Prodigal Son

by Cymry

Summary

There's a visitor at Avengers Tower and he'll only talk to Steve Rogers.

Takes place chronologically before 'Grace Can Be Found In Unlikely Places' but they can be read in any order.
Eleven months since Bucky vanished from DC, Sam and Steve were in the basement of a Turkish hotel. Just behind a vast china cabinet was a stairway down into a sub-basement, and in that sub-basement was a heavy steel door. But when they broke it open they were met with only silence.

There was a lobby area inside with a metal detector and a security desk next to it. Slumped behind the desk was a dead man with a bloody shirt and a neat bullet hole through his forehead.

“You think-”

“It was him.”

Steve had seen more than his fair share of corpses and not just in war. After New York, he’d helped unearth survivors and those who hadn’t been so lucky. By his estimation, this man had been dead for two days at most.

“We just missed him.”

Steve deliberately didn’t punch the security desk. He’d bloodied a lot of knuckles that way. So at this point in the search, he put his hand down on the counter to anchor himself. Just days ago, Bucky had been here. He’d been staying in Istanbul just like Steve and Sam, tracking the same Hydra cell. Was he okay? The next thought that floated up was absurdly ‘was he lonely?’

Sam made his way behind the desk, leaning past the body.

“These cameras are still working, Cap. And we can watch it back on these.”

The exit wound had made a terrible mess back there but Steve had been through worse for Bucky. Sam tapped away at the keyboard and on the screens, a tiny Sam and Steve went out of the room backwards. Nothing happened for a long time except for corpses gently cooling in other rooms. Then Bucky appeared.

Sam quit rewinding just as the last body fell. That was a woman in a white coat and she fell not a metre away from her male colleague. Bucky stood over them, a rifle in his hands. Steve drank in the sight of him. He wore a light jacket and gloves to hide his metal arm. There was no smear of black greasepaint across his eyes, but even the crappy cameras picked up how hollow his cheeks were. How narrow his chest was.

“He’s so thin,” said Steve.

“Life’s not been too kind to him. Least it’s better than Hydra.”

On the screen, Bucky dropped his gun and sank to his knees. He pressed both fists to the sides of his head, shuddering and shaking. His back heaved like he was about to throw up.

“Looks like a panic attack.”

“I should’ve…” Should’ve clung to Bucky on the bank of the Potomac, should’ve followed him on the highway, should’ve caught him in 1944 before he fell from the train.
“Steve. You couldn’t have known.”

Sam put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing hard through the heavy suit. Together they watched Bucky get to his feet, bent over to take huge breaths. Then he walked into the view of a different camera. This one was pointed at a chair, one with restraints and a black and iron thing like a halo. The floor had a drain in it.

Bucky started demolishing the chair methodically at first. The restraints he pulled off with one mighty heavy each. Then he threw the arms to the ground. As it went on Bucky became frenzied, shattering the halo into shards, tearing the padding open, pulling the whole thing from the floor where it had been bolted down. He stopped only when he fell to his knees, cradling his metal arm against his chest.

“The wrist. He’s hurt it,” said Steve.

Thirty-six hours ago, Bucky tenderly touched his wrist, turning it slowly. When he was satisfied, he took what he needed from Hydra. Two guns and ammunition. A coat hanging from the back of a door. And four big bags from a fridge. He searched all the fridges, but those four bags were all he found.

“What could that be?”

“It looks like an IV bag,” said Sam. “Medicine? Something that big might be a saline bag, but I don’t know what he’d want that for.”

Bucky put all four into a hard case he took from the lab. Then he walked out and he looked so tired that Steve wanted to reach out through the screen and bring him to his side, where it was safe.

“We’ll find him, Steve.” Sam tapped the screen, “Look at how close we are.”

“Not quite close enough.” Steve straightened up, preparing himself to see in person all the bodies Bucky had created. “Let’s see if we can find something to point us in the right direction.”

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A year since Bucky vanished and Steve stepped into the Tower with a sigh. The UN wanted more and more details about Ultron and what had happened in Sokovia. Tony got the brunt of it, and it was a lot, even when the blow was softened by his very expensive lawyers. Even Steve had to go up in front of the committee. At least Wanda had been spared. She was a good kid and still grieving her brother. Steve knew all about grieving.

He waited for an elevator, undoing his tie and shoving it deep into his pocket. To his surprise, the elevator brought him Sam.

“Don’t you ever turn your phone on, Cap?”

Before Steve could even open his mouth, he was being dragged into the elevator. His shield was leaning up against the glass wall and Sam jabbed the button hard. He was usually - to excuse the pun - unflappable, but something had gotten him spooked.

“I turned it off when I went in front of the committee. Sam, what’s happening?”

“We’ve got a visitor.”

Steve suddenly found it hard to breathe.
“You mean-”

“Walked straight in here and scared the shit out of everyone. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice everyone keyed up in the lobby?”

He hadn’t. He’d been so consumed with thoughts of Ultron, of losing Bruce, and of when the next meeting would be. For once Bucky hadn’t been in his thoughts at all.

“Has he asked for me?” he said, hating how timid his voice sounded.

“Yeah,” Sam said gently. “He knows you. He wrote it down.”

“Wrote it down?”

“Yeah.” Sam shook his head. “He didn’t speak a word. I don’t think he can.”

Steve felt dizzy and groped for the elevator wall. He’d replayed that moment on the highway over and over in his head. The mask falling away. Bucky’s generous mouth and grey eyes. Who the hell is Bucky? He could speak then.

The elevator dinged cheerfully and Sam took the shield for him. Steve followed in his wake, feeling like all the old weaknesses had returned to his legs.

“Steve.” Sam turned, blocking off the corridor. Behind one of those doors was Bucky. “Before you go in there, I’m going to show you a picture, okay?” He slid his phone out of his pocket. “I’m not going to lie. He’s in a bad way, but you got to remember that right now he’s safe. He’s stable. But going to pieces in front of him is not going to help.”

These were moments that he could be spending with Bucky, but Sam had never steered him wrong before. And the faster he looked at the picture, the faster he could go.

“Show me.”

All the deep breaths in the world couldn’t have prepared him. It was Bucky alright, but not the Bucky of the 30s and 40s with the easy smile and the slicked-back hair. Not the Bucky of the twenty-first century, all power and deadly efficiency. He was now painfully thin, his eyes huge in dark, shadowed hollows, the shape of his skull visible through his skin. He listed to the left and Steve realised that the weight of the metal arm hidden under his dirty jacket was pulling him to one side.

“Steve. Steve, man, talk to me.”

“What’s happened to him?” Steve barely recognised his own voice.

“We don’t know. He says he’ll only talk to you. There’s food in there with him, but he hasn’t touched it.”

Bucky would have hated to be seen like this, all tangled-haired and filthy, but Steve didn’t have the words. If he tried to describe it, he’d only start screaming. Why couldn’t Bucky eat? Why couldn’t he speak? What had Hydra done to him?

“I want to see him now.”

“Second door on your right.” Sam held the shield out to him. “Just in case.”

“Sam, he’s skin and bones. He couldn’t hurt me if he tried.”
“I hear something, I’m running in.” And Sam stepped aside.

The second door on the right was a perfectly ordinary door of glossy wood, where, on a normal day, perfectly normal meetings took place. Even though he wanted to go through fast enough to take the door off its hinges, he forced himself to go in slowly so as not to startle Bucky.

The smell hit him first, the mingled scent of an unwashed body and filthy clothes. Steve wasn’t delicate and he’d willingly experience worse just to see Bucky lift his head and focus on Steve. God, he looked tired, like he’d come off a week of double shifts because the cold air got into Steve’s chest every winter and medicine was expensive.

“Hi. Hi, Bucky.” Hi, sweetheart, baby, darling. What’ve they done to my best guy?

There was a couch in this room where Bucky had chosen to sit, his back against the wall. On the long table were two untouched plates, a chicken sandwich and a cold mac and cheese. There was also a small pot of jello and a half-full pitcher of water.

“You know me?”

Bucky nodded, his head moving up and down in precise movements. Next to him was a backpack and a yellow pad of paper. The top sheet said I’ll speak to Steve Rogers in something that was almost the neat cursive honed under Miss Garner. He took it up and flicked through until he found a blank page.

You’re Steve, said the paper when he turned it around. I know you.

“All our lives. Why aren’t you talking?”

The Winter Soldier hadn’t talked very much, but he had done it. The man who’d asked ‘who the hell is Bucky?’ silently looked down at his page and wrote in very deliberate movements.

The Asset does not speak unless required by mission parameters.

“Oh, Buck.”

Steve reached out to touch his arm and Bucky’s reaction was instantaneous. He flinched backwards, metal arm held out to guard. His pupils were pinpricks.

“I’m sorry, Bucky, I’m sorry.” Steve backed away, his hands open and contrite. “I’m sorry, I won’t touch you. I promise.” It was like talking to a spooked animal. Speech and food and touch, the list grew longer and longer. Steve could only hope that these things hadn’t been lost forever in some Hydra torture chamber. “You can trust me.”

Bucky unwound slowly, never dropping his gaze. His papers and his marker pen had fallen onto the floor. When he reached out for them with his metal arm, the wrist made a grinding noise.

“Did it get worse since Instanbul?” Bucky dropped the marker in shock and it rolled away to Steve. He plucked it up. “There were cameras there. Sam and I saw you hurt it then. We destroyed the footage if you’re worried.”

He held out the marker pen and Bucky took it, closing his fingers around the cap so that there was no chance that they would brush fingertips.

It was careless of me.
“I’m glad you missed them,” said Steve. “At least I knew you were okay.” Thin, but not emaciated like this.

*The wrist is damaged and I cannot repair it.*

“And you haven’t eaten. Is there something else we can get you?”

He didn’t write anything down. Instead, Bucky drew a crude outline of a human torso. It had a triangle for a nose, a tube leading down from the mouth to the stomach, and two thin arms. He displayed it with no flair just a soft rustle of paper. Then he added a rectangle above the man’s head and drew a line from it running down into the arm.

“Is that an IV? That’s how you eat?” He remembered Bucky searching all the fridges back in Instanbul and how he’d carefully packed away the four bags he found. How long would four of those last him? “I can get something arranged. We have a really good medical staff here.” Thank God, they hadn’t moved to the Compound yet. “They can take care of it for you.”

Bucky looked at him with that gaunt and solemn face. He had smashed his shield into that familiar face and worked violence onto that beloved flesh to save millions. Maybe it was right that he couldn’t touch him now. Finally, Bucky wrote down a short sentence.

*Steve Rogers can be trusted.*

“So you’ll stay?”

Bucky wrote for a very long time, the pen moving slowly across the page. He couldn’t have had much energy left at all. His handwriting unravelled with each sentence.

*I went to the museum where you were an exhibit. And I was there too. But I remember things that weren’t there. I remember fireworks. And at that word, the lump in Steve’s throat came right back. I remember flashes of other things. What was James Buchanan Barnes to Steven Rogers?*

Steve knelt on the floor so that he wasn’t looming over Bucky. And this way he could talk lowly, just in case Sam was in earshot.

“It was my twelveth birthday.” Steve unfolded the memory like a treasured photograph, almost smelling the haze of gunpowder and tasting Coca-Cola on his tongue. “When you took me up to the roof to watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July. We had some birthday cake with us and some soda.” Bucky, despite his fear of being touched, was leaning forward to listen. Could he picture Sarah Rogers’ apple cake too? “And when the fireworks started you kissed me. And that was that. We were lovers right up until… until I lost you. It wasn’t in the museum because no one else knew. No one else could - it was illegal. Not that that stopped us.”

On the Insight Carrier, ‘I loved you all my life’ had been met with fists and screaming. Now it was met with a calm look like a puzzle piece had been slotted into place.

