Living Just to Breathe

by emptydistractions

Summary

All Steve's ever wanted was to help people. And ever since they fished him out of the ice, that's what he's been doing. In fact, that's all he's been doing. In a world that he doesn't recognize anymore, it's easier to buy himself in his work than to face up to the ghosts of his past. Maybe avoidance isn't the healthiest strategy, but it's all he's got.

All Bucky wants is to keep his city safe without some big, blonde idiot trampling all over his plans. Ever since the Avengers rose to fame and SHIELD moved in, that simple task's been getting harder and harder, and he's about at the end of his rope with it all.

Neither of them have ever been especially good at compromise.

(Or: A story about two heroes who hate each other. Until they don't.)

Notes

This is my contribution to the 2019 Shrunkyclunks Big Bang and my first go at writing a hate-mance! It was a lot of fun. Thanks to the mods of the event and to my fantastic artist elenatria! Check out her amazing art on tumblr or AO3 and later in the story!
And thank you as always to the best beta in the world, Lillaby, and to spikeymarshmallows without whom none of my stories would probably ever get written.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
It all started with a mistake. Or maybe it would be better to say it was a misunderstanding. After all, Steve had certainly had his share of those since he’d come out of the ice, and he had made reluctant bedfellows with regret a long time ago. So by the time he realized what a massive error he’d made, he was already halfway to acceptance of it as well.

Ever since he’d woken up 80 years into the future and half a world away, Steve had made it a point to stick to Manhattan and its soaring skylines and never-sleep attitude. It was nothing like he remembered New York being, and yet he found a strange sort of comfort in that every night as he settled down in bed in Tony’s tower overlooking a city that no longer felt like his.

He’d been afraid, if he really admitted it. Afraid to go back to Brooklyn, afraid to see how things had changed, afraid to witness how the sights and sounds of his childhood had vanished like they’d never even existed at all. As if Steve was the only one who remembered them, and once he was gone they would be too, like a puff of smoke on the wind. On his worst days, he sometimes wondered if he’d somehow imagined the entire thing.

So he’d made excuses at first. He was settling in, he told the others. Learning too much about the future to be bogged down by the past, and besides, he was too busy with his work and with life and with the next mission. There was always something. And then Loki had come and split open the sky, and suddenly Steve’s excuses had been anything but.

He felt like he’d barely looked up and suddenly it had been almost a year since he’d woken up in a
New York that no longer belonged to him in a body that still didn’t feel like his own. So much had happened but he realized finally—finally—that he was ready.

Or so he thought.

But as always, Steve Rogers made plans and life laughed in his face. All his preparation flew out the window within the first five minutes of stepping foot into his old neighborhood. He’d thought he’d been prepared for all the ways in which things had changed.

But what he hadn’t anticipated were all the things that had remained the same.

Across the street stood an old apartment building. Steve remembered walking by it every day to get to school. It seemed like something from a far-off memory, and yet here it was, as if some giant hand had reached back in time and plucked the building up and dropped it into the future. It seemed as displaced as Steve himself. At some point, someone had thought to give it a new coat of paint, but that was already fading in spots and peeling in others, as if the building was resisting the attempt to modernize it. Everything else was the same though, from the crumbling brick façade to the cracking concrete steps out front. Steve’s eyes burned at the corners as he stopped walking to stare, and he half expected to feel his Ma whack the back of his head to chide him for holding people up.

No hit came though. A car blasted through the nearby intersection, windows down and music blaring, pulling Steve forcibly into the present. He closed his eyes and shook his head slightly, as if he could physically clear the memory away. With one last look at the old building, Steve pulled his ball cap low over his eyes and then shoved his hands into the pockets of his sweatshirt before hurrying away.

If he’d hoped to fare any better on the next street, or the one after that, he was soon disappointed. There were reminders everywhere. The butcher shop where they’d bought their meat was still operating, though it had expanded to include a restaurant now, and the pharmacy on the corner still sported the same ancient plate glass windows and wrought iron grille work, and the church where he’d taken his first communion. It went on and on and on-

“Excuse me, sir?”

Steve whirled around at the sudden light touch on his shoulder, hands automatically coming up into a defensive position. In front of him stood two wide-eyed teenage girls, just out of school for the day. Both had backpacks slung over their shoulders, and one of them carried a schoolbook tucked into the crook of her arm. His wild expression must have caught them off guard as they stood frozen to the spot.

Steve coughed and cleared his throat, surreptitiously wiping traces of moisture from his cheeks. “Sorry,” he said, looking up and pasting on his most press-friendly smile. “You startled me.”

“No no no, we’re sorry,” one of the girls said hurriedly. She was taller than her friend, with her dark brown hair tied back in a long braid and braces on her top teeth. “We didn’t mean to sneak up on you, it’s just that—well, we were wondering… are you by any chance Captain America?”

The last few words came out in such a rush that it took Steve a moment to piece them together. When he had, he couldn’t help but inwardly cringe. He’d long since given up on the dream of going unrecognized on the streets in Manhattan where people knew to watch for the Avengers, but he’d been hoping that here…well, he’d been hoping for a few hours to mourn his old life in private, that was all.

A voice that sounded very much like his Ma scolded him for his ungracious thoughts. He knew he
should be thankful to be in the position that he was, to be recognized for how he could help people. And he was. Some days were just harder than others.

The girls squealed in teenage delight when Steve introduced himself and looked at him with stars in their eyes as he signed their bookbags and notebooks. To his dismay, the commotion quickly drew a crowd, including a mother who was out walking with her young son and a group of men just leaving a work lunch.

It felt like more and more people kept coming. He took so many pictures that his face felt ready to crack in half with the force of his smile. In his pockets, his hands clenched and unclenched, fingernails digging little crescents into the palms of his hands. Cold sweat gathered at his wrists and inside his collar, and there were just so many of them too many and they all wanted something and nothing here was right just like remembered and not at all and suddenly he couldn’t breathe but that wasn’t right he hadn’t had asthma since the serum so why was his chest so tight and why were his ears ringing so loudly?

“Excuse me,” Steve said suddenly, voice coming out strange and strangled. The people, who’d been chattering excitedly over one another, fell silent. They all turned to look at him (so many eyes and hands reaching and). “I have to go,” he muttered as he pushed his way roughly through the small crowd that had gathered around him.

As soon as he was free he broke into a sprint, turning down the first alley he came across. He kept going, feet eating up the pavement in huge stretches as buildings and people flashed by in a blur of colors. Steve didn’t know where he was going, but he knew from the direction that his path was taking him somewhere near the water.

The buildings got worse as he went, the streets more rough and mean. He slowed to a jog and then to a walk as he tried to calm down, working on breathing in and out at a slow, steady pace. As the panic drained out of him, shame took its place. God, what the hell had that been? Captain America, scared off by teenage girls and young mothers. Steve knew he’d never hear the end of it if Tony got wind.

Steve stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets as he idly assessed his location. He was somewhere in the warehouse district. He could hear the not-so-distant lap of water against concrete, and the smell of stagnant water filled his nostrils. Somewhere near the docks then.

He perked up as a noise broke the silence. His eyes darted quickly to the side, and he strained his hearing to pick up anything else. There! Again, the same sound, and this time Steve zeroed in on its origin. He knew that noise; fists and feet hitting flesh. The sound of combat.

It was coming from the building to his right. Silently, Steve vaulted the chain-link fencing and quickly located the first broken window he could find. He pulled his sweatshirt down over his hand and reached up to clear the remaining shards of glass away from the ledge before hoisting himself up and through the frame. He froze as his eyes adjusted from the sunny day to the dim light of the interior of the building.

The inside of the building was one large, empty space. It had most likely been used for storage once,
but now it was home to only a few large piles of rotting pallets and rusting bits and bobs of old machinery. The window he was perched in was maybe ten feet up in the floor, one of several set into the brick walls to let in natural light. He’d entered on the far end of the old warehouse; on the other end, several figures moved.

Steve dropped soundlessly to the floor, ducking behind a large stack of mouldering lumber as he took stock of the situation at the other end of the warehouse. There were three men. One of them, large and brutish-looking with hair buzzed close to his scalp, leaned against the wall with one leg folded up and his foot planted on the brick behind him. He looked bored. The other, his partner Steve guessed as he watched them exchange words that he couldn’t make out, was smaller and wiry, with a sour expression on his face. If he had to hazard a guess, Steve would have bet the third man wasn’t working with them, given the fact that he was currently tied to a chair.

The chair they had tied him to was wooden and old. It was solid, unlike some of today’s newer furniture. His arms were pulled tight behind his back and wrapped tight with actual rope, which wasn’t something Steve had seen in a while, what with the invention of zip ties. He couldn’t see much of the actual man. Dark, shoulder-length brown hair fell over his face, but when he moved, Steve could see the dark patterning of bruises blossoming across the bridge of his nose and around both eyes. Twin trails of blood dripped from his nose, and his lower lip looked split. It wasn’t combat he’d been hearing, but instead an old-fashioned beatdown.

The smaller man stepped forward and took a handful of that long hair and yanked hard, pulling upwards with such force that the chair legs scraped heavily over the concrete floor, leaving little furrows in their wake.

“Where’d you get it?” the man growled as he tightened the grip on the other man’s hair. The man in the chair met his gaze, and either his conviction was rock solid or his pain tolerance was off the charts. Either way, Steve was impressed.

“I told you,” he replied. His voice had the faintest hint of a Brooklyn accent, but one that had been watered down to almost nothing, there and gone again in an instant. “I ain’t talkin’ to nobody but your boss.”

In response, the man yanked him backwards by the hair and slapped him hard in the face. The ring of the impact echoed through the empty warehouse. Steve watched in fascination as the man in the chair turned back towards the man who had just hit him. He was grinning, his mouth a bloody mess as he slowly and carefully reared back and spit a mixture of blood and saliva into the other man’s face.

For someone who had just been spit on, the other man was eerily calm as he let go of the handful of hair, letting the chair legs drop onto the ground with a dull thunk. He shrugged and wiped the spittle from his face as if it was a minor inconvenience. The switch from his earlier violence to this calm demeanor was almost as chilling as the violence itself.

The smaller man turned to his partner who was still learning against the wall, now idly cleaning his nails with a small knife. The entire scene couldn’t have looked more like a stereotypical gangster movie if it had been scripted and produced by Hollywood itself, and Steve felt the sudden urge to look around for any hidden cameras. At the behest of his partner, the larger man pocketed his knife and pushed himself up off the wall.

“Well,” the little one said, turning back to the man in the chair. “You sure you ain’t got nothing to say?”

The man in the chair spit more blood onto the concrete. “Go fuck yourself.”
“Alright.” The other man shrugged and his partner came forward, moving with surprising speed for someone so large. He raised a booted foot and kicked, planting it squarely into the man’s chest with such force that Steve felt the dull thud in his own ribcage in sympathy. The force of the blow knocked the chair clean off its legs, and man and chair both landed flat against the concrete. The resounding crash sent several roosting pigeons scattering from the roof.

The man in the chair gasped and wheezed, trying to catch his breath. To be honest, Steve wouldn’t have been surprised if the blow hadn’t cracked a few of his ribs.

“What’d you get it?” The skinny one again. “Who’d you buy it from?” he asked as the big man advanced again.

“Your mother.”

The man got a kick to the side of his head that sent him and the chair skittering across the floor for his troubles. Steve rubbed his eyes in frustration. More and more he got the feeling that he’d walked right into the middle of one giant clusterfuck. He was guessing all three of them were criminals, or at the very least dabbling in something illegal. God, Steve was tired. He felt wrung up, dried out, like a used-up dish towel. What he wouldn’t give to just call the police with an anonymous tip and let them sort this one out.

