tony finally conceding that no one could top Carol Burnett and Lucille Ball in the female comedienne lineup.

“I can’t believe you’ve seen Carol Burnett,” laughed Tony as they entered his lab.

“One of the first people recommended to me at the video store,” Steve confessed. “They told me I’d like her if I liked Lucille. They were right.”

“But most of Lucille’s stuff was post-war,” noted Nat.

“I remember her in a Marx Brother’s movie,” mused Steve, thinking back to sneaking into movie theaters with Bucky. “She did a lot of radio stuff for RKO, I remember too.”

“He’s a regular history of Hollywood,” yawned Tony. “To work!”

Tony tinkered with something on his table before lifting it and showing it off. “Pretty?” he cooed excitedly.

“It’s an arm,” Nat said flatly.

“For Bucky I’m assuming?” Steve added. “Unless I get to rip one of yours off and beat you with it?”
Tony gave a heavy sigh. “Genius is unappreciated around here.”

“Too many geniuses,” agreed Steve. “Hard to tell which one is being referred to on any given occasion.”

“Now who’s funny har har?” Tony set the arm down. “It’s not finished and I need to have someone look at how his current one is attached to his brain, nervous system, bone structure and everything else but I think I can get rid of the Hydra crap and replace it with something we don’t have to worry might eventually turn on us, or him, at the worst possible moment.”

“Mmm, it’s Hydra. That’s always a possibility,” conceded Steve, peering at the arm. “It looks a bit big.”

“Yeah I’ll have to scale it to the right size and musculature,” nodded Tony, fidgeting with wires hanging out of it, “but it’s not like I’m slapping it on him tonight or anything.”

Steve gave Tony a heartfelt grin. “Thanks, Tony, I mean it.”

Tony gave an embarrassed shrug and started chattering about one of his other inventions, mechanized suits that didn’t need him in it to help save the world. Steve listened with half an ear, making noises as appropriate in lulls of Tony’s speech.

He started thinking about Bucky’s reaction to the things in the boxes, his heart wrenching sobs over his mother’s grave, the words he spoked to the dead woman and the reminiscing they did on the way back to Stark Tower. The wall Bucky’s mind erected had a chink in it, it seemed, and it shouldn’t have surprised Steve that Winifred Barnes was the weak link. As macho as Bucky could be, he’d been a mama’s boy through and through, worshipping the ground Winifred walked on as he had.

That thought led to all the letters Bucky wrote during the war, mostly to other mothers in the neighborhood or elderly women like old Mrs. Slomski. Bucky, by nature, was a protector, just like Steve, only when they were growing up, Bucky could back up his feelings with his fists and mouth, whereas Steve just had his mouth. When they went to war, Steve rarely needed someone at his back, his senses heightened but on the occasion when it was needed, Bucky was there anyway.

“Hey Tony?” Steve interrupted Tony’s monologue. Tony gave him a curious look, unoffended that Steve not only hadn’t been paying attention but was also interrupting in a rather rude fashion. “Do you know if Brooklyn Children’s Home is still in existence?”

Tony tilted his head to one side consideringly. “JARVIS?”

“Unfortunately that particular entity is no longer in existence due to lack of funding. It closed in the mid 1990s,” reported the AI dutifully.

Nat was studying Steve with wise eyes. “What are you thinking, Cap?”

“I’m thinking like mother like son,” Steve responded. “The news reports are full of kids being bullied. That’s one thing Bucky and I could never tolerate as kids, especially since I was the target of it so much.”

Tony’s face lit up with understanding. “Ah! Give him a cause!”

Steve nodded. “Something to focus on other than himself and his woes.” He looked at Nat. “Would that work?”

She considered. “I used working for S.H.I.E.L.D. as a way to give myself a cause, to help balance
the red in my ledger,” she allowed. “This is better. I’d check with his counselors and such first though. He’s still a violent individual and he’s underwraps, right?”

Steve smiled a smile equally as shark-like as the one Tony was sporting. “For now. I’m sure Pepper’s already planning something to introduce him and get past the government’s interest in him.” Tony nodded. “I can guarantee it. My Pepper’s a firecracker that way.”

“A firecracker. More like a Jericho missile,” Nat said derisively. She turned to Steve. “Clear it with his counselors, I’m assuming that’s Sam now, and Pepper when she’s ready for the big reveal, but you may be onto something for both of you really.”

Steve knew a pleased smile was creasing his face but couldn’t help it. He was pleased. Maybe it would give Bucky something to focus on.

“Let’s take this a step further,” Tony said in typical Tony-fashion of going overboard. “Why don’t we open a place where kids who are bullied can go for help, free of charge? Self-defense, nothing too dangerous mind you, counseling, hotlines, how to handle bullying on the interweb, the whole schmear. You two can get boned up on the 21st century that way as well? You teach the kids and the kids teach you?”

Nat frowned but Steve liked it. “Yes. I’ll pitch it at Buck when he’s feeling more the thing.”

“Go check on him,” urged Nat. “I need to talk to Tony about me some new suits anyway. I’ll order some Thai and bring it up when it gets here.”

Steve left the lab with an amiable wave, checking with JARVIS while in the elevator that Bucky was physically fine and opened his door to find the apartment trashed.

The furniture was destroyed, stuffing from the sofas and chairs littering the carpet like snow. Cracks in the windows showed damaged from fists, chairs and what used to be the television. There were holes in the walls but none of Steve’s framed art was damaged. A couple were hanging askew but that was it.

Alarmed, Steve started shouting Bucky’s name. He went to Bucky’s room first and found it empty, almost giving himself a heart attack on the spot. He went to his room next and found Bucky sleeping on his bed, face down, unmoving.

“Bucky?” Steve whispered and then said louder, “Bucky?”

“Steve?” Bucky twisted around and blinked sleepily at him. “Wha’s wrong?” he asked blearily.

“What happened? Did you have a flashback?” Steve walked over and pulled Bucky’s flesh hand from beneath the covers. There were no bruising, cuts or scrapes to be seen.

Perplexed he brushed his fingers over the knuckles almost absently.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky’s voice was stronger, more awake. “Food here? I’m starved.”

“You need to see the living room,” Steve told him. Bucky frowned but obediently followed Steve out of the living room.

“What the-?” Bucky looked around, stepping carefully through broken bits of furniture. “Did you think I did this?” he asked, hurt in his tone.

“I thought maybe you had a flashback,” Steve explained. “I had them, broke a lot of dishes at first.”
Bucky’s frown intensified. “I came up here and just crashed on your bed. I’ve been asleep ever-“ he paused. “Hey, JARVIS?”

“Yes, Sgt. Barnes,” came the smooth reply.

“What happened in here?”

“In where, sir?” The AI was confused too apparently.

“Are you still recording?” Steve asked.

“Yes, sir?” JARVIS didn’t sound so certain now.

“Playback in Tony’s lab when we get there,” Steve ordered and Bucky hurried to put his shoes back on before they left the room.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I overused Kipling, thought technically I don't think that's really possible because Kipling is awesome.

There's an actual plot in this! No one is more shocked than me, which is why it took so long to post, mainly because I was staring at the last part going "what? huh? who?" until I figured out what my brain wanted. Sometimes I pants my fics, sometimes there's a point. This has been pantsing so far...apparently now I actually have to plot something! (scandalized gasp!)

Yes I know I took liberties with Bucky's family, but heck, I'm on roll with the liberties so far, might as well go whole hog, y'know? :P

Also, the "we'll leave a light on for you" is an American commercial for Motel 6 by radio host, voice actor and author Tom Bodett. I also watch too many Travel Channel commercials talking about bug related food in Asia. I don't know why, I thinks it's probably overemphasized but it's kind of stuck in my head now.

Please tell me someone gets the irony of Tony being scandalized at Steve's dissing of Chaplin. (If you don't, Robert Downey Jr. played Chaplin in the brilliant biopic of the same name. Really if you haven't seen it, please do. RDJ was fantastic!)
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

My sincerest apologies for the time between chapters. Some monumental personal tragedies happened to me and I was not only off work but also occasionally hospitalized. Also during November I finished my manuscript for NanoWriMo so go me! Never fear, Wolfie is back on track to finishing up this story. :) It may be once a week however, depending on if I start my new job soon or not. Hopefully more often than that.

“Tony, there’s been a break in,” Steve announced as soon he and Bucky hit Tony’s lab.

Tony looked up from where he was tinkering with something on Nat’s costume belt and blinks owlishly at them. “Uh, what?”

“Our room was trashed after Bucky went to our quarters,” Steve explained in agitation. He couldn’t believe Bucky slept through what had to have been a hell of a racket. He also didn’t seem overtly concerned, which concerned Steve even more than the break-in.

“JARVIS?” Tony asked in alarm.