“Please stay, Buck. It doesn’t have to be forever if you don’t want to, I just want to know that you’re safe.”

Bucky rolled his marker pen between his fingers. All the plates in his arm clicked and shifted, the ones above his wrist not as smoothly as the others. Then he did another one of his slow nods, one movement up and one down.

“Thank you, Bucky.” He kept his hands to himself even if he wanted to tuck Bucky’s matted hair behind his ears and kiss him until his eyes closed. “I got a friend outside, the one who brought you
up here. His name’s Sam. I’m going to get him and we’ll—” he waved a hand at Bucky’s untouched lunch “—we’ll get you some of your food, okay?”

Bucky pulled his backpack towards him. It was a lot cleaner than he was. From inside he grabbed a notebook, fat with leaflets and tickets. There was a cardboard pocket on the back cover and inside was taped two little squares of plastic. Steve had been in the future long enough to recognise micro SD cards. Bucky waited patiently until Steve extended his hand for them.

“What’s on these?”

Bucky’s only answer was to tap himself lightly on the chest. If they contained the sum total of Bucky Barnes, then they were very light indeed. But Hydra could never have known the best part of him. Steve curled his fingers gently around them.

“I’m going to talk to Sam for a minute. I’ll be right back.”

He could feel Bucky’s eyes on him as he made his way out to the corridor.

“So I’m guessing you didn’t get strangled,” said Sam. He had the shield leaning against the wall next to him.

“Don’t. He doesn’t do that anymore.”

“He staying?”

“For now. He gave me these. I think they’re his files.”

“We’ll get them looked at. But the most important thing is to get him to medical and—”

Something crashed in the other room and Steve was moving, snatching up his shield on the way. There were no black-clad Hydra agents but Bucky was on the floor, shaking himself violently.

“On his side, on his side,” said Sam. “And get something soft under his head.”

He was so light, even with his metal arm, and he didn’t resist when Steve rolled him onto his side. There was foam on his lips with flecks of blood in it.

“It’s okay, Bucky, it’s okay. You’re going to be fine.” Steve wondered who he was trying to convince. Boardrooms were short on soft furnishings, so Steve shoved his suit jacket under Bucky’s head and hoped for the best. “It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m sorry for touching, but don’t be scared, baby, we’re going to help.”

It seemed to go on forever, but when Bucky’s body finally relaxed, the time Sam called out was one minute forty-seven. The grey eyes he’d memorised by the age of eight had gone confused and far away.

“I’m sorry, Bucky,” said Steve. He wiped away the foam with his shirt sleeve. No reaction at all. “I’m sorry.”

“Steve, they’re going to take him now.”

Somehow there were medical staff in the room, a gurney between them. Steve didn’t let them touch Bucky. Bad enough that he had to do it, let alone strangers. But down at medical, they were separated by a swarm of medical staff who banished Steve from the room. He had to stand on the other side of the window and watch other people’s hands touch Bucky.
“They’ll take care of him, Steve.”

“I know that.”

“Seems you don’t know you’ve been off fighting robots and politicians for two weeks, but what do us mere mortals know, right?”

In the other room, someone cut away Bucky’s clothes and his ribs cast shadows across his skin. His clavicle made deep hollows on either side of his neck. It reminded him of his old body. That was wrong. Bucky was meant to be the strong one, the healthy one.

“You called him ‘baby’ in there.”

The old fear gripped Steve deep down in his guts, right where Bucky had shot him. The fear of being blue-ticketed or worse. And it never had to be anything official. A dark street would do it when men got drunk and mean.

“Steve.” Sam put a hand on his arm. “You know it’s okay.”

Everyone was occupied with Bucky, putting needles in his arm, sticky pads on his chest. No one was around to hear anything Steve said.

“When I came out of the ice,” he said, looking not at Sam but at the narrow glimpses of Bucky he got between people’s bodies, “he’d been dead for seventy years. But to me… I’d only lost him a week ago. SHIELD told me that it was okay now, but I didn’t say anything. I could have handled anything someone said to me. But if they’d had said anything about Bucky…”

“You were grieving.”

“And then he was alive. He’d survived but he didn’t remember. Not even his own name. I should have told you when we started looking for him, Sam, but I didn’t know how to. I still- I still don’t know how to handle it.” Steve made an effort to keep his voice low, even if it was legal. “I still don’t know what to think. He remembered our first kiss. I think he remembers more than that.”

“Steve, you know that any sort of romance is going to be too much right now. He’d been away for a year, but there’s a lot more than a year’s worth of trauma there. The guy can’t even be touched unless he’s out of it.”

“I know.”

The frenzy of activity was slowing down around Bucky and Steve shifted. He should be there.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but how long were you two an item? Was it like a wartime thing for you guys?”

Once again Steve saw all the bright lights in the sky just for him. Bucky’s mouth on his, warmer than anything he’d felt before, tasting of cake and Coca-Cola.

“It was my twelfth birthday. We’d gone up onto the roof to see the fireworks and that was it for me.”

“So you were childhood sweethearts?”

Steve took a quick gasp of breath. No one would have described them like that back then. Childhood sweethearts were like Marty and Gloria Callahan down the block, not a pair of inverts. But it was the twenty-first century. Bucky and Steve, together since the 4th of July 1930, could be childhood
sweethearts too.

“Yeah. Childhood sweethearts. It’s okay to think like that, isn’t it? I can hope that he wants it someday?”

“It’ll be a long road.”

“Longer than seventy years? Even if he doesn’t want to, he’s still my friend. I’m going to help him.”

“I’m not going to be able to persuade you into sleeping in a real bed any time soon, am I? At least promise me that you’ll take some time after he wakes up. Go outside for a spell. Hell, do some shopping for him. Just take it slow. It’s a marathon, not a sprint.”

“You’ve seen me run.”

“Not what I meant. Take care of yourself too, man. I do not want to have to kick Captain America’s ass any time soon.”

“If that’s how you think it’s going to go.” Steve put his hand on the window as though he could transmit a comforting touch to Bucky by telepathy alone. “I’ll tell the others eventually. I just need time.”

“Secret’s safe with me.”

The doctors finally left Bucky be and when they filed out Steve went in. They’d dimmed the lights so Bucky was lit up mostly by the screens that surrounded him. They’d put tubes in his arm, an oxygen mask over his face. Steve wanted to put his hand over Bucky’s to see if it still felt like he remembered. But he’d promised so he kept his hands to himself and dragged a chair over.

Bucky had never looked smaller, his matted hair pulled out of the way, his long eyelashes spread against his cheek. But he wasn’t alone at least. If Steve could promise one thing is that Bucky would never have to fight alone.

Chapter End Notes

So I wrote a thing about Good Omen’s Crowley and Aziraphale getting caught up in one of the Winter Soldier’s assassinations and then meeting Bucky Barnes in the twenty-first century. And I loved writing Bucky working through his problems with his sign language and very supportive boyfriend. Weird trains of thought occurred and here’s how he and Steve got there.

First draft’s all done so chapters should be quick. Let me know what you think.
The Asset lifted his head as the van door opened, squinting against the sudden light. He hadn’t realised that his chin had fallen onto his chest and there would be a punishment for not staying still if noticed. But Handler One was looking at the man he’d brought here and Handler Two was reading a newspaper in the front seat. Perhaps punishment would be avoided.

“Jesus! His guts are hanging out,” said the man who was not a Handler.

“Why the fuck do you think he’s here, genius?” shouted Handler Two from his seat.

Handler One climbed up into the van, dragging the protesting man with him. The stranger wore a white coat with ‘Dr Karcher’ embroidered on the pocket. There was a bright red thing in his pocket, a circle on a stick, wrapped in plastic. A badge pinned to the outside with a picture of a smiling cartoon mouse.

“I know why you brought him to me,” said Dr Karcher, “I just want to know why you brought him here.” He waved a hand at the Asset, “What are you going to do? Pass him off as your kid?”

“I think you best think about what you’re going to do for Hydra, sweetheart,” rumbled Handler One. His hand was very near his jacket pocket where the Asset had seen him put his pistol. Not that he would need it against the man filling the small space with the smell of nervous sweat. Dr Karcher ran his fingers through his thinning hair and the Asset sat there, blood plinking onto the van floor. His metal hand - the strong hand, the one Hydra had gifted him - maintained constant pressure on the hasty dressings that were keeping his intestines in. What was the word sweetheart? It sounded sweet as candy.

“Fuck,” said Dr Karcher, messing with the candy in his pocket. “Okay, okay. But he can’t be here. There’s a parking structure two blocks back. Drive there.” He turned to the neat plastic bins where the van’s medical supplies were stored. “What’ve you doped him up on?”

“Nothing,” said Handler One, dragging the door closed. “No point when he burns through it like he does. He’ll stay put if we say so.”

“Jesus,” repeated Dr Karcher.

The van started up and the vibrations made pain come wriggling and alive in the Asset’s open belly. But he stayed quiet, as a good Asset should. Around the edges of his vision, things were starting to blur.

“Look at that,” said Handler One, “not even a fucking grunt. I could stick my hand right on in there and he won’t do a fucking thing.” The van bounced over a pothole and the Asset gritted his teeth. Nausea rose in his throat and the whole scene before him became nothing more than a smear. “Hey, watch this.”

With how the blood was rushing through the Asset’s ears, he almost missed Handler One’s order to open his mouth. But he did, opening his mouth as a good Asset should. There was no point in wondering what would happen next. Only Hydra had a choice in his future.

Handler One leaned in, smirking. He smelt of cigarette smoke and gunpowder. In his hand was the candy from the doctor’s pocket.

“Been a good boy, soldier?” He placed the candy delicately on the Asset’s tongue, the stick poking
out of his mouth. “Have a sucker.” He pushed the Asset’s chin up and went back to his seat.

Sweetness bloomed in the Asset’s mouth. Sugar. The taste of strawberry. Red like a strawberry. Carefully, he moved the sucker in his mouth with his tongue. *Something sweet’s good after a hard week, least until you can get a stiff drink don’t you think, baby?*

There was something missing from his right-hand side. Impossible, because the Asset didn’t own things like real people did. But something—no, some one was missing. Not Handler or Director or Target. Someone who did not fit into Hydra’s neat categories.

Handler Two parked the van and got out of the driver’s door. There was a cigarette in his mouth. He liked to burn perfectly round holes into the skin of the Asset’s inner thigh. They always healed afterwards and the Asset was not permitted opinions on the smell of singed flesh.

“Hey, dummy!” Handler One slapped him across the face with a closed fist. The sucker fell out of his mouth and onto the floor. The Asset had ignored an order and punishment was now inevitable. “Get on the stretcher already.”

The Asset leaned forward, feeling things shift in unfamiliar ways beneath his metal hand and the dressings. He planted his flesh hand in his own blood and he pulled himself up bit by bit. Why he thought someone would be there to catch him he did not know. He stumbled, boots slithering on the wet floor. The ghost of sweetness—like sweetheart—was on his lips.

“C’mon, I don’t have all fucking day,” said Handler One. The light coming in from the front window caught his hair and turned blond into gold.

The Asset lashed out with his metal fist and suddenly Handler One was trying to breathe through a collapsed windpipe. As he fell, Dr Karcher squealed. He threw his hands up, one half into a rubber glove, the empty fingers dangling.

“Where?” the Asset rasped out.

“Don’t hurt me, please, I-”

“Where?” The Asset clamped his hand back onto the dressing and stepped over Handler One. Handler One’s face was turning blue.

“I don’t know-”

“Where is he?” screamed the Asset.

“I don’t know, I don’t know! I don’t know who you’re talking about!” He sank to his butt, blubbering and the Asset ignored him. He needed to find this person. Everything would be okay if he could. Guts slithered beneath his hand as he bent to take Handler One’s gun. Someone with blond hair, someone who was sweetheart and baby.