But he knew he wouldn’t- couldn’t- in good conscience do that. Regardless of how tired he was, these men were far less dangerous to him than to regular men and women who might respond to the call.

Steve rolled his neck and stretched out his shoulders, the joints cracking as he surveyed the room. He didn’t have his shield with him, not that he’d need it for this, as the men were lightly armed. There was the knife and at least one handgun that he could see poking out of the small man’s waistband. (Terrible gun discipline- he could practically hear Natasha’s disapproval from here.) The man tied down wouldn’t be a problem, though he’d probably be unhappy about being freed only to discover that his rescuer was about to turn him over to the police along with his captors.

Steve took a deep breath and let out one last weary sigh that was close enough to dramatic that he was happy Natasha wasn’t nearby to hear him. As soundlessly as possible, he launched himself from his hiding place, hitting the ground already at full speed. As he passed a pile of rotting two-by-fours, he grabbed one up and threw it, catching the smaller of the two men perfectly in the temple as he shouted and reached for his gun. He went down like a sack of bricks.

Before the big guy had the chance to so much as react, Steve caught him with a knee to the stomach, driving his leg up and into the man’s torso. He felt the air leave the man’s lungs in a whoosh as he slammed into the wall behind him with all of Steve’s weight bearing down on him. He slid down the wall and crumpled at its base.

The whole thing was over in less than a few seconds. Satisfied that the other two were out cold, Steve walked over to the last man left, pulling the chair up by its wooden frame. The man’s breathing was still strained, his chest heaving as blood dripped from his still-bleeding mouth. His hair was tangled and matted with blood, and he looked like he’d tangled with a tank and lost. Still, Steve couldn’t help but notice that under all the grime the man was startlingly handsome.

“You gonna run if I untie you, or are you gonna stay and behave until the police get here?” Steve asked him.

The man rolled his eyes in a way that very much said ‘no shit’, and Steve figured that was good enough for him. They’d both had long days, and if Steve couldn’t stop a man half beaten to death
from running than he might as well hang up his shield for good anyway. Besides, he hated the thought of causing any more misery than he had to, and while he hadn’t been the one to beat the man in the first place, he certainly wasn’t going to leave him tied to the damn chair.

Steve was tempted to just pull the rope apart, but he didn’t want to hurt a man who was cooperating quietly. Steve kept his eyes on the large mass of knots as he contemplated his own horrible luck and how the hell he was going to get away from this without Tony making this into a thing. As far as he could, Tony Stark lived for exactly that.

He tugged and twisted until the knot finally pulled apart and the ropes fell away. “There,” Steve said, already thinking ahead to how to handle the police. “Now how-”

He didn’t even see it coming. The punch had all the force and subtlety of a truck behind it, and the power of it sent Steve sprawling backwards. He hit the ground and the concrete jarred his spine, reverberating through his bones as his vision swam. Cartilage crunched in his nose.

His ears rang as he scrambled quickly to his feet, equilibrium momentarily shot. It wasn’t even the fact that he’d gotten sucker-punched that upset him- it was the fact that it actually hurt.

“The fuck-” Steve began.

“You fucking idiot.” The man he’d just freed was standing up now. He was a few inches shorter than Steve, slender and firmly muscled, and so, so angry.

Steve stopped short. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Captain Asshole,” the man snapped. “Yeah, I know who you are,” he said with a sour expression when Steve looked surprised. He was so mad that he was practically spitting, the blood and bruises painting his face only adding to the macabre sight. He paced back and forth, casting dark, angry looks at the two knocked out men on the floor. “I’ve spent months- months- tracking these guys and trying to an in with them, and you ruined it in five fucking seconds!”

Steve was frozen to the spot. As if he’d thought the day couldn’t get any worse, along came the universe to smack him- or punch him, as it were- in the face. “I-”

The man whirled around to face Steve while pointing at the men Steve had taken down. “Do you know who they are?” He didn’t wait for Steve to answer before starting up again. “They were my best shot at getting to the boss of one of the most prolific weapons smuggling rings in this goddamn city.”

And now the gears started clicking into place. Steve thought he understood. “Do you work for SHIELD?”

If looks could kill Steve suspected the one he was getting now might have done him in several times over. “No shit Sherlock,” the man said. “Everyone works for SHIELD since you fuckheads turned up.”

Steve felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he started to realize exactly what had happened here. He’d interfered with another agent’s investigation. A complicated one, by the sounds of it. He felt awful, but at the same, how was he was supposed to know? The agent, whoever he was, had put on one hell of a show.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, dropping any hint of defensive posture he still held. “I really am. I had no clue.”
“Of course you didn’t.” The agent looked at Steve like he was something particularly nasty on the bottom of his shoe. “If it won’t get you on TV, what do you care?”

“What? That’s not—”

“Save it for the press conference,” the agent cut him off again before Steve could say anything. Steve could feel himself rapidly losing what little control of the situation he might have had left. “Months,” the agent muttered as he rubbed at one of his shoulders. Steve noticed for the first time that the agent was wearing sleek black gloves that didn’t fit with the rest of his outfit, which had clearly been picked to appear as nondescript as possible. “*Months*, I worked on this. I let them pop my goddamn shoulder out for this.”

Steve watched in amazement as the agent stiffened his back and shoulders, and then used his left hand to press against his right shoulder, hard, until Steve could hear the joint shift back into place. Like before, Steve felt his own shoulder twinge in sympathy pain. The man himself barely winced.

Steve let out a long exhale as he surveyed the room. The other two men were still out, and they would likely be for awhile. The chair and rope stood forlorn a few feet away like some kind of old movie set piece. Again, he couldn’t help the guilt. He knew well enough the feeling of having a mission thrown off course by someone else’s careless actions.

“Let me help,” Steve said earnestly. “There’s still—”

“There’s nothing.” Cut off again. Despite how terrible he felt about the situation, this was starting to get old. “This guy’s paranoid as fuck,” the agent continued. “The minute he gets wind of this, he’ll pack up and I’ll be lucky if I find so much as fucking breadcrumb.”

Steve tapped his fingers absently against his thigh as he thought. “What about them?” he asked. “Can’t you question them?”

The agent scoffed at his suggestion and Steve felt a tiny flare of annoyance. His good graces were beginning to run out and they were quickly moving into new territory. “Question the guys you just gave brain damage? Awesome idea. No, I can’t question them. They’ll rot in prison before they give up their boss. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Steve wasn’t willing to give up quite yet, and besides, they had resources. “Why don’t we take them in?”

“Like I said, they won’t talk. *I know* these guys. Sorry, but Tony Stark’s money can’t buy you out of this one.”

The statement threw Steve for a moment and he blinked, trying to make sense of it. “That wasn’t... No. Look. I’m sorry, I really am. Is there anything I can do to help?” He was willing to chalk up the man’s behavior to a bad day and make it right, despite the fact that they’d clearly gotten off on the wrong foot. Lord knew, Steve wasn’t exactly innocent of the same thing.

“You can help by staying the fuck outta my way.”

Ah. Maybe not just a bad day then.

The agent turned and stalked off, heading for the set of rusted metal doors and the exit. As he passed the smaller man, he kicked at him lightly. “And take care of these assholes. You break ‘em, you bought ‘em.”

Steve followed quickly after him. He’d already been planning to make the phone call to the police,
but something in him rebelled at being told so blatantly what to do in such a tone. The old doors gave way with a creaking noise and the man pushed through them, Steve on his heels. He caught up to him just as the agent was pulling a small, sleek motorcycle from a cleverly concealed spot behind two rusting dumpsters.

“Wait!” Steve said as the man fired up the bike and swung a leg over. He made a sight that went straight to some of Steve’s fantasies. Bruised and bloody and wild and dangerous. Hurriedly Steve brushed those thoughts aside. “What’s your name?”

In response, the agent revved the bike, flipped Steve a gloved middle finger, and roared past him.
“You had a panic attack, Steve.”

“Huh?” Steve looked up from where he’d been staring morosely into his drink. Across from him Natasha sat, elbows on the table and one hand played idly with the straw in her own drink. She smiled a sort of half-smile at him that was neither condescending or pitiful, but instead somehow managed to be a mixture of both. Or maybe he was just being too sensitive.

“A panic attack,” she said again as she leaned forward to snatch a French fry from his plate. She had a stack of her own, but she always insisted that French fries tasted better off of other people’s plates. “Like anxiety,” she explained as she popped the fry into her mouth. “But a lot of it, and all at once. You get sort of…overwhelmed, and your brain tells your body to freak out.”

He nodded and took a half-hearted bite of his burger. “Huh,” he said again.

Natasha sighed at him. As usual, she looked flawless; skin smooth and even and every hair in place. She both stood out and blended in perfectly in the non-descript greasy diner where they’d met for lunch. Steve supposed that was part of what made her so good at what she did. Memorable, but only when she wanted to be.

“What? They didn’t have those in your day?”

Steve snorted. “If we did, I certainly didn’t know about it. There was a war on, and before that everyone was too busy trying to keep me from dying as a kid to sit down and talk about my feelings.”

“Hey,” she snapped. “Lose the attitude, please and thank you. This is the twenty-first century. It’s a thing now.” Her expression softened a bit and Steve felt his own shoulders relax. “Honestly, I’m surprised you haven’t had more problems, given the way things went down for you.”

He huffed out a humorless laugh. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.

She blew him a cheeky kiss and stole another French fry as Steve did his best not to smile. It hit a little close to home was all. After all, that was how these lunches had started in the first place. He’d been so isolated when he’d first woken up, and Natasha had been the first real friend he’d made in SHIELD. One week she’d dragged him out for lunch, and then the next, and the next, until finally she stopped having to drag him. He knew why she did it, and he knew that she knew that he knew. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t still special.

“You know,” she told him, wagging a finger at him. “You should talk to Tony. He knows a thing or two about this.”

This time he did laugh. “Sure. Okay. I’ll get right on that.”

She pegged him with a serious look. “I’m not kidding. You really should try to get along with him. I think the two of you have a lot more in common than you think.”

He resisted the very childish urge to roll his eyes at her. “Maybe,” he said, making his tone as non-committal as possible. That way he’d have ground to stand on later when she yelled at him. “What about you? How’d that thing with the diplomat go?”

They talked for the next half hour about her work with foreign diplomats, past cases and current
ones. She asked him about his life (it was fine, nothing new to report, as usual), and he asked her about hers (same, but with more flair). The waiter took away their plates and came back with the checks. Steve was just reaching for his wallet when Natasha stopped him with a gentle hand on his forearm.

“So what is it Steve? I’ve plied you with greasy foods, I’ve graced you with my presence, and I’ve gifted you my worldly advice. So what’s up?”

Steve laughed uneasily. “Who said anything was up?”

She raised one elegant eyebrow at him in a way that said ‘really?’. “Your face. I bet you’re terrible at poker. Now what’s up? Don’t make me drag it out of you, Rogers.”

Steve sighed and sat back, wallet and check forgotten. Truth be told, something had been bothering him. It had only been two days since he’d run into the other agent, but he’d been unable to think about much else. The more he thought, the worse he felt about the entire thing, and to top it all off, he hadn’t been able to suss out who the man even was. Steve was the kind of guy who needed closure like he needed oxygen, and this entire situation seemed designed to torture him.

“I just… had a bad run-in with another SHIELD agent,” he began hesitantly. “I think I really messed up his case.”