“I have no record of anyone entering the room after Sgt. Barnes,” JARVIS reported in an aggrieved tone.

“Give me all audio and video feed right now, JARVIS,” Tony ordered, abandoning Nat’s modifications and flicking his hands to create hovering screens showing various different angles of Steve and Bucky’s main room.

Bucky entered the playback screen, removing his jacket and rubbing his neck as he moved first to the closet to hang up the jacket and then to the hallway. The playback switched to the hallway as Bucky went first into his own bedroom before back tracking into Steve’s instead. The feed followed him and they watched as Bucky collapsed on Steve’s bed, curling his flesh arm into Steve’s pillow, burying his face in it and inhaling the scent.

Steve fought a blush and failed, especially when he realized that both Nat and Tony were giving at him amused glances. There Bucky stayed as the time lapse sped up. Steve didn’t see anything unusual on the cameras showing the living room. To his untrained eye it seemed as if one moment the room was perfectly in order and then in a blink was completely ransacked.

“JARVIS, back it up to fifteen point nine eight,” Tony barked authoritatively.

Then Steve saw it. The frames gave a tiny, miniscule hesitation. Bucky’s body went from curled around Steve’s pillow to face down as Steve found him.

“Someone messed with JARVIS’ recording and security?” asked Nat incredulously. Tony was swearing a blue streak, furiously typing on the keyboard he pulled from somewhere beneath the myriad of debris on his work station. “How does that even happen, Tony?” she demanded.

Tony waved a hand dismissively at her, still swearing under his breath. “Oh yeah? I got ya now.
Mess with my fucking system, will ya? JARVIS and I will tear you apart, you slimy piece of –AH HA!” he crowed in triumph. “Here. Our intruder didn’t erase it, he couldn’t, but he could circumvent the feed, or so he thought. I do need to thank him for revealing a hole in our security platform and we need to remember this for the future. Not everyone is as good as we are, and whoever this jackanapes is.”

“Jackanapes?” Bucky asked Steve out of the side of his mouth. “Tony been watching movies with you again?”

“Why aren’t you taking this seriously?” Steve asked him in agitation. “Whoever this was came within feet of you, Buck. You didn’t even know…” Steve felt his stomach drop as a thought occurred to him. “You didn’t know, did you?”

Bucky gave him an affronted look.

“Well you don’t seem overly concerned about it,” Steve said waspishly.

“What do you want me to do, Steve? Tear at my hair and bemoan my fate? Is that gonna change anything? Cool heads and all that jazz,” Bucky retorted.

Steve opened his mouth to make a rebuttal but Nat interrupted.

“Arguing about how emotional or not Bucky is won’t help, Steve.”

Steve reluctantly nodded and turned his attention back to Tony, who was still typing furiously through gibberish code on the screens.

“Almost through the worm they implanted to bend their way through JARVIS’ security. They are good but not as good as Anthony Stark!” More furious typing was followed by another triumphant shout of “Ah ha!” The screen blipped to Bucky moving through the room once more only this time there was a shadow in the kitchenette area that they hadn’t seen before.

Steve stole a glance at Bucky and saw him frowning intently on what was undoubtedly the intruder that he’d not noticed. As digital Bucky moved into the hallway, the shadow shifted enough into the light to reveal a man, equal or maybe an inch taller than Bucky himself. Once Steve’s bedroom door closed behind Bucky, the shadow moved fully into the room and waited as if listening. Then the man, masked similar to Bucky had been as The Winter Soldier, moved to the hallway. The camera followed.

A small line was shoved beneath the door of Steve’s room and a small bit of gas was issued into the room. More typing by Tony analyzed the chemical to be an airborne sedative just strong enough to sink someone in deep sleep but cause no harm. It had dissipated by the time Steve entered which explained why he felt no adverse affects.

“I know that drug,” Nat stated grimly. “It was used a lot in the Red Room, especially in instances where we were either attempting blackmail, or wanted to get access to someplace without causing any alarm.”

“Perfect,” muttered Steve.

The man proceeded to begin searching behind frames on the wall, drawers in the desk in the corner and ripping through the cushions on the chairs and sofa. The longer the intruder searched the more reckless and desperate he seemed to become and his behavior became more destructive and erratic.

Then the intruder began to dig through the box of mementos of Bucky’s and he seemed to come
unhinged. Both Steve and Bucky winced at the damaged the man wrought, wholesale destruction of everything they owned. Whatever he found, and didn’t find, seemed to have been some sort of catalyst.

The intruder jerked a phone out of his pockets and pulled the mask off his face, speaking rapidly in Russian to whoever was on the other end of the line.

“JARVIS, trace that call,” Tony commanded.

“Well, sir,” JARVIS responded.

“-didn’t find it. He knows who he is. Do I terminate or retrieve?” The intruder listened and then began to protest the decision. “Sir, I can bring him in. He may have trained me but I can take him. He is nothing compared to me.” The intruder grimaced and pulled the goggles off his face to reveal his features fully.

Steve and Tony both looked at Nat when she inhaled sharply with recognition. Steve shot a glance Bucky, but his expression was blank and detached. If he recognized the man, it wasn’t obvious even to Steve.

“I know him,” Nat told them. “Leonid Novokov. He was part of the Red Room training but he was unstable. He was notoriously unstable and after a few missions, he went away. We all assumed that he’d been decommissioned,” she added.

Steve assumed ‘decommissioned’ was a polite euphemism for ‘disposed of permanently’.

“Okay, I remember him too, though, but not you. Did I train you, Black Widow?” Bucky asked from his place beside Steve. Steve turned to gape at him.

Nat shook her head, red hair grazing her shoulders with the movement. “No, I was just starting my training when Novokov was decommissioned. If you trained Novokov and any others, then whatever went wrong with Novokov may have been deemed to be at the fault of his training and they put you back in cryofreeze and got rid of him. We may have been a new technique of training operatives.”

“Or,” Bucky said thoughtfully with more subjectivity than Steve felt he should be feeling, “something was wrong with the subject in general.” He looked at Tony. “Can we get more information on this Leonid Novokov? Why is he here now if he was disposed of at least a decade and a half ago?” He gave Nat a questioning look and she nodded.

“And what would his interest in Bucky be?” Steve added peevishly.

Bucky nudged Steve’s elbow playboy. “Don’t worry, darlin’, I’m not cheating on you with an old flame,” he teased.

“I’m not amused,” Steve exploded. “Someone broke into Stark Towers-“

“Avengers Tower,” Tony corrected absentmindedly.

“-and could have killed you without anyone the wiser until I found your dead body on my bed. You think I would sleep well after that?” Steve continued as if Tony hadn’t spoken.

Bucky gave him an inscrutable look. “How well did you sleep once I went over that cliff?” he asked.
“I didn’t. I was dead less than three days later,” Steve told his lover plaintively. “I’d rather we didn’t have a repeat of the last time one of us played dead, if you don’t mind. Our luck isn’t that good, okay?”

Bucky held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, I’m just trying to lighten the moment. You seem a little on edge.”

“I can’t imagine why that would be,” Steve retorted sarcastically. “I just ask that you find this as alarming as I do, Buck.”

“Who’s sayin’ I’m not,” Bucky countered with a scowl. “I’m just not flying off the handle.”

Steve opened his mouth to argue more but Nat only said in warning tone, “Steve.”

And that’s when he noticed.

Bucky’s cybernetic arm, whirring on occasion normally, was still. All the plates that Steve could see beneath the short sleeved shirt were locked from the tenseness in Bucky’s body. His right hand was clenched tightly as well, so tightly in fact that his knuckles were white and the veins were pulsing in his biceps.

“Bucky, it’s okay, “ Steve murmured, crowding his body in front of Bucky’s, slipping his hands on the smaller man’s waist.

“No, it’s not but once this is taken care of, we’re going be more than fine, I plan on making sre of it,” Bucky whispered back, his tone hard and his gaze flinty.

Steve gave Bucky a smile. “I have no problem with that,” he assured Bucky. “I’m sorry I doubted your concern.” Bucky nodded and focused his attention back on Tony, who began talking.

“So here’s what we know about Leonid Novokov,” Tony told them, bringing up the file he found on their intruder. “Seems he had all the same skillsets of The Winter Soldier but his only drawback was that he wasn’t a trained soldier like our boy here, was just some poor schmuck they drug in off the street and began to train up. The conditioning, shall we call it, that they subjected The Winter Soldier didn’t work as well on our Comrade Novokov, probably because he didn’t have any version of the super soldier serum in his system.”

“And the decommission?” asked Nat, nipping at her thumb in agitation. Steve reflected having her former life come back was probably just as uncomfortable for her as it was for Bucky.

“Cryostasis,” Tony reported and brought up a picture of a coffin-like contraption with a round porthole type window in it revealing a man’s face literally frozen in its’ view. “Seems he was uncontrollable and unstable so they figured to put him on ice, literally, in case they could fix the bug in his works at a later date.”