He nearly tore the van’s door off its hinges climbing out over Dr Karcher. Blood made his fatigues stick to his legs. Blood loss was becoming critical. But there was someone out there who-

“What the shit?” Handler Two spat out his cigarette onto the ground. His gun was in his holster and he was only human and slow. The Asset had no compunctions about killing him.

“Sputnik!” cried Handler Two, the word echoing around the concrete, and the Asset tumbled to the ground, down, down into darkness.
Bucky came up from sleep screaming, just like every other time. He screamed up at the ceiling tiles until all that was left was a pain in his throat like a razor and someone saying soothing things to his right. Screaming had sapped his energy, but there was enough left to turn his head in that direction. Steve was on his feet, the shield half-raised in his defence. Some part of Bucky, a memory raw and new, thought there he is.

“Jesus, Bucky,” said Steve. “Was that a nightmare?” His free hand twitched towards Bucky before returning to his side. “Are you okay?”

They’d taken his clothes and dressed him in a flimsy hospital robe, which meant people had been touching him. Doctors touching him. The thought made his skin crawl. But there was also a cannula in his arm and a tube running from it and that was attached to a bag filled with a yellowish liquid. Nutrition, at last, to feed his terrible metabolism.

He nodded carefully. Steve’s expression did not change.

“And it’s like that every time?”

Bucky nodded again. In the last year, it had lost him places in shelters and drawn the attention of neighbours. And it hadn’t gotten better at all. On the contrary, more and more memories came out in his sleep.

Steve’s hand scrubbed at his face. There was a chair on its side and a blanket too. He’d been sleeping here next to Bucky’s bed. Safety… but wrong somehow. He remembered being at bedsides himself. On guard at a camp deep in France, frost sparkling in the moonlight. Armed with a Kalashnikov while a former Hydra director died of polonium poisoning. In a tiny room listening to ragged breathing coming from a pile of coats and blankets.

During his year out in the world, Bucky had gotten good at pantomime. He pointed at the chair, then at Steve, then pressed his thumb and forefinger together.

“That’s right.” Steve made that happy-sad face. “You spent a lot of time over on this side of things when I was small. I caught everything going.”

Someone knocked at the door and the same man who’d taken Bucky up into the Tower put his head around the door. His name, recorded in Bucky’s notebook, was Sam Wilson. Bucky had torn his wings off on the Insight Carrier and flung him into the air. Thankfully, the Asset had failed to kill him.

“Everything okay in here?”

“It’s okay, Sam. Bucky just startled me coming out of a bad dream.”

As if Steve knew how it looked, he took his shield off and fixed his chair. His suit jacket was hanging on the back and, underneath that, Bucky could see his backpack. It hadn’t occurred to him to worry about it when Steve was here. Steve wouldn’t allow his memories to be thrown away like he had to throw away so many other things.

Sam Wilson entered, holding the door for a woman. She was dressed in jeans and a blouse, but she looked at him in a measured way that said doctor.

“So… Barnes,” said Sam, “This is Dr Castillo.”
“We thought the white coat wouldn’t put you at ease,” said the doctor. She had a tray balanced against her hip and Bucky couldn’t see what was on it. This made his hands curl into weak fists of their own accord. “I’m the one that put you onto your liquid nutrition there. Can I come closer?”

There was no point in answering doctors. They did what they wanted. But Steve said, “I think you better stay there for now, doctor” and miracle of miracles she did as she was told.

“Okay,” she said brightly. “So here’s what we’re aiming for today. We’ve got you on IV nutrition at the moment, but given your unique case—” Almost unique. “—we need a lot more. Especially since we don’t have liquid nutrition tailored to your needs. Do you know what an NG tube is?”

Hydra had found that keeping the Asset entirely on IV nutrition to be impractical in some circumstances. At least a dozen times, they’d used the NG tube instead, perhaps why his stomach hadn’t completely antropied. But man cannot live on watered-down soup alone and Bucky couldn’t know how many contingences Hydra had in place to keep him from obtaining liquid nutrition through normal channels. He’d been forced to live on what he could scavenge from Hydra cells.

Bucky nodded.

“It goes down to your stomach via the back of your throat and we can feed you that way. We don’t have all your files yet, but we did get one mentioning you’ve been fed this way before.” She glanced over at Sam, then back at Bucky. “But we won’t put it in unless you say yes. Or if your situation becomes so bad we have no choice.”

“Medicine by consent is what we do here,” said Sam.

Steve pushed the yellow pad of paper under his hand and he displayed an even more remarkable insight into Bucky’s mind when he looked at Bucky’s one word reply - ‘Can’t’ - and said,

“Bucky can’t do touching. Is there a way he can do it himself?”

They folded up the bed so Bucky could sit up and he did what Hydra had programmed him to do - follow orders. Feed, swallow, wait, swallow. Bucky let his hands do the work without input from his brain.

Swallow.

Wait.

What’ve you doped him on?

Feed.

No point when he burns through it like he does.

Swallow.

Wait.

“There we go. All done,” said an unfamiliar voice. “I wish all my patients were this brave. How does it feel?”

The term feel was unclear, undefined. The Asset took stock: fat reserves depleted, the muscle being eaten away to keep the nervous system and heart functioning, fatigue making his head cloudy. The Asset did not remember what he had done - or what he had not done - to make his handlers punish
him with starvation, but perhaps this was the end of it.

“Ready to comply.” Even his voice was weak. The Asset guessed there hadn’t been a mission for a long time. “Critical maintenance required.”

No orders followed, only silence. The Asset remained still and silent.

“Hey, step back for a bit, Doc. We’ll handle this.” That was a black male, American accent. The Asset might know him. “Out of the room would be best, we don’t know how he’s going to react. Steve, you’re up.”

“Hey, Bucky.” Blond male, America accent. The Asset knew him. “You know where you are?”

American accents did not necessarily mean that he was in America, but only a strict handler would expect him to guess differently. The Asset had had many strict handlers. So he thought about it and there was an unusually large selection of memories to choose from. He’d been sat in a coffee shop and the television had shown this man - blond hair, blue eyes, broad shoulders that should be narrow - fighting a legion of metal men and he’d got up and headed to New York because-

Because it was Steve, the man on the bridge, the man on the Insight Carrier, commander, childhood friend, lover of-

He opened his mouth and tried to say just one word, just the one name, but all that came out was silence.

“Hi, Bucky Barnes,” said Steve, happy-sad smile in place. “We lost you for a sec there.”

Bucky lifted his hand - it weighed two tons at least - and explored the tube that came out of his nose.

“Don’t mess with that too much,” said Sam Wilson. “They still have to test it.”

Steve offered him tape to fix it to his face and when that was done, Bucky leant back against his pillows. He’d walked to Avengers Tower, powered by fumes. Seven days since the last Hydra IV pack ran out and he’d been rationing them before that.

“Does it hurt?” said Steve and Bucky found it in him to spare energy for a shake of his head. It was important to reassure Steve. “That’s good, Buck. Just stay awake a little longer.”

Dr Castillo came back in, moving slowly, keeping out of arm range.

“Hello again, Bucky. How does it feel?”

“It doesn’t hurt, he says,” said Steve from just a look at Bucky. This was useful, having someone to speak for him.

“Good,” said Dr Castillo. “Almost there. We just have to aspirate some liquid from the tube, just to check it’s seated right.”

Bucky remembered this too. No one wanted to be the one to kill the Asset - a valuable piece of property - by drowning him with his own food. He allowed Castillo within range. Steve, and possibly Sam Wilson too, would not allow her to touch him. Even then, he sat perfectly still as she drew liquid from the tube. Some part of him, even with Steve Rogers here, couldn’t quite believe that this year wasn’t some elaborate trap.

“Knock, knock.” There was a man in the doorway. Of course Hydra made sure that the Asset knew
who Tony Stark was when the time came to tear down SHIELD.

“Hi, Tony.” Steve got up and went over to Stark. But before they shook hands, Steve looked back at Bucky over his shoulder. Checking in. “Thank you. I know you’re busy.”

“Well, you promised me a mechanical puzzle so here I am.” Stark leant around Steve’s broad shoulders to look at Bucky. The Bucky from before the fall would have been embarrassed to be wearing his old clothes in front of someone in a very nice suit like Stark. His clothes had been stinking rags but the layers at least had hidden just how bad things had gotten.

“So you’re Cap’s old war buddy, huh?” Stark came up to his bedside, hands in his pockets. Steve would have briefed him. “Not only are you giving my decryption programmes a surprising workout, you’ve brought me something to fix.” He bent slightly to look at Bucky’s left arm. It was almost a relief to see him look past Bucky’s gaunt body to the sweeping metal plates. “Very nice. Now I don’t say this to many guys - not when sober at least - but the arm? Just beautiful. And from the forties too? I mean given time I could make something even better, but that’s not bad.”

That had been a lot of words, more than the Asset used in some missions, which fit Hydra’s profile of the man. But he was also a talented engineer. Bucky rolled his wrist as a demonstration and something made a high-pitched whine deep inside. Dr Castillo retreated with her syringe and Stark took her place.

“Tony’s agreed to fix your arm, Bucky,” said Steve. He was hovering on Bucky’s right-hand side. “He’s a friend so you can trust him, okay?”

Steve Rogers could be trusted, so, by extension, Stark could be trusted too. At the foot of the bed, Dr Castillo flashed him a square of pH paper that had turned the correct yellow colour. NG tube correctly situated. More nutrition to be sacrificed to his haywire metabolism. But all the nutrition in the world couldn’t hold back the need for sleep.

“Tony’s going to scan your arm,” said Steve conversationally. Like they were chatting over coffee. “He won’t have to touch you all. Castillo won’t have to either. You go to sleep.” There was a twitch of his big hands like he was holding back from touching. “Maybe this time you…”

Won’t have a nightmare, Bucky was sure he meant, but that was naive. There were always more nightmares to be unearthed. A year out in the world and he hadn’t reached the end of the line yet.

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Bucky had fallen asleep while Tony ran the handheld scanner up and down his metal arm. Being hooked up through the tube in his nose as well, meant that fluids and food were flowing into him through two separate points. Sixteen hours a day, he heard the medical staff say, sixteen hours he’d have to spend hooked up like that. He thought about the file Natasha had given him and the picture of Bucky in cryo. He’d looked like a machine put away until Hydra had needed him again, when he’d been so alive when Steve knew and loved him.

At least Sam had let Steve write Bucky a note and request an extra blanket for him.

“Take some time for you, Cap,” he’d said, “and try and do it in your own damn bed.”

*I’m just a few floors away* was how he’d signed off his note, and he was keenly aware of it as he paced his apartment. After searching the world for Bucky Barnes, he was here and he knew him. All he wanted was to go back down to Bucky’s room and talk and see just how much he knew. Did he
remember cold nights tangled together under every blanket they owned? The way Bucky had rested his warm hands on Steve’s skinny ribs, then was warmed in turn against Steve’s newer, bigger body. Did he still want things like that, deep down beneath his terror at being touched?

Steve kept himself occupied by ordering a few things online that Bucky might need, then tried sketching, reading, and watching TV. In the end, he turned to FRIDAY and Bucky’s files.

They were being decrypted in no particular order, but what they all had in common was the detail. Hydra may have gone rogue from the Nazi High Command all those years ago, but they had the same affinity from paperwork. Here were the debriefs from a mission to London in the 70s. Here were the original arm schematics from the 40s in turn followed by how they took away Bucky’s ability to eat solid food in the 90s. Every horror was pinned neatly to the page, a guide on how to make a soulless assassin out of James Buchanan Barnes.

But that wasn’t all. There were random injuries sometimes, things that hadn’t appeared in mission debriefs. Bruises on his neck, cigarette burns on his inner thigh. Steve was not a stupid man - no matter what he and Bucky said when they’d traded snipes - but he didn’t want to believe. In the end it was the grotesquely cheery note scribbled on the bottom of a medical report that shattered the illusion.