Natasha’s head was slightly cocked, her curiosity caught. “Who?”

Steve tapped his fingers along the cracked varnish of the tabletop. “He was so pissed he wouldn’t even give me his name. All I know is that he works for SHIELD and he’s got a hell of a left hook. Knocked me flat on my ass.”

Both eyebrows shot up this time. “Not a lot of people get the drop on you.”

“Yeah,” he smiled ruefully in agreement. “I know. I feel like an asshole. But it was the weirdest thing. It was like the guy hated me already, before I fucked up his day.”

Natasha shrugged in sympathy. “Maybe it’s your face. It is kind of hideous.”

She smiled at him and he laughed. “Probably. I just wish I knew who he was. I could at least say sorry.”

“Hmm.” Natasha pursed her lips as she thought. “SHIELD’s got a lot of agents.”

“I know. Believe me, I think I’ve looked at nearly half of their files in the last 48 hours.”

She looked up at him curiously. “You said he was able to knock you flat? Left hook?”

The question caught him off guard. “Uh, yeah.”

“You sure it was the left?”

He thought back and the image of the agent popping his right shoulder back into place popped into his mind. “Had to have been. Right was injured.”

Natasha’s face lit up with recognition. Or at least Steve hoped that’s what it was as she dug a SHIELD-issued tablet from her purse. “Here,” she said after entering her secure log-in and sliding it across the table to him. “Is this him?”

The man in the picture on the screen was much cleaner than Steve had last seen him, and absent
were all the bruises and dirt and blood. His hair was shorter but his eyes were the same piercing blue, and his face bore the exact same surly expression that had made Steve feel about two feet tall during their encounter. Yeah, that was definitely him. He nodded.

Natasha took back the tablet and pulled up a new file. “James Barnes,” she announced. “Goes by ‘Bucky’.”

Bucky. Steve tried the name out in his head, tried to fit it to the man he’d met. It was a little difficult.

“Jeez,” Natasha muttered, drawing his attention back to her. “No wonder he hated you. He hates all of us. He was a free agent ‘til SHIELD moved in. Looks like he resisted the change harder than anybody.”

Steve furrowed his brows and took the tablet back, scrolling through the file. Large swathes of it were blacked out, redacted by someone with higher authority than them. He stopped momentarily on a picture of a sleek, grey metal arm and whistled lightly. No wonder his punch had hurt. Steve wondered how he’d gotten it. “If he hates SHIELD so much, then why the hell would they want him working for them?”

“Oh, you know,” Natasha said, waving a hand lazily through the air. “Enemy of my enemy is my friend and all that nonsense.”

“More like enemy of my enemy is a pain in my ass,” Steve muttered as he handed back the tablet. At least now he knew. Something in him was almost disappointed. He’d thought he would feel more at peace if he at least knew, but it turned out to not be the case.

She shrugged as she tucked it into her bag. “I wouldn’t worry about it. He doesn’t work much of the bigger stuff.”

Now that the issue of the agent’s identity had been resolved, Steve returned to his earlier task and began pulling cash out of his wallet. He knew how this went. Every week, Natasha tried to pay for her own, and every week he wouldn’t let her.

“How come I’ve never heard of him?”

“Uh, maybe because the last time you willingly associated with someone outside your apartment was in 1945?”

He shook his head as he counted out bills. “Ouch, going straight for the kill shot.”

“You know I’m not going to tell you what to do with your life, Steve. You’re a grown man. You wanna isolate yourself, you do you. I’m not here to judge. But a little distraction might do you some good.”

He shrugged it off, not sure he was ready for that particular conversation. “Maybe.” And then, like a gift from above, his phone went off with the special alert that only meant one thing. He smiled at her. “I guess we’ll see how that whole distraction thing works, huh?”

She shook her head in mock frustration at him as he dropped the money on the table and stood. “You still gonna be my date tomorrow, Rogers?”

He winked playfully at her. “You know it.” She was still laughing when the restaurant door closed behind him.
Steve pulled anxiously at the bow tie around his neck as he did his best to resemble a wall decoration at Tony Stark’s annual charity gala. Every year, Stark would pick a charity and arrange a giant party (although Steve was fairly sure it was Pepper who did the actual picking and arranging and all Tony did was show up) and every year Steve had to come, and every year he was anxious and uncomfortable and spent the night hugging the walls after his obligatory press meetings until he was allowed back up to the privacy and comfort of his own apartment.

So far the party had been in full swing for nearly four hours, and Steve had been here for an excruciating three and a half of them. Natasha, looking stunning as always in an emerald green dress and a complicated updo, had vanished into the press of people almost immediately, but Steve didn’t begrudge her. She was good with people. She’d make a lot of contacts, open a lot of wallets. It would be good for the charity- Steve was pretty sure it was something with children this year- it would be good overall.

But it still left him alone. After fending off hundreds of New York’s finest who all seemed to want to talk to him, he’d finally, mercifully, been left alone. He was just contemplating the possible consequences of an early escape when he spotted a familiar face by the bar. Well, skulking in the shadows behind the bar might have been a more appropriate way to put it.

Here was his chance to set things straight. Steve had been thinking about it since yesterday. He still felt awful about the run-in with Bucky Barnes, and he had resolved himself to track the man down and do what he could to fix the damage he’d caused. And now, luckily, fate had brought the man to him instead. Maybe this night wouldn’t be as bad as he thought.

As he walked closer, Steve couldn’t help but think that Bucky looked gorgeous. He was in a slim-fitting suit that looked perfectly tailored to him, and his dark hair was pulled back into a manageable knot at the back of his head. He was nursing a drink- it looked like scotch from where Steve was standing- and had clearly had a bit to drink already. There was color along his cheeks and across the bridge of his nose. Steve noted with some surprise that his injuries had already faded much faster than they should have. He must have some kind of enhanced healing, similar to Steve’s own.

“Hi. Bucky Barnes. We met the other day,” he said as he approached, smiling to show Bucky there were no hard feelings from the day before. “I’m-”

“Nope.” Bucky cut him off by turning and walking away. Steve froze for a moment before hurrying after him.

“Wait,” he said, catching up to him in a few strides. They were at the very edge of the hall, far from the huge mass of happy, laughing, glitzy people, but Steve lowered his voice regardless. “I’m sorry, okay. About yesterday. I didn’t know. But I’d really, really like to make it up to you.”

Bucky turned. He had an open, earnest look on his face, and Steve thought maybe he’d finally gotten his point across. “Really?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. Whatever you need. I’d like to help.”

The expression dropped from Bucky’s face so fast Steve nearly got whiplash. “Go eat a dick. That’d be really helpful.”

Steve counted to ten silently in his head. “You don’t have to be an asshole about it. I get it. I fucked up your operation and I’m sorry about that. But all I’m doing is trying to help.”

Bucky laughed in his face. “Because that’s what I need. Help from goddamn Captain fuckin’ America to do my job when he can’t even manage to do his. How ‘bout instead you fuck off and go
do something useful for a change, huh? At the very least, _please_ get out of my face. SHIELD may have made this bullshit party mandatory, but there ain’t nothing in my job description that says I have to talk to you.”

Steve could practically feel his blood pressure rising the longer they talked- well, the longer that Bucky talked _at_ him, anyway. And he was getting _loud_. Steve suspected the glass of top-shelf scotch in Bucky’s hand might have something to do with it. Either way, people were starting to notice. He could feel more than a few curious pairs of eyes on him. _Time for some damage control_, he thought grimly.

“Come on,” he said, cutting Bucky off mid-sentence as he grabbed him by the upper arm and pulled hard. Steve wasn’t even sure what Bucky had been saying, an insult, probably, if their short and sordid history was anything to go by. Bucky sputtered indignantly and tried to pull his arm from Steve’s grip. The ice in his glass clinked and liquid spilled over the rim as Steve dragged him bodily from the ballroom.

“Let go,” Bucky snarled as he attempted again to escape Steve’s tightly held hold on him. For spite and his own brief satisfaction, Steve momentarily tightened his fingers until the knuckles started to blanch. Then, just as suddenly, he let go. The action resulted in a very ineffective and inelegant attempt on Bucky’s part to stall his sudden momentum as he shot forward.

Balance regained, he spun to face Steve. “The fuck was that, Rogers?”

_That_, Steve replied icily, “was me trying to avoid you making a scene in front of half of New York. If you feel the need to keep yelling at me, fine, but at least do it where less people can hear you.”

He gestured to the hall around them. It was a perfect complement to the ballroom they had just left. High, vaulted ceilings soared above their heads, and the floor under their feet was lined with a plush, expensive carpet in royal blues and purples. A handful of cushioned chairs and small, elegant settees lined the walls, interspaced with art and the occasional potted plant. They were blessedly alone out here, save for a couple down at the far end of the hall immersed in conversation. The sounds of music and the gentle swell of voices seeped in through the closed double doors from the party they’d just left.

“You know what?” Bucky’s voice was lower now, practically a growl. “Fuck this. And fuck you.” Without warning, he shoved his drink into Steve’s hand. “I should’ve known better than to come to something like this. I’m leaving.”

Impulsively, Steve grabbed Bucky by the bicep, halting his retreat. _Why had he done that?_ But it was too late. Bucky whirled around, anger sparking hotly in his blue eyes, and then he was close, _too_ close. God, had they been standing that close a second ago? He was saying something now, yelling it, really, but suddenly, for some reason all Steve could focus on was Bucky’s face, closer to Steve’s than it had ever been before. His normally pale skin was dusted a reddish-pink from alcohol and exertion. His hair, which had been pulled back neatly into a bun for the night, was coming loose from its tie. Wisps of it framed his face and fell on his neck. Up close his eyes were a startlingly clear blue and dark with anger. Like his fingers had a mind of their own, Steve made an aborted attempt to reach out... and do what he didn’t know. His body hadn’t thought that far ahead yet it seemed.

Bucky noticed the halted movement, his eyes flicking quickly down to Steve’s partially outstretched hand and then back up to his face. “Are you even listening?”

“No,” Steve said honestly. And then, before he was even aware of the decision to do it, he surged forward, closing the space between them in an instant. Their lips met in an unruly clash that was
awkward and perfect at the same time, and then they were kissing, Bucky’s lips full and soft, softer than Steve had been expecting, and-

-and what the fuck was he doing?

Steve’s eyes snapped open as he pulled away from the kiss with such force he almost lost his balance. The look on Bucky’s face would be funny if the situation itself wasn’t the exact opposite. He felt his cheeks start to redden. God, why had he done that? What the fuck was he thinking? The glass he had forgotten he was holding had spilled so much scotch it was nearly empty. Unable to look away from Bucky’s stunned face, Steve felt behind him until he found a chair and left the glass there. All the while Bucky glared him down with an inscrutable expression.

“I’m sorry,” Steve finally forced himself to say. Bucky was silent, the air between them fraught with tension. “I’ll just...” Steve mumbled and started to turn away; back to the door, back to the sounds of the party and away from whatever the hell had just happened.

“Rogers.”

He snapped back around at the sound of Bucky’s voice. If he kept this up any longer he was going to end up with whiplash. And then, just like that, Bucky was there again, in his space, uncomfortably close. This time he saw it coming before his eyes instinctively closed as Bucky kissed him again. His lips were still soft, but the kiss itself was hard. Bucky pushed against him and Steve steeled himself, refusing to move back. Bucky responded, putting more force into the kiss. A hand found its way to the back of Steve’s neck- the metal one- and there wasn’t time to unpack exactly what that did to his libido. The whole thing was strange enough without stopping to analyze it. He suspected that if he did the encounter would be over before it’d’ve even begun.