“So why now?” Bucky rumbled. “They fix whatever is wrong or they that desperate?”

Tony shrugged. “Who knows? Hydra lost its Asset so maybe they are looking for a new one and thought maybe the secret to fixing Novokov lay with you. Maybe he got curious about you and didn’t like what he found?”

“Or maybe he was sent to recapture the Asset,” Nat added darkly.

Steve shook his head. “If that was the case, they had Bucky dead to rights. There’s more at play here than a lost asset and its destruction or recovery.”
Tony sat back in his chair. “Thai’s here.”

“Have someone else, no, you know what? I’ll do it after all.” Nat moved toward the door. “Maybe I’ll get lucky and someone needs to get their head bashed in while I’m getting it.”


“Call in Barton and make sure that Banner is safe as well,” Steve ordered Tony brusquely. “Just in case.” He turned to Bucky and motioned with his head. “Once the food gets here, we’re going to our quarters and have a long conversation that neither of us are going to enjoy.”

Bucky scowled at him but said nothing.

Tony looked awkwardly between the two of them, coughed and turned away back to his work table. The food arrived via a confused Clint Barton, who said Nat handed him the food and told him she was going on patrol around the building. Steve left Tony to explain everything to Barton and marched behind a stiff-backed Bucky, each man carrying his own food.

“What do you remember of training anyone in the same skillsets you possess?” Steve demanded as soon the two of them verified their rooms were clear of intruders. Steve didn’t even care how Novokov left the Tower; he figured that could be something for Barton and Stark to work on.

“Very little,” Bucky admitted before shoveling a forkful of noodles into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed. “Occasionally they would have me spar with an agent or someone they felt was promising. He may have been one but usually they were masked like me. His movements seem familiar somehow though so it’s entirely possible I met him that way.”

Steve’s appetite left him and he put aside the cardboard carton of his own noodles. The thought of Bucky training other people in the same techniques he himself utilized to end lives on the orders of Hydra made Steve ill.

“Hey.” Bucky got up and sat down next to Steve on the couch. “It’s okay.”

“No, Buck, it’s not,” Steve protested weakly. He got up and began to pick up the debris-strewn living room area. He got an empty garbage bag from beneath the kitchen’s sink and began to pick up the stuffing from torn cushions on the floor, took the broom and swept broken glass and dishes and ignored the sensation of Bucky watching his every move even as the other man ate.

Bucky then silently got up and began to clean as well. Carefully Bucky placed each destroyed item from his box of mementos back inside the cardboard container. By the time the two men cleaned up what they could, both were emotionally exhausted. Without a word, they adjourned to Steve’s room.

Steve fell backward on his bed and stared glumly at the ceiling. “I should paint the place while it’s destroyed,” he said dumbly. “I hate the plain white. I’m sure Tony doesn’t care.”

“Steve.”

Steve ignored Bucky’s concerned tone. “I was thinking maybe paint the ceiling a blue, maybe cerulean or sky? I saw this Do It Yourself show once that said having one wall a different color from the others also adds a certain pleasantness to the room. What do you think?”

“Steve, dammit.”
“You always wanted to see me paint something big, like a mural. Maybe I’ll do that instead?”

“God dammit, Steve, stop fucking ignoring me. Look at me,” commanded Bucky but Steve resolutely avoided Bucky’s gaze.

“Maybe I can find something soothing for both of us. Nothing with ice and snow, naturally, but maybe a desert scene or a sunset? We always liked watching the sunsets on the roof in Brooklyn before you were drafted.”

Bucky straddled Steve’s hips and Steve had no choice but to look Bucky in the face now. There was a tenseness, a sadness that Steve hadn’t seen before. He couldn’t define it but it was like a punch in the gut, seeing that in Bucky’s face and blazing from his gray-blue eyes.

“You are such a pain in my ass, sometimes, you know that?” Bucky told him peevishly. “And I was the one topping, for cripe’s sake.”

Steve blinked. “You remember that?” he asked slowly.

Bucky frowned at him. “Of course I do, you idiot. You were everything to me then, just like you are now. Why do you think I’m trying so hard to be your old Bucky, so I don’t lose you, you idiot!”

Steve frowned back. “But I don’t want the old Bucky.”

Bucky reared back as if affronted.

“The old Bucky was great, don’t get me wrong,” Steve explained, “but I’m not the old Steve anymore. I need a new Bucky to go with the new Steve.” Steve put one hand on Bucky’s hip and the other he curled around the man’s neck to draw him down. He brushed their lips together gently.

“I really want to get to know this new Bucky guy I’ve met. He’s fascinating, a bit of tease sometimes but I think we’ll get along quite well.”

Bucky’s eyes were huge in his face and he licked his lips even as his breathing sped up. “I like the new Steve. You’re right, he’s not the same Steve I remember but I like him too,” Bucky confessed. “I never thought the old Bucky deserved his Steve and I’m not sure I deserve the new Steve but I’m willing to be worthy of him if he’s willing to take a chance on me.”

Steve beamed a smile at Bucky, he couldn’t help it. “Oh, I think I’m more than wiling to take a chance on the new Bucky. It was all I could do not to go down on you in the shower the other day, you know. You were so beautiful, flaws and all, it was hard.”

Bucky cocked an eyebrow. “Pun intended?”

Steve gave a bark of laughter. “Not intended but all the same, I get hard thinking about what it will be like when we finally come together again.” Steve leaned up and covered Bucky’s mouth with his once more, their tongues brushing each other softly.

Bucky leaned down so that their mouths could seal more fully and Steve let himself get lost in the kiss, eyes closing in contentment. He missed this, missed this part of being close to someone. It didn’t even have to end with sex, though he wouldn’t complain if it did. Just having the contact with another human being was enough and a bonus that the human being was Bucky.

Steve moaned when Bucky’s hands brushed his chest, the shirt between his skin and Bucky’s strong hands. Bucky began to tentatively explore, Steve’s mouth and his body. Soon the two of them were exploring each other’s body with soft touches and gasps of passionate encouragement.
“I am sorry to interrupt, Captain Rogers, Sgt. Barnes,” came JARVIS’ apologetic tones, “but Sir has found some more information that may concern our intruder’s intentions and requests your presence at your earliest convenience.”

Bucky pulled back and glared at the ceiling where JARVIS’ speakers were housed. “Thirty minutes to an hour is our earliest convenience. I need that long, at least, more if I can manage it,” he complained good-naturedly to Steve.

Steve privately concurred but knew that not showing up when Tony called would only mean Tony would barge in at a less appropriate time instead. “We’ll be there in a few minutes, JARVIS, thank you.”

Bucky gave a disgruntled huff. “We need to teach Stark some manners on the training mats tomorrow for this,” he groused and Steve chuckled.

“Get up,” he told Bucky, pushing gently at the other man’s hips, wishing instead he was wrapping his legs around them instead as Bucky sank in. His cock twitched at the thought and he mentally groaned. He needed to stop thinking about that or they weren’t going anywhere. Bucky was going to be hard enough to convince without Steve unenthused either.

Bucky gave a sigh and moved from his position straddling Steve’s hips with great reluctance.

The two of them gave each other a longing look before trooping out the door of Steve’s bedroom.

“This isn’t over,” Bucky told him mock-threateningly.

“You’re damned right,” agreed Steve in a similar tone.

Silently they made their way back to Tony’s lab, in the elevator Steve brushed Bucky’s metal hand with his and took it, clasping it tightly when Bucky went to move it away. No one said anything when they entered Tony’s lab, hands still clasped. Natasha only smiled knowingly and Tony arched an eyebrow. Barton looked from their hands to their faces and smirked.

“What’d you find, Tony?” Steve asked, his voice unintentionally plaintive. He had no doubt that the room’s occupants knew that something got interrupted and figured he was due a small fit of pique. After all, he hadn’t been laid in over 80 years, dammit.

“We think we know what they were after,” Nat told them before Tony could make a smart alec retort.

“You,” Barton told him with a grin. “That’s why they reactivated Novokov. Some yutzes low on the totem pole in Hydra probably thought it would be a good idea to fight fire with fire, so to speak.”

“Hmm,” Bucky said, pulling his hand from Steve’s grasp and pacing a bit. “That makes sense in a twisted way. The only problem is Novokov’s instability. I know I went off the reservation on occasion. Who knows what a potentially loose cannon like Novokov would do if he slips his leash.”

“Probably what happened in your rooms is what happens when he slips his leash,” Tony told them. “There is Hydra chatter on some of their frequencies that Maria gave me as being compromised by what’s left of S.H.I.E.L.D. looking not only for word of The Winter Soldier but also Novokov.”
“Lovely,” Steve muttered ironically. “So they’ve lost two assassin assets recently. That’s going to put them on high alert. We won’t be able to twitch without Hydra wanting to know why and be all over us like white on rice.”