Take it easy on your girlfriend next time! I stitch up enough assholes on the clock as it is!

Steve’s tablet fell through his hands onto the floor and he barely noticed. He’d expected the beatings, but somehow he’d expected Hydra to refrain from this. That they had Bucky - beautiful, beautiful Bucky - who’d been tortured and conditioned to obey Hydra in all things… Why hadn’t turning him into a weapon been enough for them?

His hands were numb, his legs were numb. Everything was too bright and jagged, his breath coming in quick gasps. Somehow he was trying and failing to get off the sofa, falling on his ass with a single wobble and there was no Bucky to pick him up with a grin and a “steady on those pins, darling”. By the time Sam got there, Steve was half-curled up on the floor and shaking.

“Cap, you hear me? You’re having an anxiety attack. Cap, hey!”

“Sam?” Steve felt clammy with sweat. Sam’s hand on his back felt hotter than the sun.

“FRIDAY called me up.” Sam helped him up onto the sofa, stepping back to give him some air. “Want some water? Or some talk?”

“I was reading the files.”

“Jesus, Steve. Of all your bright ideas-”

“I had to Sam. It’s my fault.”

“No, no, don’t you-”

“It’s my fault, Sam!” Just like that all his weakness was replaced by the anger of a Brooklyn asthmatic with scraped knuckles. “All I had to do was catch him! He’s been looking out for me since I was five fucking years old and the one time he needed me, I couldn’t do it.”

“Steve.”

“I almost had him.” He couldn’t sustain the anger in the face of Sam. Not when the people he was angriest at were long in the ground. “Just one more second and I would have caught him.”
“And? You got a time machine hidden in your pocket, Rogers?” He squatted in front of Steve, hands dangling between his thighs. “Steve. I know what it’s like to play games like that. Believe me, I know.” Knocked Riley’s dumb ass right out of the sky. “But it’s not going to help. He’s got a whole headful of trauma, no matter what games you play with it, so he needs you to save it for your therapist and focus on helping him right now.”

Steve thought of Bucky surrounded by wires and tubes. The Asset does not speak unless required by mission parameters. Opening his mouth when he came back to himself like he was trying to speak.

“You’d have liked him,” he said to Sam and to the space between his feet. “Bucky, I mean.”

“Because he kept your dumb ass in line before I did?”

Steve snorted, trying not to feel guilty for laughing.

“He did. But he was funny and so damn clever. He was _stylish_.’” There were tears on his face. “You should’ve seen him dance, Sam.”

Sam’s hand on his shoulder was like Bucky’s.

“He’s got all of us now.”

“Then Hydra’s got no chance.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains spoilers for 'We Have Always Lived In The Castle' by Shirley Jackson. You should read it if you get the chance to. It's very good.

Sam told him not to overwhelm Bucky with too many things, and that made sense to Steve. Bucky had been living a barely-human life as the Winter Soldier. No chance Hydra would have allowed him possessions, not even the clothes on his back. Even now, the total sum of his possessions were three notebooks, an eclectic assortment of pens, a reusable water bottle, and a battered copy of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. All these things had little hints towards Bucky’s travels and Steve treasured them despite feeling guilty at subjecting Bucky’s things to a mandatory security check. The water bottle had writing on it in a cheerful shade of yellow advertising a food market in California. On the back of the paperback was a green price sticker - £2 marked down to £1.20. Pens from motels, banks, and tourist traps.

From his pile of Internet purchases, Steve chose the heated blanket first. He dithered over adding the books, but in the end, decided that Bucky needed *something* to do. The collection of Conan stories had gone unread because it had reminded him so much of Bucky’s pulp magazines and Steve hoped he’d like it now. *Death on the Nile* he chose for the exotic location rather than the murder.

Bucky was awake when he came down, carrying his gifts under his arm. He was tucked into bed with one of his notebooks open on his lap and full bags running into his arm and his nose. Now there was a tablet attached to the wall by a metal stand.

“Hi, Buck.”

He caught a glimpse of spidery writing on the page before Bucky set the notebook aside. Still no talking, but Bucky waved him a hello instead.

“How are you feeling?”

Bucky was still horribly gaunt but his eyes were shinier, more alive. Hopefully, he felt safer too, up here in the Tower. Bucky’s attention was drawn to the big plastic bag.

“I brought you something. You don’t have to accept it if you don’t want it, but it’s yours. If you want.” Steve wasn’t sure if this was offering Bucky a choice or confusing him, but he flashed him a smile. “No strings attached.”

He opened the bag and tugged a fold of material out. The colour he’d chosen was dark-blue, the colour of Bucky’s best going-out suit. More importantly, the thick fabric was soft and silky. Even without being plugged in it would keep Bucky warm. Soft and warm were not things that Hydra provided.

“You’ve got no fat on you. And I remember what that was like.” Once again, Bucky brought his thumb and forefinger together. “That’s right. Here.”

He offered the bag to Bucky, making sure both his hands were holding it on the opposite end. Safely
isolated from touch, Bucky’s hand dug into the blanket. Sometimes Steve could see the shadows of familiar mannerisms on Bucky’s face. A little twitch of an eyebrow, the infinitesimal lift of one corner of his mouth.

Bucky turned to the tablet, pulling it down into range. His fingers delicately tapped at the screen.

“It’s nice,” said the tablet in an inoffensive American accent. “I like it.”

Before, Bucky would have looked at Steve - down with a curl of his mouth, or up under his dark lashes - and said “You spoiling me, darling?” or “Ain’t I lucky?” or “Jesus, Rogers, where’ve you been hiding that?”. For now, Steve was happy to hear short sentences through the proxy of the tablet. It was a step in the right direction.

“It heats up when you plug it in. You want me to set it up?”

He could see how tense Bucky was when Steve carefully peeled off his blankets and replaced them with the new one, making sure he was covered. When he knelt on the floor to find a socket, Bucky pushed himself upwards on a trembling arm to watch him.

“All done. I’ve got some books for you too.”

But Bucky was rooting through his backpack and Steve found out that Bucky’s possessions also included two hundred and forty-six American dollars, sixty British pounds, and thirty-five Euro hidden in the lining.

“No, Buck, no. I don’t want your money.” Steve ignored Bucky’s outstretched hand, deliberately setting the books down on Bucky’s bed. “They’re gifts. Honestly, you keep it.” He might need the cash if he chose to leave afterwards, thought Steve to his dismay.

Bucky dumped his money back in his bag and his hand came out holding *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. As the paperback was thrust towards him, Steve opened his mouth to refuse. But on Bucky’s face was that frown, that perfect furrow between his eyebrows, that Steve had seen a hundred thousand times. Before, Bucky would have said “You stubborn asshole, didn’t your Ma teach you to accept some help once in a goddamn while?”.

“Okay.” He took the book, watching Bucky’s arm vanish under his new blanket. “But this is a loan, you hear me? I’m giving it back to you.”

All Bucky did was regard him with those grey eyes of his, the rest of him soaking up the warmth.

That night, Steve sat at the window, next to the beautiful view, and read the whole thing in one sitting. A poisoner and her sister lived in a grand solitary house. Only Merrikat braved the outside world to bring back food and library books. After traitors and fire and fearful, resentful locals, the house was a ruin. But the poisoner and her sister closed off the rooms they couldn’t use anymore and settled down to live together in what was left.

Steve wondered if Bucky had picked up this book because it was cheap or because he saw something in it. Was Bucky Merricat the killer? The precious Constance? Steve thought that Bucky might be the house itself, damaged parts of himself locked away.

The next day - after muddled dreams of Bucky burying coins in the earth with his mismatched hands - he brought another book and a soft jacket to wear over his shoulders. Bucky was sat up and hooked up again, already halfway through the fat volume of Conan stories. And there was a hole in the wall, just the right size for someone’s fist. He’d done it waking up from a nightmare, relayed Bucky through his tablet. At least he’d done it with his metal hand and hadn’t torn out anything in his other
The hole was still there on the third day and Bucky’s sheet of paper was covered in blocky Cyrillic letters. Natasha had also left a bottle of dry shampoo on top of Bucky’s read books.

On the fourth day, Bucky made his first request. He wanted socks.

The fifth day saw Bucky perform his first wobbly steps in those precious few hours unhooked.

And so they went through this peaceful routine until the seventh day when Steve came in and Bucky’s bed was empty. His blanket was folded down neatly, IV stands empty, his backpack gone.

Steve dropped his new delivery of clothes down into his usual chair and went back out. Dr Castillo’s office was just a few doors down. There were several cardboard boxes stacked against one wall. She was coming upstate with the rest of the Avengers and had already given up her lease. Currently, her unexpected charge kept her and her staff in the city, staying in one of the guest suites upstairs.

“Hello, Captain,” she said, looking up from her computer monitor.

“Hi, doctor. Could you tell me when Bucky’s going to be back?”

“Back?” she echoed. She got up, ponytail streaming behind her as she pushed past Steve. One look at the room and swore under her breath. Just as she’d been trained, she turned to the alarm button.

“Wait, doctor, wait, wait.” Steve caught her arm, trying not to squeeze too tightly. “FRIDAY!”

“Searching now, Cap.” She would say he’d gone, that he walked straight out of the lobby and out of Steve’s life. But the AI said, “One floor up, south-west corner.”

One minute later and Steve was looking at Bucky again, his chest feeling lighter. Bucky was sat in a corridor, half-hidden from the outside world by a gigantic potted plant. He had a book open on his lap, but what he was doing was watching New York.

“Hey, Buck.”

He sat down on the sun-warmed floor too. Bucky drew his legs back and they were trembling with the effort of getting up here. His hands were completely still though. Hydra had wanted steady hands at all times. That had been very clear in all those reports.

“Gave them all the slip, huh?”

He was - formerly - the deadliest ghost in the world. No wonder no one had noticed him leave. And no wonder he’d come up here. He looked at Bucky, leaning against the plant pot with his legs in the sunlight, and thought about the room he escaped. Bare white walls, the single window looking into the corridor. Stuck with his machines for sixteen hours a day.

“It must be boring in there.”

Bucky shrugged, nodding at the book in his lap. Bucky had always been good at waiting. If they had a treat planned for a Friday night, he’d count down the hours with a teasing smile. And the war had involved just as much waiting as it did fighting. But that didn’t mean that he had to spend his recovery stuck in a little white box.

“I mean,” said Steve, trying not to sound eager, trying not to scare Bucky off, “my place has windows. And a spare room. I just thought you’d like the company.”
Bucky appeared to be considering it, his book closed with his metal hand keeping his place. Steve pictured him solemnly leafing through books on his floor, never more than a room away. Would it be Merrikat and Constance at the end of the book or the beginning? It wouldn’t be two beds pushed together and covered with all the blankets they’d owned come wintertime. But maybe it didn’t have to be. If there were things that Bucky couldn’t remember then Steve would do it for him. He’d searched for Bucky almost single-mindedly like he was trying to claw back something of himself. Maybe he could claw more of Bucky back too.

Bucky nodded.

“You’d like to?” Steve’s hands grabbed at each other so he wouldn’t grab at Bucky. He could pretend that one set of long fingers might be someone else’s. “I mean, I’ll have to talk the doctors round, and Sam as well, but you know me.”

Bucky stretched his legs back out, one after the other. His toes were mere inches away from Steve’s leg. And the corners of his mouth were turned up just a little.

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Steve brought up the move to predictable results.

“That is a terrible idea,” said Sam, coffee mug suspended halfway to his mouth. “Like I hesitate to use the term emotional minefield, but that’s basically what you’d be walking into.” He took a look round and leant in close. “Think about it. No talking, no touching, no memories.”