If he could bruise, he would’ve by now with the aggressiveness of Bucky’s lips. You wanna play that way? he found himself thinking. Fine. Without warning, Steve pushed back, hard. If Bucky was surprised he didn’t show it. Steve brought his hands up. He wrapped one tight around Bucky’s hip and kept the other at the small of his back. So far, by virtue of his own shock, he’d let Bucky be in charge. Enough of that. He took the kiss over, and smirked at the low sound from Bucky’s throat. Steve bit at Bucky’s lips, silently urging him to open his mouth. Bucky growled back and Steve bit harder until the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth.

Finally, Bucky acquiesced and their tongues tangled together. A shiver Steve couldn’t suppress shot down his spine and straight to his groin. He could feel himself starting to get hard, and was suddenly very aware of the tight fit of his tux. He should stop this. Shouldn’t have started it in the first place, truth be told, but it was too late now. He wanted this, like he hadn’t wanted anything else since he’d been taken out of the ice. But he wasn’t an idiot.

Steve pulled back slightly, just far enough to whisper against Bucky’s lips, “We can’t do this here.” He could feel Bucky’s hesitation, the way his muscles tensed under Steve’s hands, the tightening of his mouth. “Elevators. My place. Let’s go.”

He didn’t wait for an answer before he was pulling them towards the elevators. The hall was empty, the couple from before now gone, and he sent up a quick thank you to whatever god that had worked that in his favor. At the end of the hall was a long bank of elevators, each of them with doors polished to a mirror-like shine. The one to their left opened with a quiet ding immediately after he pushed the button. Another thing in their favor.

As soon as the chrome doors closed them in they were together again, like magnets drawn together. Steve let out a breath, the air pushed out of him, as Bucky shoved him against the wall of the elevator. His hands were like fire on Steve, everywhere their fingers leaving branding marks as they
clutched at each other. There was nothing nice or tender about it all. The struggle for dominance was more like a fight than anything Steve had been in this century.

“Jarvis,” Steve gasped the moment he was able to. Bucky pulled away from his lips, mouthing his way down Steve’s neck with more teeth than was probably strictly necessary. Steve bit back a noise as teeth clamped down on his neck, painful and exhilarating all at once. “My floor. Don’t let anyone else on.”

There was a slight lurch as the elevator started up and then began to ascend at a speed that had taken Steve more than a few times to get used to.

“Stark would be too self absorbed for something as simple as buttons in his goddamn elevators,” Bucky muttered under his breath, before returning to the rather violent application of a hickey to Steve’s neck.

Steve tipped his head back against the wall of the elevator as Bucky worked. Every nip of his teeth sent a little zing of pleasure to Steve’s gut, and his cock strained against the thin fabric of his underwear. They were pressed so close that he could tell Bucky was just as worked up as he was.

Bucky was still busy with Steve’s neck. Steve knew the bruises would fade by the morning, but the effort was impressive nonetheless. He felt his smile fade as he locked eyes with his own reflection in the mirrored wall opposite him in the elevator. It was still strange, seeing himself like this. He’d been out of the ice for nearly a year now, had had the body Dr. Erskine gave him for longer than that, and yet it was still a shock every time. Was that really him? The tall, tightly muscled body he saw in the mirror felt like a fake, like he was always one second away from waking up small and sickly again. Like the whole thing had been one long dream.

With great effort he forced himself to look away and shoved the feelings as far down inside himself as he could. This wasn’t the time to get existential. Instead, he reached down and roughly tilted Bucky’s chin back up so they could kiss again. Bucky eagerly responded, and Steve let himself get lost in it long enough to drown out anything else. Bucky ground their hips together, pushing Steve nearly flat against the mirror behind him. In response, Steve reached out with one hand and traced the hard outline of Bucky’s cock through the supple material of his dress pants. He was rewarded with an animal noise, somewhere between a whimper and a moan.

He was just about to go further when the elevator doors silently opened onto the private hall outside of his apartment. He pushed hard against Bucky, walking him backwards out of the elevator and towards the door, Bucky took the movement in stride, never breaking apart from Steve’s lips. His metal hand squeezed where it was gripped around Steve’s waist, so tight it was almost painful. With his other hand, he deftly undid Steve’s belt and zipper before unceremoniously pushing aside the waistband of Steve’s underwear to stroke his cock.

Steve couldn’t stop the moan that bubbled up from inside him. Bucky’s hand was smooth and warm. He couldn’t get a lot of leverage, constrained by the fabric, but what he got was more than enough. Steve practically slammed Bucky into the front door in his eagerness to get there, but Bucky didn’t so much as flinch. All the while his hand worked steadily on Steve’s cock.

The door. He had to open it. Every bit of Steve’s attention was zoomed in on the feel of Bucky’s hands on him, the taste of him in Steve’s mouth, the sound of his breath. *Fuck.* The door. He could do this. The keycard was in his wallet, which was in his back pocket. The back pocket of his pants that were now being shoved down by Bucky, just far enough to let his cock spring free. The air of the hall was cold on it for just a second before it was replaced with the warmth of Bucky’s hand again. *Fuck it,* he thought, *it’s a private hallway.*
In the time he’d been contemplating their situation, Bucky had worked open his own pants and Steve eagerly reciprocated, reaching for Bucky’s cock. He was cut, Steve noticed, and his dick was hot and firm beneath Steve’s fingers, almost the perfect length for his hand. Between the steady strokes on his own cock and the spontaneity of the situation, he could already feel the beginnings of his orgasm creeping in. He wasn’t going to last long like this.

“Protection?” he mumbled against Bucky’s lips. It was hard to put together words in his current state, but damnit if he wasn’t going to try.

“My wallet,” Bucky said shortly, before going in for another hard kiss. His metal hand had wandered up from its place at Steve’s waist and was now brushing against Steve’s chest. Bucky made a dissatisfied sound at the thick lapel of Steve’s jacket and pushed it roughly aside, rubbing his hand across Steve’s chest through the thinner material of his dress shift. Steve couldn’t help the whine that escaped from him as Bucky rolled one hard nipple between his metal fingers. “Wallet,” Bucky reminded him gruffly.

Right. Steve reached back and pulled the worn leather wallet from Bucky’s back pocket and flipped it open. True to his word, there was a condom tucked into it, along with a travel-size packet of lube.

“You just carry this stuff around?” Steve asked, and Bucky glared at him in response.

“Like there’s something wrong with being prepared?”

Steve resisted the urge to make a snarky comment back as he plucked the condom from between the leather folds. “You know that’s really bad for them, right?” he asked, absentmindedly inspecting the foil packaging.

“Good thing I can’t get pregnant then,” Bucky replied, and then pinched Steve’s nipple hard enough to make him yelp in retaliation.

Well, at least that answered Steve’s next question.

Something caught his eye as he went to close the wallet. A picture, old and faded and clearly well-worn. The edges were creased and torn and a water stain marred one corner. He looked closer. It was Bucky, young and fresh-faced, with a smile that Steve had never seen on him, and around him-

“Mind your own fucking business.” Bucky snatched the wallet out of Steve’s hand before he could look closer. “You know that’s really bad for them, right?” he asked, smoothly directing Steve’s attention back to the task at hand.

“Fuck off,” Steve replied, ripping open the foil packaging. He rolled the condom on and coated it with lube, stifling a groan as he did so. He looked up at Bucky, the half-full packet still in his hand. “Should I..?”

“I got it.” Bucky took the lube and applied a generous amount to his fingers before reaching behind himself. Steve felt the briefest flash of guilt as he watched Bucky prep himself; he’d always done this for partners in the past. But then again, he’d never had an encounter quite like this before. “Okay,” Bucky said after a moment.

Steve didn’t hesitate, a clear sign of how close to the edge he already was. In one swift movement he dropped down, wrapped an arm under each of Bucky’s thighs and lifted. Bucky’s back was still flat against the apartment door, Steve holding him up entirely. Instinctively, Bucky’s legs wrapped around Steve’s waist, which was just what he’d been aiming for. The gasp that Bucky let out as Steve pushed into him for the first time was sharp and loud.
“Fuck,” Steve groaned. Bucky was searing hot and smooth and perfect. It was tight; he obviously hadn’t prepped as much as he should have in his haste, and Steve let out another long groan as he fucked up into him. Bucky answered with a moan of his own. His legs tightened around Steve’s waist and his back scraped along the wooden door as they moved.

Fuck. He had been close before, but now he was right on the edge, each thrust threatening to send him right over the cliff. He gripped the back of Bucky’s thighs so hard there would surely be fingerprints left in the morning as he slammed into him again and again. Bucky’s flesh hand was between them, and he was jerking himself hard and fast. Good. Steve didn’t know how much longer he’d last. Every thrust sent lightning through him, lighting up his nerves. He was a third rail, a live-wire, one touch and he’d be done.

“Fuck, oh fuck.” Bucky’s voice rose in pitch as he spilled over his own fingers. Steve felt his muscles clamp down and that was it, he was coming, and oh God, it was good, and-
Living just to breathe
He came back to himself quickly. He was still holding Bucky up, who had his head tipped back to rest on the door, eyes closed and breathing hot and heavy. Carefully, Steve pulled out and set Bucky down on wobbly legs. He watched as Bucky tucked himself back into his pants and did up his belt with trembling hands. He should probably do the same, but his limbs didn’t seem to be listening to his brain.

They stood there like that, both limp and boneless and panting, until eventually the silence began to stretch into something tense and awkward. Self-consciously Steve pulled off the condom and redressed himself, disliking the feeling of being so exposed. Bucky looked as tense as Steve felt, lips that were bruised and swollen from kissing pulled tight into a scowl.

When he could take the silence no longer, Steve hesitantly asked, “Do you want to come in?”

It appeared that wasn’t the right thing to say at all. Steve briefly wondered what was, as Bucky scowled even harder. “This doesn’t change a goddamn thing, Rogers.”

Steve didn’t have the energy to fight back. Instead, he watched as Bucky made his way back to the elevator and took off, never even once looking back. Steve let his forehead hit the door with a heavy thunk and exhaled slowly.

Well. That happened.
To be entirely honest, Steve wasn’t one hundred percent proud of what happened next.

Bucky hadn’t technically been completely correct either. Things did change after their encounter. Oh sure, some things remained the same. For example, Steve still went about his days seeing and hearing neither hide nor hair of Bucky Barnes, but now, the infuriating thing was he knew.

Knew that Bucky was out there somewhere. Knew that they had started off on the wrong foot (Steve’s fault) and somehow it had been made infinitely worse (also Steve’s fault, he supposed), and the worst part was he still had no clue how to fix it.

Sure, there was always the thought that maybe he didn’t need to fix it. Bucky Barnes was one person who hated Steve in a city of millions, and those seemed like pretty good odds. If only Steve could let it go. But the problem was that he couldn’t. He kept thinking about it, replaying the day they met and the night of the gala over and over in his head, analyzing the mistakes and wondering about the uncertainties. He was slowly driving himself mad.

He was driving everyone else to the edge too, it seemed, if the way Clint cut him off a week and a half after the gala to say, ‘Either fuck him again or kill him Rogers, but for God’s sake please stop talking about him,’ was anything to go by.