“White on rice?” echoed Barton and Bucky, while Tony chortled.

“He got that one from me, I love it,” Tony snickered. “Anywho, you’re probably right, Cap, which means we can have some fun if we want by running these guys into the ground. We might even get lucky and find Novokov. I’m sure C.I.A. or whatever is left of S.H.I.E.L.D. would love to have him under wraps.”

“I’ll let Maria Hill know,” Nat said, standing up. She looked at Bucky. “You lay low. We don’t know if Novokov has told any of his Hydra handlers of your whereabouts but the less you are out and about the less chance they have to make contact with you. Now that we know how Novokov got in, and it would be nice to know how you circumnavigated JARVIS as well, the place is as secure as we thought it was to begin with.”

“And,” Barton added, “if Steve has to go out, make it public. Someone is going to notice when Captain America is kidnapped.”

“We need to alert Sam while he’s here,” Steve told the team. “He hit public as the Falcon after helping Nat and I in D.C. Hydra may consider him a source of information as well. He’s trustworthy, as Nat knows.”

Nat nodded. “He is. A good man, Sam Wilson.”

Barton hiked an eyebrow at what, for Nat, was effuse praise.

“I refuse to be locked up,” Steve continued, knowing this was going to get a protest. “We need to keep Hydra on alert and active. They are bound to make a mistake and keeping tabs on me will keep them busy and in the open.”

“No.” The response was from both Nat and Bucky. Nat’s tone was no nonsense and Bucky’s was vicious in its intensity.

“Cap is the most public figure after me,” Tony told them. “Iron Man can make occasional circuits around the city as if I’m looking for something or someone, which I will be technically. Cap can make the occasional foray on the street.”

Bucky growled something unintelligible and Nat’s lips pressed together in a thin line but neither could argue the point. Tony and Steve were the most public figures. Hydra would have no difficulty following their movements which would allow the others to come in on Hydra from behind.

“Still don’t like it,” groused Bucky even as he acquiesced finally after several minutes of thinking of a way out, no doubt, that would keep Steve safer.

“It’ll be fine, Buck,” Steve assured him. “You’ll see.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I started a new job and I'm in the edit stages of my original novel. Those are my excuses. Also this is completely unbetaed even by me. I could use a beta (and a nag) if anyone wants to volunteer for the job. See me as wolfiejinn on Tumblr!

A week passed without incident into two weeks and then three. Bucky was starting to get antsy, if Steve was going to give it a mild description. Barton said flatly that Barnes was becoming a bigger pain in the ass than when he was a brainwashed assassin.

As promised Tony, in his Iron Man suit, was seen zipping around the city in discernable search patterns. He even occasionally wandered out into the countryside as if scouting on intel. Steve made an occasional public appearance which always landed on the news: shopping, talking with kids at a local hospital, and jogging through Central Park.

Sam worked on Bucky and Steve both without either of them the wiser. They hadn’t been able to consummate anything because they were too busy arguing every time Steve decided it was time to make a public appearance. He was watched like a hawk by either Nat or Clint and always JARVIS on these jaunts but it didn’t do anything to ease Bucky’s worries. The best way to get to Bucky Barnes was through Steve Rogers and he knew better than anyone just how ruthless Hydra could be in getting what they wanted.

One evening he looked up when Steve and Tony came into the main community room, arguing. While this was nothing new, the two were often squabbling about something, the subject matter was alarming.

“You can’t go,” Tony stated unequivocally. “We can’t guarantee how secure it is.”

“I jog in Central Park,” Steve argued vehemently. “How many bodies a week are found there and you’re worried about me going to a museum exhibit opening?”

“Did you see who was on the guest list?” demanded the billionaire. “People even my father would have twitched at being in the same room with and you know my opinion of my old man.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “It’s the Smithsonsian, for crying out loud, Tony, give it a rest. I already RSVPed.”

Tony’s lips compressed into a thin white line and he shot Bucky a look. “He’s going without backup and half the guest list are possible Hydra that wasn’t on the list that Romanoff didn’t dump on the internet.”

Bucky frowned. “Okay,” he said, “I guess I’m confused. It’s the Smithsonian. They have the Hope Diamond and moonrocks, one of kind dinosaurs and stuff. You don’t think the security there is going to be tight enough for Captain America?”

“See?” Steve told Tony triumphantly.

“I didn’t say you could go,” Bucky noted, “just that I was questioning whether or not Stark had his
security concerns misplaced.”

Steve scowled. “I’m going. End of it. Deal with it, both of you.” He stalked to the couch that Bucky was sitting on and flopped down, arms crossed like a six foot four year old.

Tony and Bucky exchanged exasperated looks and Tony threw his hands up in the air.

“So what’s the exhibit on?” Bucky asked casually.

“Glad you asked, Buck,” Steve said sarcastically. “Communications technology used during World War I & II. Understandably they would like Captain America to make an appearance. I said okay and it was three months ago, Tony!” Steve added in a raised voice as if to override anything that Tony was going to say.

Tony stuck his tongue out at Steve and left the room.

“The Smithsonian is perfectly safe,” Steve told Bucky archly as the silence drew out between them.

Bucky sighed. “I know and you’d go anyway no matter what.”

Steve patted Bucky on the shoulder commiserating. “I’ll bring you something from the gift shop.”

“Oh please, Dad, could you?” Bucky said sarcastically and Steve laughed, leaning over to give him a peck on the mouth.

“Don’t worry, Buck,” Steve said, his lips brushing Bucky’s as he spoke. “I’ll be safe as houses.”

Steve didn’t know how wrong he could be.

As a compromise, Natasha went on Steve’s arm as his date/babysitter, much to Steve’s disgust and Bucky’s dissatisfaction. He still didn’t want Steve to go, not with someplace practically crawling with Hydra, but Steve’s stubborn streak even outmatched both Tony and Bucky’s ruthlessness, so he went.

Halfway through the evening they got a call from Nat which turned Bucky’s newly cemented world upside down.

“Has Rogers contacted one of you?”

Tony’s grip on his cellphone, placed on speaker for the benefit of the room, tightened to white knuckle. “No,” he ground out, “that’s why we sent him with you.”

“He hasn’t come out of the bathroom,” Nat reported, ignoring the jibe. “And the guard I sent in to check said Steve’s not in there. We just finished looking at the exhibit on Pioneer 10s transmission and the WOW transmission. I’m sure he didn’t get passed me and went back to the exhibit. He was all excited about the radio broadcast attempts into outer space.”

Bucky swore at her in Russian. She swore back at him, her tone polite and sweet, in kind. Tony ignored them both and pulled up one of his floating in the air view screens that made Bucky’s skin crawl every time they magically appeared. “Where are you?” Tony barked, a schematic of the Smithsonian floating in front of him.

“Second floor, the bathroom by the door to the exhibit hall,” she reported.

A few swipes of his fingers brought up the specific blueprint for that area. Bucky peered closely.
“There are no exit points. How’d they get him out?”

“Maybe they haven’t,” Tony said grimly. “Nat, time to shock and awe the boys in there. Check it yourself.”

“Right.” A high pitched giggle followed her no nonsense tone and there some masculine exclamations over the line. “Oh sorry, boys,” she giggled drunkenly. “Have you seen my date? He went in here and never came out. I’m sure I couldn’t have missed him.”

“Lady, this is the men’s room!” came one exclamation.

“Nobody’s in the stalls, so could you please go?” pleaded another.

There were more exclamations of dismay and outrage as Nat apparently investigated further. “Oh, please,” she told someone, still in a drunken tone, “his is bigger and better.”

Tony suppressed a laugh but Bucky could feel his blood boil.

“Nope, you guys are right!” she said a moment later. “The dog must have dumped me.”

There was silence to that and the bang of a door. “He’s not there.” Her tone was back to no nonsense Black Widow.

Bucky swore out loud. Tony echoed the sentiment in English. Both men tensed when Nat’s voice, her tone changed from brisk to calculating, drifted to them. “Hold on. I think I spotted-”

There was the rapid patter of footsteps and Tony demanded, loudly, that Nat report. Clint drifted into the room just as sounds of a fight breaking out over the line became apparent.

“What the hell is going on?” Clint demanded.

“Never send a spider to do a soldier’s job.” Bucky tensed at the Russian and the man’s tone. Tony stared at him, waiting on a translation, as did Clint.

“What do you want?” Bucky asked in kind, his hands balling into white knuckled fists.

“We have what we want, Zima Soldat. Rest assured when next you see him he will finish the job he should have on the helicarriers over the Potomac.” The line went dead.

“Who the fuck was that?” Tony asked irately.

“Leonid Novokov,” Bucky told him grimly. “He’s just taken out the Black Widow and has Steve.”