“But he is remembering, Sam. I swear to God, he’s been filling up those notebooks so fast-”

“And what if he remembers his target last year was you? Sorry, Steve, but that’s a no.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea, Captain Rogers,” said Dr Castillo. “He’s still in a fragile state at the moment.”

“It’s just he’s in that room all by himself for the most part.” Bucky had been the charming one, able to get an extra piece of meat or a day-old loaf out of the shop girls with just a languid grin. Even when Steve got his new body, things like that just felt awkward on him. “And if he just wants nutrition, then it can all be set up on my floor.”

“But would you know what to do if the tube shifts? Or if he has another seizure?”

“Your notes said that was a one-off. Stress and malnutrition. The rest I can learn.”

But all she did was shake her head.

The next day, Steve stepped into his living room to find Bucky waiting on the sofa. His backpack and tablet were on the seat next to him, and there was sweat on his brow, but he was there.

“Good morning.” He didn’t bother to conceal his grin. They’d been a mismatched pair - blond and dark, tall and short - but equals in stubbornness. “You escaped again?”

Bucky nodded, then turned on his tablet.

“We lived together before?” As the tablet spoke, Bucky looked around the room.

“For a long time. Nothing like this.” Steve came round the sofa, the long way to keep in Bucky’s eye line. “None of our places had an elevator.”
“It’s open,” said Bucky’s tablet.

It was. The open-plan living room/kitchen had floor-to-ceiling windows and more space than Steve knew what to do with. His contribution to filling the gaps had been some prints and his record collection. Where had Bucky been staying? It wasn't like the Winter Soldier had a Social Security number or a bank account. From the way Bucky’s eyes darted around, Steve thought it hadn’t been anything so grand.

“It’s a lot of space, I know. But I promise everything here is secure. Tony did some upgrading after… a robot incident.”

“Ultron,” said Bucky’s tablet, pronunciation slightly mangled. “I saw it on TV.”

How much had the old instincts been a factor in Bucky’s return? So it hadn’t just been starvation that drove him to New York, but the need to drag Steve out of his latest fight.

“I’ll have to tell you the whole story one day.” Once Bucky’s nightmares weren’t so bad. “But look. The elevator and the emergency door have been reinforced. All the windows are high-impact ballistic glass.” Thank God for Tony, upgrading a building that would soon have no Avengers. “You could probably get through it with your arm in time, but anyone else needs an Iron Man suit. And the view isn’t bad either.”

Bucky took it all in, tapping his fingers against the edge of his tablet. His feet were bare and Steve made a note to get him some shoes. Then Bucky levered himself off the sofa. Steve put his hands out on seeing his first few trembling steps - touch issues or not - but slowly Bucky made his way to the window. Framed there, Steve could see that the weight was starting to creep back on. That he was coming back to life.

He came up beside him - but not too close - drinking in the way that Bucky put his fingertips to the glass. He didn’t want Sam to tell him ‘I told you so’ but when Bucky turned to him with those grey eyes it was like a punch to the face.

“Was I right?”

Bucky nodded.

Of course, even Bucky couldn’t escape notice forever. Sam came up in the elevator and he seemed unreasonably angry to find Steve and Bucky playing cards by the window.

“Really, man?”

“He came up by himself, Sam.”

“And you didn’t let the rest of us know because…”?

“What was the harm?”

Bucky laid down his hand - three jacks which beat Steve’s two pair - and started tapping away on the tablet again.

“Steve, I am going to give you a long talk about what harm could have happened at another time. For now, Barnes, let’s get you down to your room and-”

Bucky made a cutting-off gesture. Then when both the other men were looking his way, he pressed play on his tablet with the air of laying down an ace.
“Autonomy means you can make an informed decision,” said the expressionless voice and from the look on Sam’s face those were his own words being echoed back. “I made this decision.”

“If it helps, Sam, he used to do that to me all the time.”

Sam groaned, rubbing his face with his hands.

“How’d I get saddled with two of you? Barnes, can I assume you’re going to keep coming up here until you get your way?”

Bucky nodded.

“This is such a bad idea. And I want to go on record saying that this is a bad idea. But fine. You win. At least give us some time to set up, alright? You need to eat anyway.”

Bucky gathered his things. He’d left his backpack on the sofa, the furthest away he’d been from it the entire week. But before he left with Sam, he turned to Steve and fanned his hands out like cards.

“Sorry, Buck,” said Steve. “Straight beats three of a kind.”

Bucky frowned and took a step forward. Steve hurriedly shuffled all the cards together with an innocent smile.

“Such an asshole,” muttered Sam and Bucky nodded.

***

As if to prove that he could Bucky still appeared in Steve’s apartment for the next two days. On the third day, Steve spent the morning in meetings, but Bucky was there when he returned, watching people manhandle a bed into Steve’s spare room.

Steve had taken great pains over that room. He’d forgotten how many boxes he had in there, how much stuff from Washington he hadn’t bothered to unpack. But he’d hardly been here really, always on missions or on the hunt for Bucky. And upstate, the Avengers Compound was taking shape.

Some part of him thought that the right pillows, the comfiest duvet, the best selection of books would make Bucky stay. Another part of him knew that Bucky would come to his decision by himself, no matter what Steve did. It couldn’t be any other way.

Bucky had gotten a duffle bag from somewhere and he was packed ready when Steve came down to collect him. All of his things were in a neat line next to him on the bed. He had on sweat pants and a hoodie that Steve had got him, and a grey top of soft material that looked like Natasha’s work. Both sleeves were rolled up, the right over his cannula and the left one over his malfunctioning wrist. Tony had been in inquiries more and more lately. Hopefully, he’d escape soon and turn his mind to Bucky’s arm.

When Steve produced the wheelchair, Bucky’s nose wrinkled.

“Sorry, pal. I know you got up there all those other times, but this is standard procedure so they tell me. But hey, I think I can get a good turn of speed of this thing. If we race, we’re winning.”

In the end, Bucky got up and sat himself down in the chair. He was very quiet in his sneakers. No wonder he’d managed to sneak up all those times.

Being a gentleman, Steve took his duffle bag. It was heavy. Seemed like the only thing Bucky hadn’t
been accumulating was sleep. There were still shadows under his eyes, even if his face had started to fill out.

“Your room’s all ready,” said Steve as he manoeuvred Bucky into the elevator. “You’ll like it.”

***

Since Steve could be trusted, Bucky believed him when he said he’d like his room. And if even if he didn’t like his room, Steve would be nearby. Anytime he liked, he could look around and see Steve going about his business. He had grown comfortable in Steve’s living room enough to notice that Steve hadn’t been the one to decorate.

They abandoned the wheelchair just inside Steve’s apartment - their apartment? - and Bucky followed Steve into his room. His muscles started to ache almost instantly. All the sneaking around had taken its toll, but he wouldn’t admit that the wheelchair had been a good idea.

He’d watched the bed get moved in, the hospital-style one, but Steve had put on a different quilt and pillows. One wall was a window made of the same high-impact ballistic glass in the living room. Yesterday, when Steve was at an Ultron inquiry, Bucky had tested the living room window by slapping it with his metal hand. No damage to the glass and all his fingers had frozen in place for three seconds. Soon Steve’s friend, Stark, would fix his wrist. A big comfy armchair was by the window. There was a shelving unit with a whole shelf full of books and two empty ones for Bucky’s things. The walls were a pleasing shade of grey-blue.

Steve made a small gesture at the room like *how is it, Buck?* Bucky would have liked to open his mouth and say that it was nice, that he loved it, but even when he was alone, the words refused to come. Sam Wilson had said it would take time for his selective mutism to be managed. Out in the world, he’d been annoyed that he couldn’t reply in English, Russian, German, or any of his other languages. This was the first time he’d been sad about it.

He nodded at Steve and he did his happy-sad smile in return. Perhaps it was more happy than sad now that Bucky lived here. 70-30 by Bucky’s estimate.

“My room’s across the hall if you need anything in the night,” said Steve. “They’re bringing up your IVs in two hours, so you can get settled in here if you like. I was just going to watch some TV in the other room. You’re welcome to join me…”

Bucky nodded again. The smile was now at 80-20.

“It’s this British documentary about the sea. It’s really good.”

The corner of Steve’s L-shaped couch was piled up with pillows ready and Bucky settled in. With his heated blanket, his tablet, and his latest notebook, he felt… good. Contented.

On Steve’s television, a tiny metal submersible like a cryotube descended into the deep ocean. A voice-over told them about the pressure and the cold working on the machine, then told them about the life found even here in the dark. Translucent jellyfish, tiny mantis shrimp, sharks feasting on the body of a whale were revealed in the light, and they all reappeared on the pages of Steve’s sketchbook. It was almost like magic.

The Asset had been activated to deal with only one sorcerer in seventy years - an old man who hung finger bones in his windows and around his wrists. None of his charms had saved him from a clean shot from two hundred metres away. Steve’s magic was benign but fascinating. Look away for a few minutes and lines and shapes became a flapjack octopus or a humpback whale. And it was so
peaceful that Bucky couldn’t stop himself falling asleep.

He dreamt of an underground Hydra base where sunlight never reached. His flesh was frog-pale under the fluorescent lights except where blood had dried on his hands. Maintenance was a series of orders for the Asset to obey without question. Open mouth, close mouth, lift one arm then the other, bend over, don’t make a noise.

But before his thighs were pulled apart hard enough to bruise, the dream was shattered by a cheerful tune. He thrashed upwards, half-tangled in his blanket.

“Sorry, Buck.” That was Steve. Steve was there and he was holding out his phone, the source of the noise. It was silenced with a swipe of his finger. “But it looked like you were having a nightmare.”

The ghost of rough hands on his thighs and shoulders made Bucky shudder. But he thanked Steve and watched his 20-80 happy-sad smile spread across his face. This - the waking and sometimes the smiles - was an unexpected benefit to living here.

An hour of sleep at his current level of activity would be enough to sustain him until morning. Steve helped him wheel his IV stand into his room and then - with a good-night from Bucky and his tablet - retired across the hall. Sat on his bed, Bucky thought about Steve’s hand moving the pencil across the page and the sheer pressure of ocean water where the sun never reached. It was four in the morning when he heard a noise.

He slid off the bed. His legs were steady for now and Steve’s room was close. He didn’t even need to turn the lights on: he was good at seeing in the dark, even with only a little light coming in.

Steve’s room was larger than his but had little furniture. It was dominated by a large bed and apart from that, there was a bedside table, framed pictures on the wall, and a pile of cardboard boxes in the corner. In the bed, Steve was curled in on himself, both hands clenched into fists. His eyes moved behind the closed lids. A nightmare.

His tablet had an alarm function as a way of calling for attention. Bucky leant his body against the wall, put the tablet in the crook of his metal arm. The shield was hanging on the wall facing the bed - an impractical distance, but to Bucky’s advantage.

Steve came awake and shot upwards in one fluid motion. Even braced for it, Bucky still flinched, nearly putting himself through the wall. But Steve’s mind was not the tangled, half scabbed-over mess that Bucky’s was. He knew who he was from the moment he woke up.

“Bucky?”

Bucky waved an acknowledgement. He juggled his tablet into position so that he could type with his right hand.

“Bad dream.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Bucky waved it off. His legs were starting to complain again. His back joined in, the weight of his metal arm dragging him over on one side. It had been satisfying to give the doctors the slip, but he was paying for it now.

“You want to sit down, Buck?”

Steve pulled his legs up, leaving a space. If Bucky sat there, Steve could just put his legs out and
touch him. But he wouldn’t do that. A huff of breath escaped him as he lowered himself onto Steve’s bed. In the corner of his eye, he could see Steve chase after the noise.

“Did I wake you up?”

Bucky shook his head. The pictures on the wall were of people - Steve, the other Avengers, Howling Commandos, Peggy Carter. Bucky was there too, the old Bucky. The Bucky of now would rather stare at his feet than meet that gaze.