Even Natasha seemed to be getting sick of him by the time that salvation came in the form of a special assignment from Fury. The assignment itself was a surprise; protection detail on transport for a corporate whistleblower. He’d already been moved from the United States and now needed to be escorted out of Mexico. There was another agent already on the job, but Fury was sending Steve as extra backup. Easy stuff really, just getting a body from point A to point B with as little attention as possible. He hadn’t been assigned anything like it in… since he’d first joined SHIELD really. Since before Loki and the Avengers and everything that had come after.

He was almost looking forward to the mission. It would be a break from his personal life, which at the moment was so far off of normal for him that he could barely believe it was real. His high spirits lasted all the way through his initial briefing from Fury, the short mission preparation, and the quick jaunt on the quinjet. This even had the possibility of being somewhat enjoyable, he thought as he watched the quinjet pull its usual disappearing act after dropping him off on the edge of city so small he couldn’t remember its name.

The rendezvous point was a seedy little motel that had definitely seen better days on the outskirts of town. It was just past midnight- they wouldn’t move their target until two or three in the morning- and the street was deserted. The few streetlights that worked flickered inconsistently, and nothing moved in the darkness.

The motel itself was a long, squat building with a handful of rooms that opened to the outside. Steve ran over his instructions in his head, aiming for the correct door. He suspected it might have once been painted green, but time and wear had faded it to a drab gray-brown. A faded eight on the door in a lighter color showed where the number had broken off at some point in the past. Reaching out, he rapped sharply on the top of the door. Three decisive knocks in a distinctive pattern.

After a moment, he heard the clicking of a lock and the door slid open a scant inch. Steve had just enough time to register the person there and- oh God, the universe must be playing some kind of fucking cosmic joke on him- blink rapidly before Bucky Barnes uttered a flat, “Yeah no,” and shut the door in Steve’s face.
Steve had never been one not to learn from past mistakes, and he wasn’t letting Bucky get the upper hand. Besides, no matter what had happened between them, they had work to do. Taking a chance on the extra noise, he hit the door hard with a closed fist. “Open the door now.”

The door opened immediately and Steve slipped inside the room, having to shove to get past Bucky who refused to budge even an inch to make any room. Steve took a quiet breath and steeled himself. He wasn’t going to let himself get frustrated this time. Sure, the last time they’d talked things had quickly gotten out of hand, but there was no reason it had to happen again.

Bucky’s expression was sour, and as soon as the door was closed and locked he turned the full force of it on Steve, standing with feet planted and arms crossed. “You did this on purpose, didn’t you?” It was more an accusatory statement than a question. “I know you’ve been looking for me. You are not subtle by the way, just in case you were wondering.”

Steve narrowed his eyes in response. Yes, he’d looked for Bucky, but he’d be damned if he let anyone tell him that wasn’t a natural fucking reaction to what had happened between them. “Yeah,” Steve admitted. “I did. You clearly didn’t care to be found, so-

“So what?” Bucky bit back before Steve could finish his sentence. “I didn’t roll out the red carpet for his highness, so in return you interfere with more of my work?”

Irritation flared hot and bright in Steve’s chest. “Step down off your high horse before you break your damn neck,” he snapped. “Yeah, I looked for you. But I wouldn’t compromise a mission on purpose. Fury sent me.”

Bucky still didn’t look impressed. “Ok, well then do me a favor, call him, and get him to un-send you. I can handle this one on my own.”

“Well, that’s not your call,” Steve said with annoyance shading his tone.

He turned away, not particularly interested in whatever smart remark Bucky was sure to come up with. The inside of the motel room was somehow in worse shape than the outside. The wallpaper, like the wall outside, had faded into a dingy, unrecognizable shade of brown, and bits of it were peeling off the wall like a bad sunburn. Two twin beds with ugly floral coveralls and yellowing pillows took up the majority of the real estate, while a chipped dresser and an old CRT television filled what space remained.

Bucky was still just in front of the door, bristling with defensive energy and face storm-cloud dark. Steve ignored him in favor of searching out the other face in the room. Their charge was a meek-looking man who Steve estimated to be somewhere in his late 40s or early 50s, with thinning hair and a rumpled expression. According to Fury he’d pulled back the curtain on some fairly shady business practices in exchange for SHIELD protection. He had done his part and now they had to do theirs.

Steve turned back to Bucky. “So what’s the plan?”

Bucky’s lips flattened into a hard line. “Shove it up your ass.”

Steve grit his teeth as his irritation grew exponentially. Okay. They had started off badly and they had only made things worse in the time since, but it was really getting ridiculous now. “Look,” he said from between clenched teeth. “I don’t like it anymore than you do, but we’re doing it so give me the damn run-down.”

After a tense, seconds-long standoff, Bucky’s lip curled in a way that said he’d rather chew his own
arm off than spend another second talking to Steve. “Fine. But if you’re coming, we’re doing this my way.”

Steve didn’t justify that with a response.

“In two hours we gotta hand him off at the airfield outside of town. It’s three miles out, but we gotta walk it. ‘S why they put us out here on the outskirts.” He smiled tightly at Steve. “Standard protection detail. Shoot them before they shoot our guy.”

Steve shot him a look and then tried to give the man under their care what he hoped was a comforting smile. “Don’t worry, sir. We’ll get you there in one piece.”

“Oh yeah,” Bucky agreed in a casual tone. He had relaxed his defensive posture as he wandered closer and was now leaning nonchalantly against the creaking dresser. “Don’t worry. If things go wrong you can always ask Steve to come step all over your plans.”

Enough was enough. Bucky had crossed the line sometime a few weeks ago, and Steve, like a dumbass, had let him do it. Well, not anymore. “Give us a minute, sir,” Steve grit out in the man’s direction. Then, without preamble, Steve snatched Bucky up by the forearm (the flesh one by the give of it) and yanked him into the small bathroom.

He was already whirling around to face Steve by the time the door slammed closed behind them. The bathroom was small and lit by a buzzing fluorescent light that made Bucky’s pale skin look sallow.

“What the fuck is going on?” Steve asked in a hard tone.

“What’s going on,” Bucky replied, “is that I’m trying to do my goddamn job and Steve fuckin’ Rogers keeps fucking everything up with his constant need to be in the spotlight. Newsflash. Not everyone goes in for that hero worship crap.”

“I don’t-” Again. It was happening again. He wasn’t going to let Bucky get him off track with personal insults that still didn’t make sense. “Not the point, Bucky. What the fuck is this? Are we really going to keep doing this? Just ignore what happened, keep acting like children, and fuck this entire thing up?”

“Well, yeah, that was the plan. Except that I don’t fuck things up, because I’m a goddamn professional,” Bucky shot back sarcastically.

God, there were so many things Steve wanted to ask. In the time that had passed since they had been together, he’d gone over this conversation in his head over and over again, had played out each possibility in his mind hundreds of times. He knew every scenario, how each might start and end, and yet he still, still, felt like he was floundering in the face of Bucky’s intensity. This wasn’t how this was supposed to go at all.

“Why?” he finally asked.

“Why what?”

“Why?” Steve repeated.

“Because I was drunk and horny and stupid,” Bucky hissed at him. “So fuckin’ drop it. I don’t want anything to do with assholes who paste their face all over the media and then pretend like they do this job because they wanna help people.” He jerked away from Steve abruptly and wrenched open the door before turning to say, “Oh, and by the way that guy out there doesn’t speak a lick of English, dumbass.”
Steve would absolutely be lying if he said the next hour and a half of waiting was pleasant. There wasn’t much to do besides sit in silence as the time to move approached. The man had taken a seat on one of the twin beds while Steve leaned up against the far wall. Bucky maintained his vigil by the front door and window, and Steve couldn’t help but stare at Bucky’s back the entire time, thoughts circling viciously through his head in a never-ending cycle.

The whole thing really did feel like some sort of huge cosmic joke. Karma having a great big laugh at him, and for what? For trying to mend something that had been broken from the start? He didn’t see the harm in that. He also didn’t understand Bucky’s preoccupation with the media. Steve had never enjoyed it himself, but it came with the job. Why didn’t Bucky understand that?

Steve laughed humorlessly at himself. He’d finally gotten what he wanted. He’d tracked Bucky down and he was still a miserable mess. And here! On this mission. He didn’t do this kind of work. The Avengers’ new-found fame had made covert ops difficult, and besides, Steve didn’t speak anything close to resembling fluent Spanish. He was ill-suited for this mission and he knew it. Fury had to have known it too. Steve would have to have some choice words with certain people when he got home.

Finally, two a.m. rolled around. The street outside was silent, and nothing moved in the pitch darkness. After a few moments of careful observation out the window, Bucky seemed satisfied and turned to talk to Steve.

“We’re heading out. Airstrip’s about five clicks due east, straight through town. No active threats, but be on guard. Hopefully we’ll be in and out in two hours.” For all the previous posturing, Bucky finally seemed serious, and Steve nodded as Bucky turned to deliver the previous instructions again in Spanish to the man.

Steve had come prepped in his tactical suit, the colors dark and muted for ops work, and he didn’t have much to do to prepare himself after he’d checked the state of his weapons. Instead, he watched as Bucky curiously pulled off the dark shirt he’d been wearing and instead zipped up a tactical long-sleeved piece that was missing the left arm.

He’d seen pictures of Bucky’s arm on Natasha’s tablet, even though any accompanying information had been redacted into nothingness, but it was nothing compared to seeing the real thing. The metal was smooth and slightly shiny, reflecting the dull light in the room, and it moved like real flesh and bone. It was beautiful, and Steve couldn’t look away from the way the metal seemed to ripple like an actual muscle ran beneath it. He caught a quick glimpse of scars around the shoulder socket as Bucky manipulated his shirt and suppressed a shiver. Steve knew what kind of force it took to make marks like those.

Bucky noticed him staring. “What?” he snapped, tugging the hem of the shirt into place.

“Is that…” Steve had a lot of things he wanted to ask, but he suspected quite a few of them might get him punched, so he settled lamely on “…what you normally wear?”

Bucky gave him a severely unimpressed look. “Listen pal. I’ve seen the archive footage and you are the last person who should be giving fashion advice.” He glanced quickly at his metal shoulder, following Steve’s gaze. “And extra fabric gets in the way.”

An insult in the usual Bucky fashion, but a real answer as well, and Steve hadn’t even been cussed at, so he decided to consider the whole exchange progress.
“Oh,” Bucky continued, “and lose the frisbee. It makes you stick out like a sore thumb.”

Steve looked at his shield and sighed. He’d been debating leaving it himself. SHIELD would pick up, he wasn’t worried about that, but he always felt a little bereft without it, a little like something was missing. But even with the muted ops colors, Bucky was right. It did stand out.

Still, as he leaned the SHIELD against the wall he muttered, “Says the guy with the shiny metal arm.”

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that.”

Steve took point, darting ahead and checking out their path, while Bucky accompanied the man through the deserted streets. He was nervous; Steve heard Bucky murmuring in Spanish now and again, and grit his teeth at the noise they were making. But he knew Bucky wouldn’t be doing what wasn’t absolutely necessary, so he kept his own mouth shut.

They made it through two miles of crowded streets as run-down, decrepit businesses gave way to even more run-down, decrepit homes. Steve had yet to see a single person stir, and that worried him. It was late, yes, but they ought to have run into a trace of someone by now; a business-owner leaving late or someone outside having a smoke.

The feeling of unease stayed with him, roiling deep in his gut as they emerged onto the very outskirts of town. Before them stretched a few miles of flat, poorly vegetated landscape, dotted here and there with small, rolling hills. It’s not a good place to hide by any means, especially now that they’re out in the open. They stayed off the main road leading out of town, taking a self-made path through the dirt and low-growing weeds instead.