Clint, tense and alert, added, “And it sounds like he’s going to make him into the perfect Hydra soldier.”

“If they brainwash him like they did me, I can’t stop him,” Bucky told the two men. “Steve had me dead to rights on the helicarrier. The only reason I’m not dead is because he didn’t want me to be.”

“Whereas you made lethal shots and he still lived,” Clint noted.

Bucky shrugged. “Not entirely lethal, though that gut shot would have put down anyone else.”

“Okay, so they have Steve and presumably Nat. Where would they take them?” Tony asked, pulling up a birds eye view of the world in front of them. It lit up with lights of what Bucky
recognized as known locations of Hydra bases past and present.

“Let’s worry about Nat right now,” Clint told Tony. “Why would they take her? She’s of no use to them. She’s either dead or unconscious. We need to have the Smithsonian security do a perimeter sweep.”

“Or I head there myself and look,” Tony snapped angrily. “Damn it, I’m off my game.”

He flung out a hand and a moment later his gear was falling into place around his body. “Commlink check.”

“Affirmative, sir,” JARVIS reported overhead. Iron Man zipped through the large door designed primarily for his entrance and exits from the tower.

Clint watched the lights of Tony’s suit fade into the distance with a grumbled, “I never get to go.”

“I’ll let you go on the mission to rescue them,” Bucky told them. “We’ll need every damned hand we can get. They aren’t going to let Steve go easily.”

Clint grinned in anticipation. “I love field trips.”

Tony found Nat, sluggish from the beating she’d taken but alive. They made an inconspicuous escape from the Smithsonian. No notice was made that Captain America was no longer present. It had been late enough in the evening that many assumed he and his date had left the venue.

Dressed in yoga pants and a baggy t-shirt, Nat nursed various bumps and bruises, irate that Novokov took her out so quickly and efficiently.

“When I get my hands on that guy I’m going to show him what a Widow can do,” she vowed and then winced when Clint slapped a bag of frozen green beans on the bump on her head. “Ow, Clint!” “Any clues,” Bucky asked Tony, who shook his head. Everyone looked at Nat.

“There’s one location that isn’t on any of the known Hydra bases because it wasn’t, strictly speaking, Hydra. A lot of hidden Hydra S.H.I.E.L.D. agents were assigned there, however.”

“Where?” Tony inquired.

“Albuquerque, New Mexico,” Nat and Clint said together.

“Why New Mexico?” Bucky asked, frowning.

“Same reason they chose Nevada and New Mexico for all their nuclear and atomic testing, nobody of political consequence lives there,” Clint explained. “S.H.I.E.L.D. took over the running of several bases there, the main one Loki destroyed when he came for the Tessaract. There is another installation, though, just east of Albuquerque on the other side of the Sandias Mountains.”

Nat looked at Tony, trying to ignore the nausea rolling through her stomach. “It’s the closest place they would have to get him too. He’s strong, stronger and better than they are and they know it. They are going to want to start working on him right away, get the ground work in. That’s where I would go. S.H.I.E.L.D. isn’t using it anymore so it’s just sitting there.”

“And it has the added bonus of having been a landing place for a lot of covert Hydra agents within S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Clint added grimly. “It’ll be familiar ground to whatever army and think tank
they’ve got together to handle Steve.”

“Or me,” Bucky tacked on, equally grim.

Nat looked at him but he refused to look back. “We’ll get him back,” she promised. He still wouldn’t look at her. “We will, Bucky.”

“I know,” he said but the confident tone belied the look of misery in his eyes. “If we don’t, I’ll kill him even if it kills me too. Captain America working as Hydra is something the world cannot afford. They had someone with an imperfect serum and look what havoc they wrought.”

His tone was calm but there was an undercurrent of anguish beneath it. Nat understood that the two men had a closer than brothers bond but never was it more apparent than now. She didn’t believe in love before but she could believe in it now. Steve had given up everything to do the right thing, even hurting the one person who meant the most to him, up to the point that the mission was accomplished, and then he stopped. Bucky’s love for Steve broke through decades of mind wipes and brain programming, bringing the man he’d been back to Steve slowly, one agonizing step at a time. She wondered a moment, with no little trepidation, if she could do the same for someone.

She looked at Clint who was studying the base schematic with Tony and Bucky, laying out a plan of attack. She held great affection for Clint Barton; he’d believed in her salvation when so many others had not. Was that love, or the beginning of love? She didn’t know and wasn’t sure she had the nerve to find out. Perhaps she wasn’t as courageous as she liked to think she was.

“Novokov’s got an axe to grind,” she heard herself say. “His trashing of Steve and Bucky’s quarters prove that. He specifically targeted Bucky’s things. Something about Bucky getting his life back sets him off. We can use that weakness to our advantage.”

“Draw him out with me as the bait?” Bucky asked but he was already nodding. “I like it. Gives me someone’s head to beat in.”

#

Bucky wanted to leave immediately, not wanting to waste a moment but the others convinced to wait until at least morning. “And it’s a two hour flight by my jet to get there,” Tony added. “We need to play this cool. Steve knows we’ll be hot on his trail for a rescue. He can hold out.”

But Bucky knew there were some things you just couldn’t hold out against and prayed with each passing minute that Steve wasn’t learning what those things might be.

Dawn broke and with it came Iron Man, the Black Widow, Hawkeye and the Winter Soldier taking off from Dulles for Kirtland Air Force base. The trip was tense with various scenarios being concocted and plans made for their resolution.

They landed and were through base security, with the help of Colonel Rhodes’ authorizations, in less than half an hour but seemed like hours to Bucky. With a borrowed military Hummer at their disposal, Clint drove south on state highways toward the location. They past turn offs to old Spanish missions still standing despite time and the occasional Pueblo revolt a few centuries back.

“Nothing but cattle, cactuses and dust,” Tony said in disgust.

“City slicker,” Clint rejoined.

“Damned right,” Tony agreed.
Clint eventually pulled over and stopped the vehicle. “Any closer,” he told them, “and we’ll set off perimeter alarms.”

They climbed out and triple checked their gear. Bucky hefted Steve’s shield, feeling ridiculous but loathe to be without it all the same. Steve would need it when the time came to get him the hell out of there.

“Let’s go,” he said and began the march toward Steve and rescue.

The land wasn’t entirely barren, with scraggily grass and bushes. Life lived in the desert despite its bleakness. Twice one of them jumped from a horned toad or other lizard scurrying in the brush and Bucky almost eviscerated a jack rabbit with a throwing knife that he had to retrieve.

The closer they approached the base the more tense they became, mainly from the lack of confrontation. Bucky didn’t like it. It smelled setup. He smelled a trap, but it’s rank smell caught his nostrils a bit too late.

“Ah, Zima Soldat,” purred a voice just in front of them as they approached a large tin style building that reminded Bucky strongly of an aluminum barn.

The man the voice belonged to step into view. He was in his mid to late thirties by Bucky’s reckoning, older than he had anticipated. Or maybe the thinning hair was misleading. There was no mistaking his training, however. Their welcome committee was graceful like any predator, moving silently and easily over the rocky terrain between them, eating up the distance.

“Novokov,” Bucky greeted. “We came for Rogers. Be a good boy and hand him over or I’ll have to get rude.”

Novokov laughed and Bucky swore the hair on his body stood on end. “Oh, you mean our new Winter Soldier?”

Novokov made a gesture and a tall blonde man, his uniform ice blue and silver, bearing a classic style shield of slate blue, stepped around the edge of the building. Steve’s eyes were cold and emotionless, his face a mask of nothing.

Bucky felt as if the wind was knocked out of him. They were too late.
Bucky stared hard at the figure before him. Steve's familiar features were blank in a way that Bucky inwardly shuddered to see. Even when he was being stoic, Steve's face was an expressive one. He couldn't lie to save his soul and couldn't hide excitement or despair any better. The costume was a cruel mockery of the Captain America costume, in grays, silver and black instead of the bright red, white and blue. As Bucky tensed, heart pounding, ready to take down his best friend, his old love, as quickly as possible, his attention was captured by a flicker of something in the depths of Steve's blue eyes.

In that jubilant moment Bucky knew Hydra hadn't succeeded as well as they thought. Even now, the better man was defeating their hasty programming. It might be a fight between him and Steve but it wouldn't be to the death. Bucky knew he could stall until Steve broke through the rough shod conditioning attempted by Hydra's infernal machinery. It was gonna hurt like ever loving hell though and not just physically. He would have to once more battle the man who meant more to him than anything.

Deciding that playing into Novokov's little scenario, as well as giving Steve's scrambled brain a bit of a boost toward the light, was the best plan, Bucky opened his mouth, his tone pleading. "Steve, you gotta listen to me. It's Hydra, they-"

"Hail Hydra," Steve snarled and sprang at Bucky without warning. It was a good thing Bucky was ready.