“Did it help? Me waking you up earlier?” At Bucky’s nod, Steve went on. “I can keep doing it if you like.”

That would be nice. Maybe sleep would come easier now that Steve was here to stop the bad dreams before they reached the inevitable bloody conclusion. And when Steve went to bed at night, Bucky could do the same for him.

“Okay,” said Steve, when Bucky nodded again, “I can do that.”

He checked the clock on his bedside table. There was another picture there with the clock, a still from black-and-white newsreel footage. When Steve woke up in the morning, the first thing he’d see would be Captain Steven Rogers and Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes smiling and laughing together.

“Might as well get up now.” He stretched. Bucky seemed to remember Steve sleeping naked or in too-large pyjamas. He wore a t-shirt and long pants now, like the ones Bucky had been given. “Want something to drink? A coffee or something?”

Bucky tried to copy Sergeant Barnes’ smile, but it felt wrong on his face. It didn’t fit. Even then, Steve helped him through into the kitchen, IV stand and all.
Chapter 4

Tony was good with people, or at least he could talk at people for long enough that he got his way most of the time. So he wasn’t concerned with Ultron committees and hearings, especially when he had very expensive lawyers. But they did take time away from his true calling. Give him a mechanical puzzle to get his teeth into and he was a happy, happy man. With Pepper out of town and the spectre of Ultron gone (for now), he could finally look over the scans.

Barnes’ arm, compared to some of the other artificial limbs on the market, was elegant simplicity. Made sense to him. From what the files said, the Winter Soldier got deployed to some nasty places. Extreme heat and moisture in Vietnamese jungles, extreme cold in Siberia. And let’s not forget cryo.

He could see the problem in the wrist, a support rod knocked out of alignment by a dented plate, causing a short and tangling up the innards. Give it a couple more weeks and Cap’s old war buddy was looking at a full replacement from the wrist down.

“Hey, FRIDAY, what’s Barnes’ latest weigh-in?”

“One hundred and thirty-nine pounds, including the arm, boss. Currently, it is not recommended that he receive anaesthesia.”

“And I am not fighting him off while trying to fix it.” Tony tapped the table. At least the rest of the arm looked in good shape considering. “Hmm, now that isn’t part of the original design.”

The holo display zoomed in on a section just above the elbow. There was a round ball that was a different density to the rest of the arm but wired into the structure.


Tony did not like the sound of ‘explosive device’. That would push up Barnes’ nap on the timeline.

“So he got out?”

“He vanished while on a surveillance mission in London, July 1990, and was found in Brooklyn six months later.”

“Should’ve headed north if he wanted to find our Capcicle.” Tony looked at that innocuous little ball lurking under Barnes’ metal skin. “Nasty stuff. Go missing again and boom! No more metal arm for you. And then he starves to death because he can’t eat food either. Really did not want a repeat of that vanishing act. Didn’t use it last year though.”

“The code was only given to certain high-ranking Hydra officials, boss. After Washington, there was likely no one left.”

“Either way it’s going to have to come out. Not a conversation I’m looking forward to, but I can get Cap on my side for sure.” Tony took a sip of coffee and then made a face when he realised it had gone cold. “Hey, FRIDAY, bring up the first mission they sent him on afterwards. Let’s see if we can track down any code-holders for Steve to take it all out on.”

Ten seconds passed. Then twenty. Then thirty. Tony sipped his cold coffee again.

“FRIDAY? You need a reboot?”
“No, boss.”

“Then what’s keeping those files?”

“Boss, I really think you should be sitting down for this.”

“FRIDAY, I read their entire book on how to put metal arms on captured PoWs. There can’t be much worse.”

The files appeared. At the head of the report in neat letters was the date: December 16, 1991.

***

Sam stepped out of the elevator into the Rogers-Barnes den of cosy domesticity. Steve was reading on one end of the sofa and Barnes was asleep on the other. His blanket was pulled over his mouth, NG tube clamped, but IV in play.

“Hey, Sam,” said Steve, all quiet so as not to wake Barnes. He marked his place in his book. “How’re things? You want a coffee?”

“If it’s going. Thanks.”

“Coming up.” Steve put his book down - Love in the Time of Cholera, Rogers? That’s tempting fate - and went round to the kitchen. Sam didn’t miss that little check he did on Barnes before he let him out of his sight.

“He sleeping any better?” Barnes looked deeply asleep for the moment, so Sam turned his back and sat at the kitchen island. He put the file he brought up at his elbow.

“Twice a day. We’re up to an hour and a half at a time.”

Sam also didn’t miss that we in there. Every time they’d missed Barnes usually by weeks, sometimes by hours, Steve would spend some time looking at the file Natasha had gotten him. Sam should’ve guessed what they had been to each other by the way Steve stared at the photos - the one of Barnes in cryofreeze and the one of him in uniform. But he’d reexamine his personal biases on his own time.

“And how are you doing, Cap?” he asked pointedly.

“Good. To be honest I think I needed the company too. I like having him back.”

“You remember our conversation though, right?” Sam took the mug from Steve, putting it down on a coaster because he wasn’t an animal. “About what he is and isn’t ready for?”

“I know. But he was my friend before and he still is.”

Sam had conceded defeat on Barnes moving in. He’d seen the stubborn set of Barnes’ jaw - he’d seen Steve in Barnes’ face - and knew he couldn’t win that battle. And he believed Steve when he said that this was the action of a friend. Well, he believed Steve believed that. But put two people with that sort of history together and sometimes the intentions didn’t matter.

“Just be careful.”

“Believe me, Sam, the last thing in the world I want to do is hurt him.”

Steve shoved a plate of cookies over between them, snagging one for himself. Food issues 101: normalising the act of eating, cooking, and just having food around. This morning Steve had sent
Sam a photo of these same cookies fresh out the oven, Barnes holding the cooling rack obligingly but puzzled.

“What’s in the file?”

“Nothing for you.” Sam put a protective hand over it. “This is for Barnes.”

Steve threw a worried look at it. Given the sheer amount of shit on those SD cards, Steve was probably right to be suspicious of files.

“I’ve put together some options for communication in case he doesn’t feel like toting a tablet around for the foreseeable future. If no one else sees them, then there’s no pressure on him to pick one option over the others.”

The line of tension across Steve’s shoulders evened out.

“That makes sense.” Steve looked back at the sofa where Barnes was still sleeping. “Thank you, Sam. I know you’ve put in a lot of work for him.”

“And for you.” Sam took a cookie. “What can I say? I pick up stray super-soldiers.”

The cookie was really good. Before, Steve’s cooking had always been about quantity first and foremost.

“Sorry, Sam, I got to get this.”

Sam hadn’t heard a thing, but when he looked over, Barnes was shivering even under his heated blanket. If anyone but Steve had tried waking him up hovering over him with a phone they’d have ended on their ass at best. Sam had seen the holes in the wall downstairs. All that happened was Barnes took several gasping breaths, curling in on himself.

“You okay, Buck?” Nod. “That was pretty good, you got an hour and twenty this time. You want some water?” Nod. “Sam’s here.”

If they had found Barnes sometime in the past year, Sam thought he would have guessed Steve’s feelings. He was giving Barnes his space, but he could tell Steve wanted to leap in close. Sam tried to tell Steve telepathically to rein in it.

“Hey, Barnes.”

Barnes pushed his hair out of his eyes and looked over at Sam. Then he waved. His face was starting to fill out, starting to look more like the kid in Steve’s photos. Emotional minefield thy name is Barnes.

He followed Steve into the kitchen, silent beneath the rattle and squeak of his IV stand. To Sam’s surprise, he clambered onto a stool on the opposite end of the island and sat there watching Sam.

“Good sleep?” Barnes shrugged one shoulder - the real one. “I got some stuff for you to take a look at when you got time. No pressure.” He held up the file, watched Barnes measure it up and categorise it as not a threat, before pushing it down the island to him. “It’s just a few ideas about how we can make communication easier for you.”

Steve put a glass of water down in front of Barnes. He didn’t react. He was fixated on the plain blue cover. Okay, this is the sort of thing Sam could deal with.
“There’s no wrong answer. You can even try them out and find the best fit before settling on one. If you don’t like it, we can stop. Medicine by consent.”

Barnes straightened both his shoulders and pulled the file toward him. Behind him, Steve was smiling like no one ever saw Captain America smile. He had it so bad.

Super soldiers had better hearing than mere mortals like Sam so they looked up first.

“Tony’s off somewhere,” said Steve.

Taking his cue from Steve, Barnes turned back to his reading. Now Sam could hear the Iron Man suit too. He was about to open his mouth and say something about how Tony was going to buzz Steve’s apartment again. But then the window exploded inwards.

Sam had reflexes, the kind that made some people panic at plastic bags in the road and fireworks on the Fourth of July. He threw himself behind the kitchen island, fetching up next to Barnes. Not Steve though. That dumbass.

“Stay here!” he yelled over the wind.

Barnes’ face was too calm. His pale eyes had as much emotion as his metal arm. Slowly and unhurriedly, he tore the cannula from his arm.

***

Steve narrowed his eyes against the wind suddenly stirring up his apartment. Tony floated in the middle of the room, carpet and sofa smouldering. The mask turned towards him, blanker than the Winter Soldier’s face had ever been.

“Tony, what the hell?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sam peering over the kitchen island. Bucky was nowhere to be seen: hopefully, he was keeping his head down and not…

“Did you know, Cap?” said Tony. His external speakers were turned up against the moan of the wind. It wasn’t the electronics that made Tony’s voice flat.

“I don’t-”

“I’m talking about your old war buddy there and how he killed my fucking parents!”

Steve was suddenly back in Jersey listening to the whirring of computer banks where Arnim Zola had existed. Accidents will happen.

“I knew Hydra ordered it, Tony, but I didn’t know it was him. I suspected, but I couldn’t know.”

“And you brought him in- Stay there!”

Bucky had risen from behind the island, Sam beside him. The corridor leading to the bedrooms and the emergency exit was just over ten feet away, but the Iron Man suit was fast.

“It wasn’t him,” said Steve, drawing Tony’s attention. “Hydra had control of his mind. You saw the files, what they did to him. Do you think he had a choice?”

For a moment Steve thought he’d gotten through, but then Tony lifted his arm and said,
“I don’t care. He killed my mom.”

Steve lunged forward and knocked Tony’s arm up. Fast enough that the repulsor blast took down the kitchen light instead of taking off Bucky’s head. He shoved hard, wrapping his other arm around Tony’s neck. Using his weight to throw off the suit.

“Get him out of here, Sam!”

Tony compensated for the extra weight and rammed Steve into the floor. It was a hard landing. But even winded, Steve had enough sense left to cling on and pull. It knocked Tony off course a little. Enough for Steve to throw him. Enough for Sam and Bucky to get a few more floors down.

Steve’s shield was hanging on the wall of his bedroom, his uniform and other equipment with the Quinjet. He bloodied his knuckles on Tony’s chest plate, grappled him down on the floor and in the air. But then Tony got him with the chest blaster and Steve slammed painfully against the wall.

“By the time you wake up, Cap,” said Tony, floating above him, “it’ll all be over.”

He lifted his arm, repulsor gleaming, and then something crashed into him in a blur of red, white, and blue. Bucky swung the shield two-handed, smashing the rim into Tony’s helmet, sending him back through the air. He didn’t let up, flowing forward, metal hand digging for the arc reactor. Tony brought his arm down on Bucky’s, metal crunching, Bucky yelping in pain. He managed to bring the shield up to block Tony’s second blast. He was thrown back but was up into a crouch immediately, shield held up between the two of them and Tony.

Bucky’s sides were heaving and Steve knew why. The serum required so much fuel, but even if energy reserves were low it could provide a short-term boost. Bucky didn’t have the fat reserves to burn through for more than a few minutes. Already the arm holding the shield was trembling. The metal arm hung limp at his side.