All three of them were completely silent as they left the town behind. The feeling of being exposed was much higher out here, and Steve strayed farther from Bucky and their charge as he scoped out the area, watching hard for any signs of trouble.

Bucky drove the man at a grueling pace that had him sweating and breathing hard, but speed was their friend at the moment. The less time they spent out here the better. Even though there’d been no hint of anyone yet, to linger longer then they had to would be foolish.

“There,” Bucky’s voice murmured low in Steve’s ear over the comms system. Steve had already spotted it a few moments before, a small airstrip just ahead of them, little more than a crumbling concrete runway with a few faded, painted lines.

Steve nodded and took off with a quick stride, intending to go clear the area before they settled in to await the arrival of the small cargo plane that would take their charge out of their hands. He had only gotten a few yards when the sound of gunshots split the air like thunder in the silent night.

“Fuck!” he heard in his ear, and Steve whirled around in panic. Behind him, Bucky had thrown the man to the ground and was now crouched over him, gun drawn and already returning fire at enemies that Steve quickly located.

He wished momentarily for his shield. There were more than a few men out there, camouflaged in the dark and hiding in the low scrub, and it would have been easy to throw it from here, angled just so to take out two who were close together by the positioning of the muzzle flashes Steve had seen. But he didn’t have it, so he’d have to make do the old-fashioned way.

Drawing his own gun, Steve dropped into a crouch to make himself a smaller target, even as he felt a bullet whistle past his own ear. They’d finally copped on to where he was it seemed. He picked off
one man while he used the cover of the dark and the noise to creep closer to the remaining ones. Somewhere behind him, Bucky dropped another one.

Steve could hear the men’s harshly whispered confusion as they lost sight of him, and he managed to get within a few feet before he struck a group of them. He grabbed the gun from one and used it to deliver a decisive blow to his temple before wrapping the other in a squeeze that quickly drove the air from his lungs. Steve held on until he felt the man go limp, and then let him drop onto the ground before he looked around for more.

“Motherfucker!” Bucky’s voice rang out over the comms, and he sounded pissed. It was followed by a series of shots, each one cracking like a whip, and Steve watched as Bucky made several hits in a row before jumping back into the fray.

When it was all over and done, they’d taken out 16 men between them and left most of them alive, though definitely worse for wear. SHIELD would deal with them later. The man didn’t thank them as he boarded a small cargo plane bound for somewhere only the pilot knew, but Steve wasn’t surprised. Not a lot of people fared well in their line of work, and the man looked like he wanted nothing more than to sleep for a week.

Steve felt a bit like that himself. While it hadn’t even held a candle to his worst mission, the day had been exhausting in its own kind of way. And there was still the rest of the night to get through. It was late, going on four in the morning, as Steve and Bucky trekked back through town, this time aiming for the SHIELD safehouse they’d been told to use. Steve was just starting to daydream about a hot shower and clean sheets when he noticed Bucky had fallen behind.

“Buck-” he turned, and then said in alarm, “Bucky?”

“’M fine,” Bucky muttered as he waved Steve away. He certainly didn’t look fine. He’d stopped a few feet back and was clutching at his side, breathing hard and sweat dotting his hairline. “Just took a bullet. Kevlar stopped it, but damn it doesn’t feel good.”

Steve winced. “Yeah,” he said. “Had a few of those myself. It’ll bruise up real good in the morning. Here.”

At the last second Steve made the decision to not ask whether or not Bucky wanted the help, and instead reached down to lock his shoulder under Bucky’s, taking part of his weight on his own. It spoke volumes of either his exhaustion, his pain level, or both that Bucky didn’t protest, but instead leaned into Steve for the entire walk back to the safehouse

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The safehouse was a small, one bedroom place, but it was clean and neat and most important, had a shower and a bed and a couch. They’d work out who got to sleep where later, but now all Steve cared about was washing off. Still, he did the nice thing, hitched a thumb towards the bathroom, and said, “You go first.”

Bucky didn’t argue, but he did take a moment to grab the folder that had been left for them and shoved it at Steve along with a pen as he passed. “Be useful for once and do some of the paperwork while I’m gone.”

Steve did as he was told (though to be honest, he didn’t know much what he was doing- the last time he’d really filled out paperwork had been nearly a year ago) while the sound of the shower started up and the post-mission adrenaline started to fade. As it did, thoughts tumbled and swirled through his brain. He thought of Bucky, of the day they’d met, of the gala, of fucking him and holding his
weight, and maybe doing it again tonight when he was injured. Steve couldn’t help glancing at the bathroom door multiple times, but no don’t be stupid. He’s made it quite clear that that was a one time thing.

After what felt like an eternity, he heard the shower shut off and the sounds of Bucky moving around the bathroom. And then, as if the universe hadn’t already put him through enough, Bucky emerged from the bathroom in nothing but a pair of skintight boxer-briefs. Steve had to work hard to maintain a neutral expression as Bucky walked into the room, rubbing a towel through his wet hair, the dark strands still dripping drops of water onto his shoulders.

Jesus, they’d had sex. Steve had been inside of him, but he still hadn’t seen this much of him. Bucky was perfect, long and lean and firmly muscled. Shorter than Steve, but thicker in the right ways, solid. The bruise growing on his side was already blooming blue and purple. Steve’s eyes followed the flat planes of his chest up the long lines of throat and then- oh.

And now he could really see... the arm. It was even more beautiful like this, dripping with water and shining in the light. But now he could see the scars too. Deep, ugly things; thick and purple, flesh pulled tight around rigid scar tissue. They formed a seam at his shoulder, surrounding the metal, like some kind of macabre piece of art.

Bucky had noticed him staring again, of course he had. But this time he didn’t say anything, just pursed his lips and held still, his eyes dark and unreadable as Steve took in his body. And when Steve finally looked away, Bucky nodded at him wordlessly and walked past, letting Steve have access to the shower.

The serum may have given him the ability to heal fast, but it couldn’t totally prevent the bone-deep strain of his sore body after a mission. The water that poured out of the showerhead was blisteringly hot, and Steve let out a low moan as he stepped into the shower. The sweat and grime and frustration of the long day swirled around the drain as the powerful jets of water worked at his stiff muscles.

Selecting a bottle at random, Steve flipped open the cap on a bottle of shampoo that smelled vaguely of citrus (and mimosa blossoms, according to the label). He took a deep breath in, letting the scent fill his nostrils as the warm steam worked at the tightness in his chest. His eyes drifted closed in relaxation.

“Are you stupid?”

There was a sudden burst of chilly air and the screech of metal on metal as the shower curtain was yanked roughly aside. Steve took another deep, calming (calming be calm you’re stuck here until morning and you’ll feel bad if you kill him) breath before turning and opening his eyes.

As expected, Bucky was standing before him. He was still wearing only his underwear, hair still damp from his own shower, just starting to curl in at the ends. Steam filled the bathroom and captured the sharp overhead light, diffusing it and casting the entire place in a soft, golden glow. The light made Bucky look almost soft, fuzzy at the edges, like something out of a dream.

“I said, are you stupid?”

Luckily, Steve knew better than to be drawn into that particular illusion.

“Not especially so,” Steve replied drily. He tried his best to look bored with the whole situation- no need to add fuel to the fire that clearly already raging inside Bucky all on its own. He was, however, acutely aware of the fact that he was both soaking wet and naked. His only consolation was that Bucky, with his bare chest and tight underwear, was little better off. And at least it wasn’t anything
they hadn’t both seen before.

“Are you sure?” Bucky asked in a tone very much like one in which one would address a small child. “Because I can’t find one part of this that you filled out correctly.”

He shoved a paper into Steve’s face, so close that he nearly went cross-eyed. It took a second for him to focus on the lettering, and when he did, he recognized one of the reports he’d just finished filling out, complete with his own handwriting. Little flecks of water from the still-running showerhead landed on the paper, soaking in and making the ink run.

Annoyance flashed through him and he pursed his lips. He didn’t see anything wrong with it. Perhaps it was the fact that he’d just been so relaxed that he had been lulled into complacency, but regardless, the words that slipped out next couldn’t have been worse if he’d tried.

“I don’t know what’s so wrong with it. I don’t normally fill these out. We’ve got a person for that.”

That turned out to be the absolute wrong thing to say to Bucky Barnes at this particular moment. His reaction was almost instantaneous. Steve would have been fascinated had he not been the target of Bucky’s tirade.

“You’re fucking serious? Of course, you’re fucking serious. Of course you’re too fucking good to do your own goddamn paperwork—”

As Bucky continued to rant, Steve’s attention slipped away from his words. There was a beautiful red flush to Bucky’s pale cheeks, whether from the heat of the room or anger or both. His hair made a wild halo around his head and his eyes were dark and electric. The water still hitting Steve scalded his skin, and he wasn’t sure if it was that or the rushing of his own blood through his veins that he was hearing. Watching Bucky, he couldn’t help but think of the last night they’d been together; their desperate race to his apartment, the taste of Bucky’s mouth, the feel of his body, hot and tight as he’d moaned beneath Steve’s touch.

Steve could feel himself starting to get hard, the swell of his cock pressing against his thigh. He should stop himself, pull the curtain over to cover himself and kick Bucky out of the bathroom, but he didn’t want to. His fingers twitched at his side with the desire to stroke himself, but he willed them to be still, to wait until he knew how Bucky would react.

Bucky’s eyebrows shot up in surprise as he caught onto the situation. Again, Steve felt the distant urge to cover himself, but he had to see how this would play out.

Even the sudden turn of events wasn’t enough to get Bucky to stop running his mouth. “Really?” he demanded. “Is that what turns you on or something? Getting yelled at? Because I’m not—”

“You gonna stand there and lecture me all night or do you wanna use that mouth for something more useful?”

Suddenly only the whoosh of the running water filled the air. The moment the words left his lips Steve panicked. Where the fuck had that come from? He’d never said anything like that in his life, never thought anything like that. God, he wouldn’t be surprised if Bucky hauled off and clocked him. He wondered if he could blame the entire thing on post-mission adrenaline.

For a long moment, Bucky did nothing, his eyes wide and completely unreadable. And then finally, finally, he blinked and said, “I can’t believe you just said that.”

Steve wanted to laugh in relief but knew the sound would only show how nervous he was feeling. “Neither can I,” he admitted. Bucky took a step closer to the shower, and then another, and another.
“What are you doing?” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged and gave Steve an intense gaze (a challenge, if he’d ever seen one) as he stepped over the lip of the tub and sank to his knees in one graceful motion. “Doing something useful.”

Should he pinch himself? Steve couldn’t believe this was actually happening, but he also wasn’t going to stand around and guess at Bucky’s motives. Bucky was an adult and he made his own choices. Steve had figured out by now that he had now hope in keeping up with Bucky Barnes’ mood changes.

Steve turned quickly and put his back to the water, protecting Bucky from the spray. Water from the tub soaked into the fabric of Bucky’s underwear, which did nothing to hide the swell of his cock. His eyes glowed red-hot as he looked up at Steve through his lashes and Steve felt himself grow impossibly harder under his gaze.

Bucky watched Steve, gauging the moment. Steve wondered what he was waiting for. Did he want permission, or for Steve to beg? Steve wasn’t the begging type, but a few more minutes with Bucky’s full lips only inches away from his cock, and Steve wasn’t sure that he wouldn’t fall to his figurative knees.

He should have known better though. If Bucky was waiting for anything, it was for Steve to be desperate, for the moment at which he’d have the most control. Bucky’s hands came up and gripped Steve’s hips hard enough to bruise had he been a normal man as Bucky finally took Steve into his mouth. Steve wasn’t normal though. But then again, neither was Bucky.