It was also a good thing the shield in Steve's hand wasn't his real one. As the shield whistled through the air toward Bucky's head, he dodged at the last minute, glancing the shield off the shield held by his metal arm. This new shield wasn't vibranium but some lesser alloy, yet it still jarred the flesh at the shoulder seam enough that Bucky wanted to scream in pain. The vibranium shield slipped from his grip but Steve ignored it, perhaps not recognizing it as the superior weapon that it was.

Peripherally Bucky saw the others engage with other enemy combatants, leaving Steve to him. It made sense: two supersoldiers going at it.

The irony that Steve was on Team Hydra this time was not lost on Bucky.

"Come on, Stevie," wheedled Bucky even as dodged or blocked punch after punch or kick after kick. "You know me, just like I knew you. If I can remember you, remember us after 70 years of programming, surely a tough guy like you can remember after one session." Bucky took a clip to the chin that sent him spinning in the air, landing hard on his left side. He shoved, moving his body just as both of Steve's booted feet came down where his head should have been.

"Think!" Bucky demanded, whipping to his feet even as Steve realized he missed his target. "We pushed your bed into the living room close to that coal burning monstrosity from two generations before. Coal, Steve, honest to God coal burning stove! We made love on that bed for the first time, right after they announced Pearl Harbor." A thought came to Bucky even as he blocked another punch and delivered one of his own. "I bought the radio. I was so sure you were gonna be pissed as hell at me but our old one had given up the ghost months earlier. Remember it belonged to your parents."
Something flickered across Steve's face and he halted the punch. "Radio?" he asked.

"Yeah I got it on the cheap too. You thought you scored big making me promise not to set you up on double dates to buy one when I had it sitting in the apartment the whole time. Remember?"

"I drew pictures of the snow," Steve mumbled and the now dented shield lowered just a fraction. It was enough to give Bucky renewed hope and Steve's new handlers heart attacks.

"Hail Hydra!" Novokov called and Steve stiffened. It was obviously some sort of trigger phrase but it wasn’t working like it was supposed to as Steve made no move to attack.

"I'm so confused," Steve murmured loud enough that Bucky could barely hear him.

"I know, Steve. They put you in a chair, didn't they, just like me? Do you want to be like me?" Bucky knew he was digging in a verbal knife but it had to be done. "You take care of me now, lover, not the other way around."

"Bucky?" Steve's eyes, blue as any sky, blinked twice and then hardened to ice. Bucky mentally gulped and prepared for the thrashing of his life.

Only Steve turned on his heel, sending the shield spinning toward Novokov, clocking the man directly in the chest. Novokov's eyes widened in shock and pain. He gasped, or tried to, his hands coming up to clutch where the shield struck before pitching forward. With quick running steps, Steve scooped up the vibranium shield and sent it spinning toward another target, ricocheting perfectly into another in a trajectory only Steve knew how to do.

Bucky felt like crowing in victory. Hydra agents scattered like cockroaches, well, the ones left standing to begin with anyway. He approached Steve instead, cautiously, not certain the frame of mind his friend was in. He needed to get Steve back into the game. Novokov was down but not out.

"Steve?" he asked almost timidly. "You okay?"

"It hurts like a sonuvabitch," Steve snarled, his huge chest heaving more from the mental and emotional upheaval than anything physical. "How the hell do you live with this day in and day out?"

"I don't have a choice," Bucky replied softly. "You wouldn't let me die. You were always in my head, telling me I was stronger than them, stronger than the programming. I couldn't run away from you in my head so I finally ran to you."

Steve looked at him, his eyes still cloudy with confusion but it was Steve, not Hydra, in control and Bucky mentally rejoiced.

"Come on, we got one more thing to-" Bucky's words were broken off by the Mack truck that tackled him from behind. He flew forward and his face hit the ground hard. He felt blood spout from his nose and heard several exclamations from his teammates.

Russian words were viciously poured into his ears, mainly questioning his legitimate parentage and griping about his purported treason against Hydra and KGB. Bucky ignored it in favor of an elbow backward into Novokov's gut. He missed, but only because Novokov wasn't there anymore. Bucky rolled groggily to his knees, ready to defend himself from a low vantage point only to find Novokov hanging by his throat in Steve's grip. It was familiar, as Steve once held him in that grip on the helicarrier what seemed like a lifetime ago.
Only this time Steve was pissed. The gloves were off.

Bucky wanted to relish this moment but knew he shouldn't. Novokov was as much a victim of the KGB and Hydra as he was. Steve wouldn't live well with killing a man who lived a life so close to Bucky's own tragic one.

"Steve, don't," Bucky urged.

"He hurt me. He hurt you." Steve's tone was firm and strong in his conviction and Bucky's heart sank a little hearing it.

"Yes, but he's been hurt too."

"Doesn't excuse it."

"Does it excuse the hurt I caused having undergone the same torture as he, then?" Bucky queried, hoping to dig into Steve's innate sense of fairplay.

"That's different. You regret. He does not."

Novokov gurgled and kicked at Steve's ribs, connecting but Steve did nothing but flinch. In his periphery vision Bucky saw the rest of the team finish mopping up Hydra goons.

"He doesn't have you or someone like you to bring him home," Bucky stated. "It's not his fault anymore than it was mine."

Steve's face betrayed a momentary flicker of doubt but he squeezed his hand a little tighter and Novokov's struggles became less violent with each passing moment. Steve was strangling the man to death. Bucky wondered how long Steve could hold the man up and if Novokov's consciousness would outlast Steve's exhaustion.


The taller man staggered a moment and Bucky braced him with his arm, starting to feel the bruises Steve managed to deliver just moments earlier now that the tense few minutes were over.

"We need to get you home," Bucky murmured.

Tony clumped up, still suited, the faceplate pulled back to reveal his bearded countenance. "He okay?" Tony asked warily.

Steve nodded warily. "I'm me, Tony, but just barely. Get me out of here."

The faceplate smacked shut and Tony's voice echoed strangely. Nat was busy zip tying everyone's wrists behind their back. Novokov got two on arms and legs for good measure.

"You got it, Cap. Rhodey's got a team on their way to pick up the pieces. To the Cap Rescue Mobile!" Tony pointed in the direction of where they left the vehicles and shot off into the sky. Clint and Natasha followed Bucky and Steve, wary but open to the fact that Steve seemed to break through the hasty reprogramming of his brain.

"That was risky," Bucky heard Nat say. "Trying to wipe Steve so quickly."

"Maybe they thought it would hold long enough to either capture Bucky and put us down or scatter
us like rice," Clint returned. "Good thing for them Steve's Captain America through and through."

Bucky glanced at Steve cautiously, knowing that if he could hear them talking Steve could as well. Steve's lips were compressed into thin lines slashing his face and his eyes were troubled.

"They strapped me down like some wild animal," Steve said in a low tone. Bucky suppressed an involuntary shudder as he was assaulted by his own memories. "All I could think was that I was not going to let them destroy me like they almost destroyed you. I was stronger than them, as strong as you."

Bucky blinked at that and sputtered uncomfortably, "You sap, shut up. You're embarrassing me."

Steve stopped walking and cupped Bucky's face with his still black gauntleted hands. "I mean it, Bucky. You endured that for 70 years and I was terrified of surviving it once. That takes a strength of will to come back from it that I pray I'll never have to find out I have."

Bucky grew even antsier under the watchful gaze of a curious Nat and Clint. "Shut up, you sap," he said again, with gruff affection coloring his tone. "Let's get you home and to bed. You look like shit."

"I look like shit?" Steve echoed in disbelief even as he started walking again. "Have you seen a mirror and what I did to you during our fight?" Bucky was sure he didn't want to know. He could feel at least one mouse on his left cheek blooming and his right eye smarted like it was already turning 30 shades of purple. And that was mentioning how sore his ribs felt and how his left shoulder ached from the run in with the shield.

The flight back to New York was quiet, Steve falling into a fitful slumber before they hardly left the ground in Albuquerque. Bucky watched him sleep with trouble brewing in his heart. Steve was captured and tortured because of him. When Nat drew him away from Steve's sleeping form to ask what was wrong, Bucky voiced this opinion to her.

"You're an idiot," she told him. "People have been trying to duplicate Erskine's formula for decades. That's how Bruce Banner became the Hulk. Dealing with people wanting to control his fate, want his blood, his DNA and whatever else they think will help them duplicate the formula is something Steve will have to live with for the rest of his life. It had nothing to do with you," she added when Bucky made a noise of disbelief. "You were an added bonus. They didn't think we'd risk you in the field. They knew we would come for Steve, so they wiped him in the hopes that he would thrash us for them."

"He could have, you know," Bucky told her.