“Tony.” he said to the blank mask hovering above them. “Tony, please. I know you’re hurting, but this wasn’t him. Howard was our friend. They pointed him at your parents like a gun.” Was that the hum of repulsors building up? “Tony! Please. Please, don’t hurt him.” Bucky’s breath was labouring, the rest of him trembling as well. But he didn’t look at Steve, because he trusted him to be at his back, on his six. “Please. I lost Bucky twice already. I’ll leave with him, you’ll never have to see either of us again if you don’t want to. Please I- I love him. I’ve loved him since I was a kid. He’s my Pepper. Tony. Goddamn it, Tony, he can’t even hold the shield up! Just look at him!”

The edge of the shield hit the carpet with a soft clunk. Bucky heaved the shield and himself back into position but lost it again. When Steve bent down and put his hand on the rim, Bucky let him take it. Steve’s last look at Bucky was at the blood flowing down his arm and his feverish eyes, and he loved every brave and beautiful inch of him.

“Tony.” Steve took the final step forward, his body Bucky’s shield. “It wasn’t him.”

The only sounds were the hum of the wind and the harsh pants of Bucky’s breath. Then Tony screamed - there was no other word for that outpouring of rage and grief - and he threw himself into the New York skyline.

Steve let out the breath he was holding. Bucky would need the first aid kit. His arm was bleeding where the cannula used to be. His feet too, his feet were bleeding from the broken glass. He’d run out here in his bare feet. God, Steve loved him.

“Hey, Bucky,” he said, setting the shield aside. “I’m going to get you a bandage and-”
Bucky’s hand shot out and fisted the material of Steve’s shirt. He dragged himself to his feet, inch by
 torturous inch, metal arm swinging limply beside him. The whites of his eyes were visible all the way
 around the iris.

“Steve?” His voice was barely audible, but that was his name from Bucky’s lips. The sweetest sound
 in the whole world. “Steve!”

“I’m okay, Bucky.” There was suddenly a lump in his throat. More than anything, he wanted to hold
 Bucky’s hand. He’d go back to being small and skinny for that. “I had him on the ropes.”

Bucky rocked back on his heels, turning it into a few staggering steps. When he let go of Steve’s
 shirt, he left a bloody stain behind. In his face, instead of recognition, there was only confusion just
 like on the highway. Just like who the hell is Bucky?

With one high whine, Bucky crumpled into a

ball and Steve followed him.

God bless Sam, who’d given him a thorough briefing on things like panic attacks and safe spaces
 before Bucky moved up here. Even forewarned and forearmed like that, Bucky’s pain filled the
 entire room.

“Steve.” Broken glass crunched beneath Sam’s shoes. “Look at me, Cap.”

There was a cut on Sam’s cheek. A piece of glass must have got him. If Tony had attacked him it
 would have been much worse.

“Steve, I need you to go pack two bags. One for you, one for your boy. I’ll take care of him, but we
 need to get the two of you out of here ASAP. Okay?”

“Two bags, I got it.”

“Just clothes and what you can carry. Leave the medical stuff for now.” He slapped Steve on the
 shoulder and knelt next to Bucky. “Hey, Barnes. Focus on my voice.”

Clear, concise orders were bringing Steve back from his unmoored state. That and the fact he was
 leaving Bucky in the best of hands.

He was no expert, but he thought Bucky’s tablet was beyond repair. The whole thing was
 spiderwebbed with cracks and the rest of the screen bubbled up. So he left it behind and went to his
 room. First, he changed into what he thought of as his invisible clothes - an anonymous hoodie, shirt,
 and jeans. His arms were covered in bruises he had no time to feel right now. Some spare clothes and
 the bag the shield came in and that was it for him. For Bucky, he did the same and took his backpack
 as well. How were they going to handle food? Bucky had gingerly tried some yoghurt yesterday and
 couldn’t even get the spoon in his mouth. But he focused on his work and came out with both bags
 over one arm.

Bucky was sat in the kitchen, where just five minutes ago he and Sam and been having coffee and
 cookies. Bloody footprints led up there and Sam was wrapping a bandage around his right arm as
 best he could without touching him. His blanket was wrapped around his shoulders.

Sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart. “...Buck. Are you okay?”

Even though it had only been a minute, his efforts seemed to have taken all his hard-fought strength
 and brought him right back to the beginning. There was a sheen of sweat on his pale face. Blood
 dripped from his feet. The serum’s accelerated healing would heal that and push the glass out too, but
 that ate up even more calories.
Bucky didn’t nod or shake his head, and he definitely didn’t open his mouth and say Steve’s name. He just sat there, bleeding onto the kitchen floor. He said nothing when his feet got wrapped up, nothing when he got into the wheelchair, and nothing when he climbed into the back of Sam’s car.

On the cameras, in Istanbul, Bucky had shivered and dry-heaved his way through a panic attack. Back in the war, after a hard mission, or when bad memories stained his sleep, he’d go all quiet like this. Steve had wondered if the quiet times had happened in Bucky’s year away as well.

“It’s going to be okay, Buck,” he said. “I promise.”

When he passed him his backpack, Bucky gripped it like a lifeline.

Sam had been on his phone since they stepped into the elevator and now he hung up.

“I got you a place to lie low. You drive, I’ll keep an eye on Barnes.”

Sam gave him directions as the New York traffic crawled along. This was why no one drove in New York. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel. He wanted to climb into the back seat and curl his body around Bucky. He wanted to go after Tony with his shield- Except he didn’t, he wanted to go after whoever had set Bucky upon Howard and his wife.

“How do you get an apartment these days?”

“Steve-”

“I mean, Bucky’s technically still dead in the eyes of the law and I don’t think Tony’s lawyers will fix it for him now. But my money’s still good. We could go upstate somewhere if it’s close to a hospital for Bucky. Doesn’t even have to be this state. Maybe Maine or Massachusetts. California even, but not Jersey, definitely not-”

“Steve, please don’t freak out when you’re driving my car, okay? It’s not like you’re suddenly not an Avenger.” But he didn’t sound confident.

In the rearview mirror, Bucky was still listlessly staring at nothing.

“He said my name.”

“Barnes?”

“Yeah. Twice. Just before the panic attack. He wasn’t…”

“Disassociated.”

“That’s a good sign, right? That he did that.”

“It’s a step forward, Steve.”

***

There was no time for a proper nightmare, just a swirl of half-remembered ghosts before Bucky opened his eyes to an unfamiliar room in an unfamiliar building. He remained perfectly still, breathing evenly like he was still sleeping. He was clutching his backpack and the heated blanket that Steve gave him tightly to his chest. There was a comforter over him and underneath him. And Steve was talking. He lifted his cheek off the blanket, which took energy enough.

Steve had a black eye - *what a shiner, Rogers* - and bruises on his arm. For one awful, yawning
moment, Bucky thought he'd done it, that he'd tried to kill Steve like on the Insight Carrier. But no, it hadn't been him. It was wrong to feel so relieved that Stark did it instead and as if in punishment for those thoughts, Bucky's body came alive with pain. Damage to the left forearm and a wound on the right, lacerated feet, an arc of bruises across his chest where the rim of the shield had been pushed into him. Fatigue made his head dull - he'd pushed his unrecovered body into combat without thinking. But pain and fatigue were old friends. It was nothing to suffer them to save Steve.

“Welcome back, Buck.” Steve came over and knelt by the bed. His hands he kept visible on the edge of the mattress, but it was fine if they dropped out of Bucky’s eye line. It was Steve. “You know where we are?”

It was a hotel room in New York. Under perfect conditions, Bucky would have liked to be out of the city by now, but staying close when your enemy did not expect it could also work. Bucky nodded, wincing as pain woke up across his neck and head.

“For now, how about one tap for yes, two taps for no?”

Steve demonstrated with his index finger and Bucky copied him.

“We got ahold of Natasha. She’s going to bring you your food from the Tower, but you used a lot of energy back there. Sleeping’s going to help a little, but if you don’t get something inside you soon you’re going to crash in a bad way.”

Bucky tapped his finger once. Yes, he could feel it in the fluttery feeling in his chest.

“You can drink water just fine, so Sam’s gone to get some soup to water down for you and there’s Coke in the fridge too. Better than nothing if you want to try.”

One tap.

“Let’s sit you up.”

Bucky dragged himself up into the embrace of the pillow pile Steve had made. Another one went under his disabled arm. The thought of Steve’s hands on his body made his skin crawl, but he wished it didn’t. He remembered: it was warm in the space under Steve’s arm and against his ribs.

From his new position, he could see Steve go to the little fridge and pick out a red can. The white writing on it said ‘Coca-Cola’ in flowing, familiar letters.

“I think it tastes different now,” said Steve. He opened the can with a hiss and poured a finger of brown liquid into a glass. It wouldn’t be poisoned because it was Steve. So Bucky took the glass and took a cautious sip.

It was sweet and close enough to water that he didn’t gag. He drained it. Did it taste different? His tongue swept over his lips. Yes, he thought. It should-

-have the smell of gunpowder in his nose warm wind blowing his hair oppressive heat of Brooklyn in summer tasting Coca-Cola on Steve’s lips and in his mouth his thin wrist in his hand saying be my fella I’ll take care of you.

The glass fell from his nerveless fingers.

“What’s the matter?” said Steve. “Bucky?”

Tears were running down his face and suddenly his breaths were huge, gulping sobs. How can he
explain without words or touch? He’d remembered their first kiss, but it had been like watching actors on a movie screen, something removed that happened to someone else. But now it was like he was there! He had been there! In 1930, Steve had kissed him back and said I don’t need you to take care of me, but sure I’ll be your fella.

And it had been taken away from him.

The mattress dipped next to him, but Bucky didn’t dare lift his head from the barrier of his one working arm. Tears started rolling off his chin. It hurt his ribs and chest to cry. Was crying always like this?

“It’s okay, Bucky,” said Steve on his left-hand side. “You cry as much as you need too. It’s okay. It’s okay.”
Chapter 5

Bucky’s crying fit lasted for three minutes before stopping just as quickly as it started. He put his one arm down, gasping for air, his face wet. Steve’s questions were met with helpless shrugs, and he felt lucky that Bucky finished the whole can in small increments. It took some time between Bucky’s deep, steadying breaths, but it was another hundred or so calories in the bank. And when Bucky fell asleep afterwards, his face was turned towards Steve. In that small slice between pillow and blanket, he could see damp eyelashes and Bucky’s slack mouth. He didn’t dare get off the bed and lose that view.

When the knock came at the door, Bucky woke. Though his eyes were red and tired, they fixed on Steve and he smiled. When Steve’s heart restarted, he smiled back.

“Hi, Buck.”

The knocking came again and it was awful watching the smile drain quickly away, replaced with watchfulness. When Steve got up, he pointed at the shield, leaning up against the wall. To reassure him, Steve took it with him and peered through the peephole.

“That’s one hell of a black eye,” said Natasha when he let her and Sam in. He let Natasha push his head to one side to examine it. Her fingernails were impeccably painted. Did she know what Bucky was to him? He didn’t think she’d known before considering the number of girls she’d tried to set him up with. Had Sam told her?

“I could teach you how to cover that up if you like,” she said. She let him go, adjusting the strap of her bag. “The right foundation can do wonders.”

“It’ll be gone in a few days, but thanks, Nat.”

She was dressed like someone heading to the gym, like one of the young women they showed in adverts and on whatever Instagram was. No one would have found her black gym bag suspicious unless they opened it. Inside was the Captain America suit, rolled tightly into a tube, two big IV bags, and twenty-four fat syringes.

“Anything happen?” said Sam.

“He finished the whole can, but he’ll need something soon.”