Wet, silky heat engulfed him, and Steve nearly staggered at the sudden sensation. God, Bucky’s mouth was perfect when he wasn’t using it to talk Steve thought fleetingly as he let out a low moan. Bucky moved his tongue around Steve’s cock, working up the underside in long strokes with the flat of his tongue, and swirling around the sensitive head.

He hardly seemed to need to breathe. Steve had had sex since he’d been pulled from the ice—hell, he’d had sex with Bucky, but he’d never been blown like this. His knees threatened to buckle beneath him as Bucky continued to suck him. The sharp pinch of Bucky’s metal fingers on his hip kept Steve just grounded enough to know what was going on and who it was happening with, and that only fueled his desire. Somehow Bucky must have known, because he gripped even harder and chuckled low in his throat, the movement sending pleasure like a bolt of lightning zipping up and down Steve’s spine.

Bucky was watching him again, and he smiled around Steve’s cock, clearly pleased with himself at Steve’s reaction. Steve’s hands, which had been scrabbling at the slick tile walls of the shower now found their way to Bucky’s head. He buried his fingers in the wild tangle of hair and pulled Bucky toward him, pushing his cock further into Bucky’s mouth.

In response, Bucky opened wider. Water ran down his face in rivulets, clinging to his eyebrows and eyelashes, and dripping off his cheeks. It leaked off his chin, mixing with saliva as Bucky swallowed around the intrusion in his mouth. Steve stifled a cry at the sensation. He could feel his orgasm building already, and he tried desperately to hold it back, not ready yet for this to be over.

Unconsciously, he tightened his grip on Bucky’s hair, yanking hard against the roots, but all it did was make Bucky work faster and harder. Bucky was moaning now too, the sound vibrating through Steve’s cock and into his bones as waves of pleasure wracked through him. He could see that Bucky was fully hard now, his cock straining against the soaked fabric of his underwear.

Bucky worked his throat faster, tongue stroking and swirling and sucking at Steve’s cock. His hands
pulled at Steve’s hips, encouraging him to rock forward and fuck into Bucky’s mouth. He gripped Bucky’s hair so hard his scalp turned white beneath the pressure.

“Fuck,” Steve grit out between clenched teeth as he extracted a hand from Bucky’s hair. He meant to tap him, to warn him about the coming orgasm, but another hard suck had him digging his nails into Bucky’s scalp instead. His nails scratched bright red furrows into Bucky’s skin. “Fuck,” Steve swore again. “Fuck, Bucky- ah- I’m gonna, oh fuck-“

He came hard. His heartbeat raced in his ears as his cock pulsed. Bucky continued to work at him, swallowing repeatedly, drawing his orgasm out of him bit by tortuous bit until Steve was a shaky, sodden moss. When it was over, Bucky smiled, letting Steve’s spent cock slide out from between his swollen lips.

When Steve was finally able to think again and the rush of blood had subsided from his ears, he reached down and grabbed Bucky by the biceps. He yanked hard, forcing him up into a standing position. Bucky’s self-satisfied smirk turned to surprise at the sudden movement, but he quickly went with it, leaning into the movement as Steve kissed him.

The kiss was all teeth and tongue and bruising force. Bucky opened his mouth automatically. He tasted like soap and salt and Steve himself, and he gave as good as he got, pushing back into the kiss, refusing to let Steve have the upper hand.

Bucky spun them both around and pinned Steve against the tile with the bulk of his body, using his metal arm as a cage around Steve’s chest, cold and unyielding. Steve felt his tongue probing into Steve’s mouth and he accepted it, curling around it with his own, trying to taste and feel every inch of Bucky that he could.

He could feel that Bucky was hard where they were pressed together. Steve reached out and caught his fingertips in the elastic of Bucky’s water-soaked underwear, pushing it down past his thighs without breaking the kiss. Bucky’s cock, thick and leaking, sprang free from the fabric and brushed against Steve’s own, which was already starting to perk up for another round.

Bucky looked down in surprise, eyebrows raised. “Huh,” he said, as he idly stroked his flesh hand along Steve’s now rapidly-hardening cock. “That’s a neat trick.” He looked at Steve with a glint in his eye. “How many times can it do that?”

Steve shrugged and stared back. “Guess we’ll find out.”

Steve at least had the forethought to turn off the shower before Bucky kissed him again, and then water became the least of his concerns. Like he had that first night, Steve reached down and hefted Bucky up, grabbing him beneath the thighs like he weighed no more than a child. Bucky made a perfunctory noise of protest, but gave no other indication that he actually objected to being manhandled. Interesting. Steve made a note to explore that further later.

Carefully, Steve stepped out of the tub and across the wet floor. There was water absolutely everywhere, soaking into the rugs and the baseboards, pooling thick on the tile floor. The papers Bucky had been wielding were now a pulpy mess, and Steve felt momentarily guilty for whoever cleaned this place.

As if he could sense his shift in attention, Bucky locked his hands behind Steve’s neck and pulled at the short hairs there. In response, Steve growled, which only made Bucky grin and tug harder. Steve could feel Bucky’s thighs wrapped around him like an iron vice as he tipped his head up and kissed him. Bucky’s hair fell across Steve’s face and he felt Bucky grin into the kiss before there was a sudden sharp pain in his lip.
A metallic taste filled Steve’s mouth as he felt a drop of blood well up and trickle down his chin. He pulled back and stared. Bucky’s eyes were dark, his grin wolfish, teeth smeared with red. It was one of the hottest things Steve had ever seen.

His cock was now fully hard again and aching for more more more. He had been planning on carrying Bucky into the bedroom and throwing him down onto the bed, but fuck it. Without ceremony, Steve dropped Bucky onto the bathroom counter, pushing aside the little baskets of SHIELD-supplied soap and toothpaste. Bucky’s back was pushed up against the mirror, the wicked bruise on his side displayed in all its glory under the bright mirror lights.

Steve didn’t waste time being gentle. He leaned in, pressing Bucky back against the mirror, and took him roughly in hand, stroking him. He hadn’t gotten to touch Bucky’s cock the last time they’d been together, not like this. It was hard and smooth, cut like he was, and utterly gorgeous. Steve rubbed his thumb over the head as he stroked the thick vein on the underside with his fingers. His other hand cupped Bucky’s balls, rolling the soft skin between his fingers, exploring with a light touch as he continued to work at Bucky’s cock.

On either side of him, Bucky’s thighs tensed and relaxed in time with Steve’s movement, the corded muscle standing out like rope beneath his skin. Bucky’s heels dug into Steve’s back and the edge of the counter pushed into his abdomen. He was sure he’d feel everything later, but for now he barely registered it.

Bucky moaned and Steve greedily swallowed up the sound with a kiss as he reached blindly around the counter for some sort of lotion that he prayed SHIELD had supplied along with everything else. Finally he found some and he frantically opened it, getting more on the counter than on his actual hand. He ignored Bucky’s noise of annoyance as Steve stopped stroking his cock long enough to grab Bucky’s thighs and tug him forward across the counter.

The color was high in Bucky’s cheeks, and he looked slightly dazed. Steve took a strange amount of pride in that, in the fact that he’d been the one to put that look on Bucky’s face. With one lotion-covered finger, Steve traced quick, firm circles around Bucky’s hole. As he worked, he went back to kissing Bucky. He felt the slight hitch in Bucky’s breathing when the first finger breached him, and only when his breathing had returned to normal did Steve move his hand again.

As he occupied one hand with stroking Bucky’s cock, twisting his wrist and drawing quick breaths and gasps from Bucky, he worked the finger inside him, stretching him. Bucky’s eyes were closed, his lips slightly parted, his breathing fast. He’d stopped kissing Steve, overwhelmed with sensation. Steve pressed his forehead to Bucky’s and stayed that way, feeling Bucky’s hot breath on his mouth as each movement made Bucky groan low in his throat.

Soon Steve added a second finger, gasping as Bucky clamped down on it. He imagined that tight heat around his cock again, and he groaned as he ground his hips involuntarily into the unyielding countertop, desperate for any sort of friction. He felt like he’d barely been at it for a second before Bucky was ready for a third finger. Steve pressed slowly into Bucky’s soft flesh, marveling at how it gave way for him. He stretched him open from the inside, never stilling the hand on Bucky’s cock.

Steve curled his fingers just the right way and Bucky howled. There was a loud crack as his metal hand split the marble top and his legs jerked with a life of their own, sending things clattering and crashing to the floor. His cock pulsed in Steve’s hand but he didn’t come, not yet, so Steve curled his fingers into Bucky’s prostate again.

Bucky kicked out again, and this time it wasn’t an accident. One foot caught Steve square in the chest. Steve’s hand slipped out of his ass he staggered back, wheezing slightly from the unexpected hit.
“The fuck was that for?” he gasped out, fighting the urge to double over.

Bucky hopped down from the counter, infuriatingly calm, cock standing out straight and proud and fit to burst. “You were going to make me come, and I want to do it with you fucking me,” he said simply.

“Oh.” Steve was at a loss for words as Bucky sauntered from the bathroom, only regaining his speech when he was left alone. “Well, you could have just said that,” he muttered, following quickly after him.

In the adjoining room, Bucky had stopped in front of the bed and was looking over his shoulder with challenge written on his face. Luckily, it seemed the bedrooms were as well stocked as the bathrooms. Steve found lube and condoms in the first drawer he opened, and wasted no time in rolling one on and re-slicking his fingers.

He hesitated for a moment, and then decided to throw caution to the wind. They’d already come this far anyway. Going on his earlier guess, Steve reached out and pushed Bucky, hard. Though Bucky could have easily planted his feet for a fight, he played along and stumbled forward willingly until his knees hit the front of the bed. Steve kicked Bucky’s legs further apart, spreading them, as he placed a palm flat on his back and pushed firmly, lowering him until his chest was pressed against the bed. He worried briefly what the position might do to the injury on Bucky’s side, but if Bucky wasn’t going to protest it than neither was he.

Steve’s hand slid from Bucky’s back up to his head and gripped again at his hair, tugging on the damp strands. His fingers slipped easily back into Bucky’s slick body and Bucky moaned into the sheets as Steve worked at him in earnest, more interested in getting him ready for Steve’s cock than with teasing.

Bucky let out a long, broken sob that was muffled by the fabric underneath him as Steve finally pressed into him. After some initial resistance, he felt Bucky open beautifully around him. He had fully intended to give him a moment to adjust to the intrusion, but Bucky tensed his muscles, bearing down on Steve’s cock and making stars burst in front of Steve’s eyes. Steve didn’t need any more encouragement than that.

He pounded into Bucky, fucking him forward into the mattress even as Bucky pushed back against him. When he found an angle that made Bucky shout into the bedcovers, he let go of Bucky’s hair, grabbing him by the hips and hitting that spot over and over again until Bucky’s voice was hoarse. The fabric of the sheets tore beneath Bucky’s hands and the wooden frame of the bed creaked with every thrust like it was about to break apart.

Letting go of one hip, Steve reached for Bucky’s cock. It hardly took anything at all. One stroke, two, three, and he was gone, gasping and shaking and trembling beneath Steve, mouthing wordlessly as he came. The clench of his muscles was too much too tight too good and Steve hurtled off the cliff after him, pumping into Bucky’s still shuddering body until it was over.

For a moment he was still, letting the after-effects of his orgasm wash over him, allowing his weight to rest on Bucky’s back as Bucky breathed raggedly beneath him. The room was silent save for the steady drip of water from the bathroom and the rise and fall of their breath. It was perfect.