She shrugged unconcernedly. "I doubt it. Whatever formula made Steve the man he is today is better than anything given to you or anyone else, Bucky. It's probably a good thing that Erskine was killed. God knows what the world would have turned out to be if he hadn't."

Bucky tried to imagine an army of Steves and his brain boggled at the notion.

"Stop beating yourself up about it," Nat advised with a friendly pat on his cheek. "Go cuddle up against him. We'll wake you guys once we're at the Tower."

#

It wasn't that he was wiped and reprogrammed like Bucky. It wasn't that it hurt like a motherfucker, an excruciating pain like nothing he'd ever experienced and that included when he was serumed back in 1943. It wasn't the humiliation that he was captured so easily, though that did
sting his pride a bit. It was that it was nothing like what Bucky lived through for 70 fucking, god damned years. Not days. Not months. Years. Repeatedly jerked from some sort of frozen slumberland, ordered to do the sick bidding of power hungry dictator-wannabes and then wiped like he was some gerbil in a science lab, without sentient thought or sense of self.

It galled Steve no end that he was having intense nightmares over one experience when before he'd been occasionally impatient at Bucky's constant nightmares the last few weeks. He'd understood intellectually that Bucky's nightmares were earned. He read the reports, knew what had been done to his lover's body and mind, but until now he'd not understood it heart, soul, mind and body like he did now.

That was what gave Steven Grant Rogers nightmares now.

He watched as Bucky, now in mother hen mode for some ungodly reason, bustled around the kitchen three mornings after Steve's rescue, making bacon, eggs and coffee. It was homey, it was comforting and Bucky's solicitude was starting to grate on Steve's nerves. He didn't want or need Bucky's pity or sympathy but was at a loss how to express this without hurting the other man's feeling. Taking care of Steve following this traumatic experience seemed to have rejuvenated Bucky, the old Bucky more prominent now in a crisis than he'd ever been in weeks of attempted make believe and half-dredged memories.

"Buck, we need to talk," Steve ventured, looking down at his half-drunk glass of orange juice.

"While we're eating," Bucky assured him, flipping the bacon with a strange expertness. They were well on their way to crispy perfection if Steve's eye was anything to judge by. Considering the old Bucky was known for burning bacon Steve wondered where this new found talent for bacon cooking came from.

Eggs cracked into the skillet next to the bacon on the stove and Steve sighed, standing up. If Bucky was making eggs over easy, toast was required to sop up the runny goodness.

Expecting Bucky to squawk at Steve's interference in the cooking process, Steve reached to the top of the fridge where they kept the plastic wrapped potato bread and popped four slices into the large toaster on the counter. Bucky slanted him a curious look but said nothing, to Steve's relief. In perfect harmony, they cooked, Steve lathering bread with butter and Bucky flipping the eggs and pulling the bacon out, crispy perfect as Steve surmised would happen.

They sat down, coffee mugs steaming in their hands before one of them spoke again. Steve was pushing a crust of toast into his broken egg yolk. The silence stretched until Steve couldn't stand it anymore. "We need to talk," he repeated.

Bucky looked at him and shrugged. "So talk."

"Stop coddling me, please."

Bucky stopped chewing his bacon, swallowed and sat back. "Then you do the same."

Steve furrowed his brow. "I don't understand."

"You coddled me, treated me like fragile china or somethin', Stevie, I'm just returning the favor when it's been earned." Bucky savagely bit into his toast and chewed it, giving Steve a defiant look.

"I-" Steve halted his protest. He had coddled Bucky, maybe a bit too much sometimes, so the remark wasn't unwarranted. "Okay," he stated, dropping his toast in a puddle of yellow yolk.
"Agreed. No more coddling each other."

"Unless the other one asks for it," Bucky amended around his swallow of toast.

"Unless," Steve agreed. "I didn't mean to make you feel weak, Buck, I just wanted to give you the affection that you'd been starved for."

Bucky glanced at him and then down at his plate, a light blush making his features turn ruddy.
"There are ways of showing affection other than smothering the person to death with well meaningness, you know."

Steve frowned again. "I don't follow," he confessed. "What do you mean?"

Bucky leaned over the table and brushed a light kiss on his lips. Steve's heart immediately began to pound.

"That answer your question, Rogers?" Bucky drawled impishly.

"Yep. Screw breakfast." Steve stood up and grabbed Bucky's hand, pulling him into a standing position right before slamming his mouth down on Bucky's. The feeling was heaven. He'd been craving this since the moment Bucky turned up on his couch weeks ago. Longer maybe, since he woke from the ice and realized that nothing had changed, he still wanted only Bucky Barnes and Bucky was 70 years gone and bleached bones scattered in a mountainous gorge.

He heard Bucky moan, felt the vibration through their kisses and delved his tongue deep into Bucky's mouth, savoring the taste of Bucky and breakfast there. He didn't care that he shouldn't be engaged in sexual activities for both their sanities. He only knew he needed Bucky more than he needed air. Bucky was life affirming and always had been.

"Bedroom," Bucky panted between brief, almost chaste kisses. "Or the couch, but I prefer your bedroom."

"More space," agreed Steve before diving in for another mouth-mapping kiss.

They began to walk awkwardly, one backward while the other moved forward and occasionally switching, loathe to break physical contact in any way. Hands roamed, popping buttons on shirts and waistbands of pants. By the time they reached Steve's room their shirts and one sock each left a trail.

"It's been so long, Stevie," Bucky grumbled, shucking his pants off and all but throwing them across the room. He was bare except for one sock, which was pulled off quickly, and a pair of tight underwear that left not much to the imagination.

"I know," murmured Steve, enjoying the view. He took off his own pants and sock before rubbing his large hands across Bucky's chest invitingly. "We have all the time in the world."

"Hope you got some Vaseline," the brunet said before gasping when Steve tweaked a hardened nipple.

"Something better. The future is not without its perks." Steve walked over to the bed, opened the drawer to his side table and pulled out a tiny bottle. "According to the instructions a little goes a long way."

Bucky took the bottle and opened it. A strong waft of faux strawberry tickled their noses. "I love the future," Bucky stated reverently. Steve laughed.
He stretched out on the bed and Bucky draped himself on his long lengthy body, hands delicately tracing the impressive musculature. "No scars," marveled Bucky. "I remember injuries and I've seen the footage of you fighting and not just me. Not a single scar."

"Miracles of modern medicine," quipped Steve, trying not to flinch and giggle when Bucky accidentally brushed a ticklish spot.

Bucky frowned a moment and Steve longed to wipe that expression from his face. He reached up and rubbed the frown away with his own fingertips. "Hey, none of that now."

"I shot you."

"And stabbed me."

"Steve!" Bucky's protest was guilt-ridden.

"But it wasn't you that did it. It was Hydra's Asset, which you aren't anymore." Steve continued to light rub circles on Bucky's temples and soothe the wrinkles that his worried expression made on Bucky's beloved face.

"Sometimes I am." Bucky's tone was fierce and defiant.

"But you don't want to be and you fight it off," Steve reminded him. "You are a strong man, James Buchanan Barnes, and I love you."

Bucky's blue-gray eyes searched Steve's face, as if looking for mockery or insincerity. "You love me." The tone was nearly disbelieving.

"I've never stopped," Steve assured him. "I never, ever stopped loving you."

Bucky made a fretful moan and buried his face in Steve's neck. Steve could feel Bucky's heaving breath against his skin and shuddered with want. "I wish I could say the same."

"Bucky never stopped loving Steve," he told the distraught man. "You were the Asset, I told you, not Bucky. It was out of your control. It was not your fault. I, and the others, blame you for nothing except what you have done and will do as Bucky Barnes. Even the Asset can be absolved in some ways, for he was a tool not a person, with no thought of his own."

"Enough!" Bucky sat up, tears in his eyes and Steve gently wiped them away. "I want to fuck you into the mattress and we're turning maudlin."

"Well, you best get a move on, Sgt. Barnes, I'm not going to wait around all day without making a move myself," Steve sassed.

A mischievous gleam entered Bucky's gaze and strong blunted fingers tripped over Steve's chest, teasingly stopping just at Steve's boxer waistband. "Oh, you aren't, huh?"

"Nope."

"Well, we'll have to see about that. I thought Captain America has infinite patience."

Steve gasped at what Bucky's hands were doing to his body, mainly torturing. "Not Captain America right now, just Steve Rogers."

"Nothing 'just' about you, Steve Rogers," murmured Bucky before swooping in for a kiss.
Steve's felt his metaphorical heart swell at the words. The new Bucky wasn't the old Bucky and he didn't care. He wasn't the old Steve anymore. He couldn't love either Bucky any less and only hoped he could love more every day. It was nice to know that Bucky, perhaps, felt the same way now. Perhaps there would be no more of his attempts to be whatever Bucky he thought Steve wanted.

And all it took was a botched attempted mind wipe. If Steve had known that, he'd have tempted Hydra sooner. Or maybe not. That mind wipe machine had hurt like a sonuvabitch and nearly worked.

"Earth to Rogers, working my way to a blow job if you don't mind returning to the matter at hand." Bucky poked him in the ribs and Steve gave a start.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. "Was thinking."

"The point of sex is to not think," Bucky complained. He drifted lower and tugged Steve's heavy dick from the confines of his underwear. "Now that is purple mountains' majesty," marveled Bucky.

"Oh my God, you did not just say that," laughed Steve, blushing in spite of himself.

"Nope, I can't deny it. I said it," Bucky told him cheekily before going in for the kill.

Steve gasped as Bucky’s warm mouth slowly enveloped his dick, sucking lightly and making Steve’s knees go weak. As Bucky worked it was all Steve could do to not become a babbling mess. He could feel the pressure build and wanted it to last but not. More than anything he wanted to keep Bucky’s mouth on him but he also longed for Bucky inside him. He couldn’t have both.

“I-I’m not gonna last, B-Bucky,” Steve stammered out as the tension began to reach a breaking point. Bucky continued with his ministrations, but when Steve looked down there was an element of deviltry gleaming in Bucky’s blue-grey eyes.

Steve came without any more warning, his eyes all but rolling back in his head. How he stayed upright, he wasn’t sure but when he came back to himself after his orgasm, Bucky was sitting back with a smug look on his face and his lips red as cherries.


Steve fell onto the bed and Bucky straddled his hips. “Yeah? You love me? How much?”

“Enough to let you give me a heart stopping blow job.”

“That good, huh?”

“I haven’t had sex since 1944, what do you think?”

Bucky stilled, eyes going round. “Not once?”

Steve shook his head. “None of them were you.”

Bucky blinked rapidly a few times as if his eyes teared up. “Well I love you too, jerk, but I can’t say I haven’t had sex since 1944.”

“It’s okay,” Steve assured him. “Maybe I should have clarified I haven’t made love since 1944.”

“Now that I can get behind,” Bucky agreed.
“Is that the only thing you can get behind?” Steve teased.

Bucky grinned in response. “I’d prefer to have you in front of me.”

Steve fought and lost to a blush. “I’m game if you are,” he said even as Bucky chortled as his blush.

“You’ll like it, Stevie,” Bucky promised with a leer. Steve’s breath caught at long-lost pet name.

He shucked his under wear quickly and straddled Steve’s hips again, pulling Steve’s long legs around his waist. He liberally coated his fingers with some of the strawberry lubrication even as he leaned down to kiss Steve. Their tongues tangled wildly and both men moaned. Steve felt himself getting heavy again.

Bucky’s long fingers, slicked with lube, began to slowly stretch open Steve’s hole. It had been so long that it was a little uncomfortable at first but it was a pleasurable discomfort at first and when Bucky’s fingers scissored Steve spasmed, moaning into the kiss.

“I need you,” Steve panted, “now.”

Bucky slicked himself and pressed gently inside. He heard Bucky’s gasp as he slowly slid home. In and out Bucky moved and Steve relished the feeling of being filled and emptied once more. And it was glorious to feel it with Bucky, something only a few short months ago he thought was a thing long passed.

Bucky’s pace picked up and Steve fisted the covers as pressure built within him again.

“God, Stevie, you’re so tight, so perfect,” Bucky panted as his speed picked up slightly more. “I’m gonna...”

Steve arched his back and felt Bucky’s flesh hand on his dick. He felt the metal hand grasp one of his butt cheeks and lift him a little. Bucky’s cock hit his prostate. He heard Bucky’s pants over his own.

Steve came for the second time a moment with a smattering of love babble before Bucky’s hips stuttered and he felt the flood of warmth from Bucky’s own orgasm.

“God, Steve!” gasped Bucky.

Steve would have reveled in the power he had over the so called ghost assassin, the Winter Soldier, but he was too busy reeling from his own orgasm to really give it much thought. Bucky pulled out carefully and collapsed with sigh next to Steve, curling into Steve’s body like he was coming home.

Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky tightly, loathe to let go for anything. It felt right, it felt perfect.

“I love you,” he repeated.

“And I love you,” Bucky responded, giving a tight hug. “Now shut up. I just fucked my boyfriend silly and I’m tired.”

“You cheatin’ on me, Barnes?” teased Steve in mock-outrage.

“You wish you were ugly enough to cheat on, Rogers, now shut up and enjoy the post-coitous
bliss.”

Steve gave a laugh but did as he was told. It was bliss.

Chapter End Notes

Come visit me on Tumblr as wolfiejinn. I'm happy to babble about the two schmucks, anything Marvel, DC, comics, or Chris Evans. I'm also looking for writing prompts so drop me a line.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all the readers who have been patiently waiting. I wasn't realizing there was anyone still waiting on this until I was prompted in comments and on Tumblr the other day. Have an epilogue. The boys deserve a happy ending, wouldn't you say?

Bucky got better bit by bit as time went by and so did Steve. There were still nightmares and self-recriminations when flashbacks revealed more than Bucky Barnes’ sense of self-worth could handle. Steve did what he could to make Bucky feel worthy not only of their renewed affections but the friendships he was making with the Avengers and Sam. It wasn’t an easy road but sometimes it was an enjoyable one, filled with love and rediscovery.

Pepper, Tony and their friend Col. Rhodes pulled enough strings to get Bucky a fair hearing. All the evidence of his abuse and torture over seven decades was examined and analyzed. It was determined that James Buchanan Barnes, Sgt. U.S. Army was the oldest living prisoner of war. He wasn’t given any medals and public opinion was oftentimes divided as information about some of his kill missions leaked through the press but for the most part he was left in relative peace. Public opinion was the least of Bucky’s worries.

One day he came home from his daily therapy session to find Steve up to his neck in some sort of plastic blocks. He stood in the doorway a moment in bemusement before asking, “What the hell, Steve?”

Steve looked up with a grin. “Tony said building things is therapeutic and I’ve been dying to try out these Lego things since I woke up.”


Steve demonstrated locking two blocks together. “I got a couple easy kits to start out with and then we can build,” he reached around the edge of the sofa where Bucky couldn’t see and pulled out a box with a S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier on it, “this.”

“Seriously?” Bucky asked with a frown. “I almost killed you on that and you want to build one?”

“Therapy, Buck, I’m in therapy too, y’know.”

Steve’s tone was slightly hurt and Bucky reacted instinctively. “Yeah, I’m sorry, Stevie, my bad.” He’d been picking up modern lingo from Tony and Clint to their amusement and Steve’s exasperation. “Okay, I’m supposed to get a hobby that doesn’t involved weapons and hand to hand combat, so let’s give this a try.”
Steve harrumphed good naturedly and they started building a miniature castle. It went quickly. They moved on to the dragon, which again was finished in less than fifteen minutes.

“We got this,” Steve said confidently. ”Wanna start the helicarrier?”

Bucky shrugged noncommittally but obligingly reached for the box, ripping open one end and dumping the contents in their bag on the floor. They were halfway sorting through the pieces and being confused by the instructions when Steve noticed it was dinner time.

“Let’s order pizza.”

“Thank God you took Sam’s advice and got a decent beer,” Bucky said drily.

“Quiet, you.” Steve kissed Bucky gently instead of returning the rude gesture his boyfriend graced him with. “I bought something else other than Legos at the mall, by the way.”

Bucky looked at him interestedly. “Yeah? Clothes that don’t make you look like an old man.”

“I do not dress like an old man!” Steve protested for what was likely the hundredth time this week.

“Sure thing, grandpa.”

“I want you to dance with me.”

“You can’t dance,” Bucky told him flatly. “And besides you broke the last needle on the record player.”

“I bought us a radio.”

“Oh, really.”

“Yes, really.” Steve walked over and uncovered a cathedral style radio by some modern maker. “It can play radio stations and MP3s from our players.”

“Really?” Bucky was more interested now and walked over to inspect the modern marvel. “Let me guess you’ve already uploaded Glen Miller and Soundgarden?”

“And Maroon 5 and the Andrew Sisters, to name a few,” Steve added, punching a button and letting Frank Sinatra liven up the atmosphere.

“Good song!” Bucky said over the beginnings of crooning “Let’s Get Lost”. He pulled Steve into his embrace and they began to sway. “Did we do this during the 40s?” Bucky asked huskily, inching his hands down from Steve’s waist to his taut ass.

Steve chuckled as he got groped. “No.”

“Well, we should have.”

“Yes, we should.”

“Ah, the simpler times,” Bucky stated, pulled Steve closer.

“When all we needed was the radio, Ow!” Steve began hopping around after he accidentally stepped on a Lego.

Bucky laughed. “Sap.”
“I know, but I’m your sap.”

“That you are, that you are.”

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