Finally, Steve stood, his cock pulling free of Bucky’s limp body. He quickly busied himself getting rid of the condom as Bucky groaned and pulled himself up onto the bed, laying face down across the rumpled sheets. Steve was hesitant to be the first one to speak; he remembered all too well the aftermath of their last encounter. He wasn’t sure if this one would be any different.
To his surprise though, Bucky was quiet, only muttering a quiet thanks when Steve ventured to the bathroom and returned, tossing him a towel to clean himself off with. After cleaning himself off as well, Steve used another towel to wipe idly at the mess they’d left on the bed before sitting down heavily.

“Fuck,” he said tiredly.

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed.

“That was—"

“Yeah.”

Steve stayed still a moment longer, and then started to heave his tired body off the bed. “You keep the bed tonight. You’re hurt. I’ll stay on the couch.”

He was nearly all the way up when Bucky said, in possibly the smallest voice Steve had heard from him yet, “You don’t have to. Go, I mean. If you don’t want to.”

Hesitantly, Steve sat back down. Bucky had pulled himself up into a sitting position, though he was listing slightly to the left to avoid putting too much pressure on his bruised side. He inched himself up slowly until he was leaned up against the wooden headboard, leaving more room for Steve, who up until that point had been sitting on the side of the bed. At Bucky’s behest, Steve crawled across the covers to join him, settling against the headboard, legs stretched out in front of him. For a moment, they both sat in exhausted silence.

“You weren’t… terrible to work with.”

Steve craned his head slowly to the side, part of him not believing that those particular words had come out of Bucky’s mouth in that order. Directed at him no less! “High praise,” he replied.

“Fuck off. Don’t let it go to your head,” Bucky scoffed, though it didn’t have any bite behind it.

“Who’d you piss off to get this mission anyway?”

“Hmm?”

Bucky gave him a flat look. “It’s scut work, don’t pretend you don’t know that. Someone must not have been thrilled with you.”

Steve let out a rueful laugh, thinking back over the last week or so. “Try everybody. It’s been… interesting. Apparently I can get on people’s nerves.”

Bucky snorted. “Yeah, I’m sure SHIELD gets real tired of their golden goose.” Steve frowned, an argument brewing in his chest as Bucky continued. “So how was it, working a real mission. Down in the dirt with all us common folk and not a camera in sight.”

“You know I don’t like the cameras.” Bucky rolled his eyes at him and Steve’s tone turned serious. “I don’t. I never wanted… any of it. But it happened. It’s part of the job. And if it means I can help more people, I’m not gonna apologize for any of it.”

“Sure,” Bucky said, sarcasm in his tone. “You wanna help people. That’s why you run around with assholes who sell weapons of mass destruction and live in a billion dollar tower and work for SHIELD.”

“You work for SHIELD.”
“Because it was that or get locked up.” Bucky’s laugh was hollow. “After you idiots started making a habit of destroying half of New York on any given day, the government stopped letting the rest of us do our jobs. It was work for SHIELD or jail. Well, I spent enough of my life in a cage.”

Steve looked over sharply. “They wouldn’t have put you in jail.”

“They sure as hell woulda tried. If a place like SHIELD’s scared enough of someone, they can invent any reason they want to put ‘em away.”

There was too much there to decipher, and Steve was so tired. In his exhaustion, Bucky’s scars caught his eye. “SHIELD have anything to do with that?” He nodded at Bucky’s arm.

Bucky followed his gaze and looked at his arm with a curious sort of expression on his face, before laughing. “No. No, they didn’t.”

“Who did?”

“Look.” Bucky turned towards Steve then, hitting him with a tight smile that said he’d crossed an unseen line. “You’ve been inside me. Doesn’t mean we’re that close,” he said in a scathing tone.

Steve turned to Bucky as well, too tired to filter his thoughts in the way that he probably should. “You know what I think? I think you hate me because if you don’t you might admit that you’re wrong and I’m not what you think I am.” Bucky’s expression turned sour as Steve continued to talk. “You might have to admit that you actually like me and you can’t handle that.”

“Oh?” Bucky’s tone dripped with venom. “Is it psychoanalysis time?” He jabbed a shiny metal finger at Steve. “You’re not as good as everyone thinks you are. You want to be an asshole and a selfish fuck, but you’re terrified of what it might do to your reputation. Deep down you’re just as fucked as the rest of us.”

They stared at each other, energy crackling in the air between them like lightning. One second, two, and then-

Steve laughed. He couldn’t help but. Somewhere in his exhausted brain, a switch flipped and it came spilling out, all the tension resolved in a peal of absolute mirth. And somehow, by some miracle, Bucky was laughing too, and it was a beautiful sound, deep and booming. And then somehow they were kissing again, and though he was tired, Steve’s body was very, very much on board with this change of plans.

Breaking apart for a moment, Bucky said, “You don’t know shit about me, Steve Rogers. Now shut up and fuck me again.”

They each lasted two more rounds before sleep claimed them, and as Steve drifted off he felt the warm press of Bucky’s leg against his, the tickle of his hair under Steve’s cheek, and had a brief, fleeting thought that somehow this might be the happiest he had felt in a very long time.

He should have known better though. In the morning, when Steve woke to cold sheets and a blank-faced SHIELD operative informing him that his partner had already debriefed and left, Steve didn’t even have the energy to ask why.

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He didn’t look for him this time. Didn’t talk about him either, and as days, and then weeks passed with not even a hint of contact from Bucky, Steve felt himself shrink further and further away. He could tell that the others were starting to get concerned. Even the ones who’d ragged on him about
Bucky the hardest before now watched with concern in their eyes as Steve silently resumed working. He never heard them outright talking, but he did sometimes get the sense as he entered a room that he’d been the previous topic of conversation.

Natasha was the only one brave enough to try a conversation with him about it. “Look,” he had said a few minutes into last week’s lunch. “I’m fine. I’m not ready to talk, but I’ll be okay.”

And he mostly meant it. The first few days after he’d woken up alone he’d been hurt and angry, but tired more than anything. Tired of chasing someone who didn’t want to be chased, tired of battling with emotions so wildly out of place that Steve didn’t even have a name for them. He wasn’t going to fight for something that he wasn’t even sure he wanted some days (even though other days want raged through him like wildfire and that decision became much harder to live with).

The anger had quickly given way, and the pain sometime after that, because Steve Rogers was a lot of things, but a moper he was not. It hadn’t worked, and that was that, and as much as it hurt, moving on was the right thing to do, even though doing it without closure was infinitely harder.

But he did, and he thought he did a relatively decent job of it. He took more missions and spent more time out of his apartment. Had more lunches with Natasha, and even accepted an invitation from Clint to go to an archery range and accompanied Sam to an outdoor music festival. He never went back to Brooklyn, though sometimes he ached for it. He knew better than to stir that particular pot.

Steve had just returned from a meeting with Fury and was waiting on a phone call from Natasha on a Saturday afternoon. He was busy contemplating his day and trying to decide if he had enough errands to run to warrant actually leaving the house when his phone began to ring.

“Nat!” he said brightly as he picked up the phone.

“Steve.”

The voice at the other end was deep and decidedly male, and it stopped Steve cold as every emotion he’d done his best to work through or bottle up in the past few weeks came flooding back in an instant. So much for progress.

“Bucky,” he said, because he had to say something and didn’t trust himself to say what he really wanted to.

“I have an emergency situation here. I tried, but I can’t… I need help.” Of all the things he’d imagined Bucky saying to him, that was never on the list. “I need your help. Please.”

Steve didn’t even stop to think. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, of course. Where.”

On the other end of the line Bucky made a brief startled noise into the phone, like he’d been expecting Steve to say no. Honestly, Steve couldn’t say that he wasn’t entirely surprised himself, but when the time to make the decision had come, he’d done it without hesitation. After the initial moment of surprise, Bucky seemed to recover and quickly relayed an address over the phone before telling Steve to meet him on the roof of the building in 45 minutes.

45 minutes gave Steve just enough time to throw on a tactical suit and kit up, although without an explanation of what they were going to be facing, he had to be broad about his choice of equipment. He skipped public transportation or taking one of Tony’s drivers in favor of making his own way through the city, taking rooftops and back alleys where he could to maximize his speed and minimize recognition.

He was breathing hard, even for him, when he finally reached their agreed-upon meeting place and
found Bucky standing there, hands in his pockets and an anxious expression on his face. Bucky looked up the minute Steve dropped onto the rooftop, and kept staring as Steve approached, neither of them saying a word. It wasn’t until Steve was only a few feet from him that Bucky finally took a deep breath and said, “Hi,” like the word caused him physical pain to say it.

“How,” Steve said back, feeling immediately awkward. He cast a quick glance around. There was nothing obvious going on that he could see. The day was sunny and clear, and down on the street people went about their business as usual. Cars rumbled down the road and people ambled on the sidewalk. Across from him, Bucky slouched down into himself like he wanted to curl up and disappear. Steve tried hard not to look as astonished as he felt; this was a side of Bucky he hadn’t seen before.

“So,” Bucky began, and then abruptly stopped. He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet and chewed on his lower lip nervously.

Steve looked around one final time and then turned his gaze back to Bucky, who he noted was dressed only in jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt. Not exactly tactical combat gear by any means. Slowly Steve asked, “There was never any emergency, was there?” Bucky shook his head. Steve nodded and said, “So what are we-”

“I’m working up to it!” Bucky snapped quickly. “Give me a damn minute, will ya? I don’t do this a lot.”

“What, apologize for being an asshole?”

Bucky glared at him, and Steve met his gaze solidly until Bucky was the one to back down. Steve wasn’t the one in the wrong here. Bucky deserved to sweat a little. “Yeah,” Bucky muttered, relenting, his gaze downcast. “That.”

They stood in silence for a minute before Steve said, “And…”

“Oh my god.” Bucky closed his eyes and pinched the skin over the bridge of his nose in frustration. “I’m sorry, okay? That was… a shit thing for me to do.”

Steve tried his luck and pressed a bit further. “Then why’d you do it?”

Bucky gave him a look, but still responded. “A lot of reasons. I don’t like you.” And now it was time for a look of Steve’s own for Bucky to roll his eyes at. “All right. You annoy me. And you… You understand things. And that’s… hard for me.”

Steve exhaled slowly. It wasn’t a full apology, but this was Bucky Barnes. He suspected he could wait until the end of the world and still be left wanting if he waited for one. But it was a beginning. And that was enough to work with. Maybe it wouldn’t work out, but maybe it would. And Steve had spent enough time lingering over the past. He was ready to try something new.

“Go out on a date with me,” Steve said abruptly.

Bucky immediately bristled. “I don’t-”

“Listen,” Steve headed him off. “I’m not asking you to get married and ride off into the sunset with me. I’m asking you to get shitty coffee and maybe have a conversation that doesn’t end in one of us yelling at the other one.”

Bucky remained defensive, and Steve could practically see the struggle taking place in his head. After what felt like an excruciatingly long time, Bucky said, “Make it vodka and you’ve got a deal.”
Steve grinned at him. He couldn’t help it. “Deal.”

It probably wasn’t the ideal start to any relationship, and Natasha would likely say none of it seemed healthy.

“Hey,” he said on a sudden hunch, and Bucky’s attention snapped to him. “This your apartment building?”

Bucky nodded as a slow smile began to creep across his face. “Yep. Got a bedroom and everything.”

Well. It was a start, anyway.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed it!

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