He could feel Bucky’s eyes on him. One very large secret aside, he didn’t like lying to Sam, but that crying fit had felt private. Surely it was better to let Bucky work through it and bring it to Sam afterwards. Besides that smile afterwards…

“Tony’s in Miami,” said Natasha. “I managed to get hold of Pepper. She’s at a conference there.” She was pulling everything out of the minifridge, making a pile of candy and miniature bottles of liquor. “Sam brought me up to speed on what happened.”

“It wasn’t Bucky.”

Bucky shifted underneath his blankets. He looked down at his right hand like there was blood on it.

“I mean it, Buck. You wouldn’t have done it if Hydra hadn’t made you.”

“It looks a lot different from the other side, Rogers,” said Natasha. She closed the fridge, one IV bag
dangling from her hand, and changed the subject. “The rest of this is in a safe place, this is what I thought would fit here.”

“One bag every twenty-four hours, one syringe every two hours. Those are for the tube in his nose, but you gotta test it. Remember how?”

“I remember.”

Sam nodded then moved on to Bucky. Bucky solemnly stared back.

“I’m sorry to say it, Barnes, but we’re going to have to put another cannula in.”

Bucky broke eye contact, his body drawing in on itself. Only his metal arm remained static, resting on the pillow. Where Tony had hit it, just above the elbow, all the plates were buckled. There was no movement below that point.

“I know being touched is up there for you, Barnes. I respect that. I’ve seen it a lot. But it’s really important to get this food in you, and I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t.” Bucky stared at the bedside table. “Barnes, we’ll try and do this with as little trauma as we can. I can put it in, or we can wait for Dr Castillo to come down. She did your last one while you were out of it.”

Bucky’s hand emerged and smoothed over the plates of his forearm. There was a dull clicking but none of them moved. He tapped a fingernail twice on the metal.

“That means ‘no’,” Steve dutifully translated.

He could hold Bucky down if he had to. Bucky had managed a burst against Tony, but one Coke wasn’t enough to get him back there. But he didn’t want to do that. If Bucky even let him touch him, he wanted it to be gentle. Loving. If he wanted that again.

“Okay,” said Sam, “how about Steve? I can give him a crash course-”

Two taps again, then Bucky tapped himself in the chest.

“You want to do it yourself? You’ve only got the one working arm.”

Bucky unfolded himself slowly from the blanket, thin limbs emerging. Then he reached down and started to roll up the leg of his sweatpants.

“You’ve done that before, Barnes? In the leg?”

Bucky tapped once against the pale skin of his calf. He did it himself, only allowing Steve to help him with the tourniquet. Who had taught Bucky this? Were Hydra doctors too lazy to hook him up? Steve considered it lucky that they hadn’t let him starve.

“Good work, Barnes,” said Sam, hands visible and empty. “You still with us?”

One tap in answer, no Winter Soldier emerging to talk with Bucky’s voice.

“Let’s get you hooked up. You feel anything different or weird, you get Steve to ring me, okay?”

“You’re leaving?”

Sam nodded, hooking the IV bag onto the light fixture on the ceiling.

“Someone’s got to make sure Barnes gets his medical care. You gonna be okay?”
“I’ll set alarms for the syringes and cat-nap my way through. It’ll be fine.”

“Not what I meant, Rogers. Yeah, Barnes?”

Bucky had scribbled something down in his notebook and held it open to Sam. From Bucky’s left-hand side, Steve couldn’t see what he’d written, but Sam smiled.

“Bucky it is. See you later, man.”

Natasha hugged him and whispered “good luck” into Steve’s ear. Then he was alone with Bucky.

“Well and me now,” said Steve, door safely locked. It wouldn’t stop Tony or Rhodey, but Bucky seemed to relax a little. “Unclamp your tube for me—” He bit off the word sweetheart before it could escape. At least there was the careful aspirating of fluid and the pH paper to distract him.

As he was feeding the liquid food into Bucky’s NG tube, Bucky prodded him lightly with his notebook. What he’d written to Sam was ‘my name is Bucky please’ and underneath was another sentence.

I’m sorry you lost your home.

“It was just things, Buck.”

Are you hurt?

“Nothing that won’t heal, thanks to you, Buck. You’re still always saving me.”

The notebook closed, presumably because Bucky had no further questions. He meditatively watched Steve, and what he was thinking was a mystery.

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It felt like a memory, but Steve was prepared to swear as an artist that none of their places had had that quality of golden light. Maybe it was because Steve was looking at Bucky, who’d always had a glow about him. Bucky was sitting up with his feet on the card table, the one that needed folded card under two of the legs to stop wobbling. One of Steve’s shirts was in his lap and he was sewing a button back on. That was the entire dream. Just Bucky sewing away and humming to himself. There was a flash of metal and it might have been a needle or a metal hand.

When he opened his eyes, he was briefly out of place and time. He could see the plain hotel ceiling above him and also still hear Bucky’s humming. Across the room on the other bed, Bucky was leafing through Steve’s sketchbook and he was humming something that could have been Moonglow. Just two NG feeds ago, Bucky had been sobbing his heart out. Now he looked contented, even with his arm and leg propped up on pillows. The lamplight caught Bucky’s eyelashes and the hollows of his cheeks and another of those heart-stopping smiles. Only the smallest noise escaped Steve, but the humming stopped like someone pressed a switch.

Steve opened his mouth to apologise, but Bucky cut him off by running his fingers down his cheek. Steve’s face was wet and he scrubbed at it with his sleeve.

Bad dream? said Bucky’s notebook when he held it up.

“No. A good one.” Bucky frowned. “Honestly, Buck. Don’t worry about it.”

Bucky closed the sketchbook, working his jaw like he had something to say. Whatever it was, it was
lost when Steve’s phone buzzed.

“Hey, I still have my good timing. Let’s get you something to eat.”

He was used to the routine by now. By the time he’d got the next syringe out of the fridge, Bucky had unclamped the tube ready. Eventually, Bucky would have to see a dietician about moving onto solid food. A therapist. An engineer for his arm. Someone to stay with him while Steve was doing Avengers work… if he was still allowed to. He’d spent some time staring at his phone, wondering if he should call Tony. Perhaps he’d draft a letter later and it hurt to think of Tony teasing him for being old.

Bucky tapped three times on his metal arm to get his attention.

“You okay?”

Bucky opened Steve’s sketchbook again and found a sketch he’d done of Bucky, the present-day one. He’d been propped up on pillows engrossed in his book, and Steve hadn’t been able to resist drawing him. He’d drawn the NG tube and the one in his arm too, shaded in the hollows of his cheek.

Carefully Bucky wrote a question in his notebook.

Am I the same as the old Bucky?

“No,” said Steve. “But neither of us are the same, except where it’s important. You came back for me with nothing but the shield. Not even shoes. That’s the Bucky Barnes I know.”

His voice broke just a little on the last word, so Steve shut up. If he went on, he knew that he’d say things he shouldn’t like how Bucky waking up and smiling at him was the closest to home he’d felt since Tony burst through his window. Maybe even since he woke up in 2011 or since he’d pressed a last kiss to Bucky’s cold cheek in the Alps. In the future, he had Sam and Nat, Thor, Clint, Bruce, and Tony too. But it had been Bucky that he wanted, that he missed like an amputated limb.

Bucky studied him, rolling his pen over his knuckles one way and then the other. Then he bent down to put pen to paper. Do you he wrote before he stopped. He stared at the blank page, pen tap, tap, tapping.

Steve kept his hands steady on the syringe. No matter what the next words were, the world would still turn and Bucky still had to be fed every two hours.

Do you love him? Then Bucky hesitated and crossed out the last word. Do you love him? me?

There was an answer bubbling ready in Steve’s throat, but it was so soon. Bucky wasn’t ready for romance, any idiot could see that. But…

Bucky had leapt into the fight without a moment’s hesitation.

Bucky had broken out of a secure medical area to come see Steve.

Bucky had woken up and smiled at Steve like he used to. Like Steve was the only other person in the world.

In front of Steve were two choices. The easy truth or the difficult lie. He knew which one he wanted, but what would be better for Bucky?
“I never stopped loving you,” he sighed. “Not even when I thought you were dead.” He couldn’t meet Bucky’s grey eyes so he looked at the crumpled surface of his arm instead. A distorted reflection looked back. “I wasn’t the same. Serum or not, I was half the man without you.”

This close he could hear the whirring of Bucky’s arm as he shifted, and the scratch of pen against paper. In seconds the notebook was shoved into view.

What Bucky had written was I love you too.

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This did not get the reaction that Bucky had hoped for. True, Steve’s face shone with joy for a wonderful five seconds and then the guilt began to creep in.

“I shouldn’t be pressuring you like this. Romantically. You’ve been through a lot.”

This confused Bucky but didn’t surprise him. He might not have all his memories - and a lot of them weren’t beautiful lived ones like the first kiss he’d rediscovered - but there were plenty of Steve being a goddamn martyr. He waved a hand in a why gesture.

“You’ve got more than enough to worry about without adding me to it.”

Bucky wished he could shake him. Even if he could touch Steve, doing that in the middle of a feed would have been a bad idea. At least Steve waited patiently for Bucky to write.

This is one less thing to worry about. He flashed that sentence to Steve then turned to a fresh page. When I am with you, things are better. I know who I am, I know I’m safe. Even the Asset knew you were missing. I kept remembering and they made me forget every time. Steve must have been reading over his shoulder because he said “Oh, Bucky” in his sad voice. But something had sparked in Bucky’s brain and he added another line, scribbling in his haste. It was always going to be you and me, darling.

Steve made a single hiccup noise and covered his face with one hand. No tears rolled off his chin, but his chin jutted like he was bracing to be hit in the face.

“I love you, you jerk. And if you’ll have me-”

Bucky flicked one of his arm plates. A yes. Steve laughed and the hand came down and wasn’t Steve - his fella Steve - the best looking guy in the whole world. He loved him. He loved him.

“I don’t know if they’ll let us back in the Tower and I don’t know where we’ll live if they don’t, but wherever it is, stay with me, sweetheart.”

If Bucky could talk, he’d be shouting ‘yes’ until someone banged the wall to get him to shut up. Since he couldn’t - but he would try, he’d go through all of Sam Wilson’s options until he could - he wrote it down.

‘Til the end of the line, Steve.

***

Steve couldn’t stop watching Bucky. He fed Bucky four times over eight hours, he sat next to him to interrupt nightmares. He found the channel that played only black-and-white movies and he watched Bucky watch Humphrey Bogart on the screen. Love lay under his skin like a layer of armour. And when Bucky looked back at him, Steve felt like he would burst. It was the dizzying high to the low
he’d felt waking up in 2011 and being told it would have been okay to love Bucky openly if he’d been alive.

He was lying down and dozing, but also listening to Bucky turning the pages of his book when the knock came. Bucky let his book fall onto his lap and Steve went for his shield. He could feel Bucky’s eyes on him as he went through the door and looked through the peephole.

Sam was on the other side of the door, plastic bags dangling from his hand.

“Just Sam,” he said to Bucky and his best guy visibly relaxed, lowering himself back into his cocoon of blankets and pillows.

“You guys doing okay?” said Sam once he was inside.

“We’re okay.”

Bucky nodded, this time with no wincing. Sleep and food had done him some good. He perked up as Sam tossed him one of his bags. Sam gave the dangling IV line a wide berth, gently throwing it onto the covers. Paperbacks fell out and Bucky snagged one.

“I grabbed a bunch of stuff at random, so sorry if you get one you’ve read before.”

Bucky waved it off, turning the paperback in his hands around to read the blurb. For just a little while, Steve would be second place to literature. He’d move up in time.

“And I know what you want, Rogers.” Steve could already smell it and when Sam thrust the other bag at him, he could practically taste the dumplings and plum sauce. When he took the bag, Sam snatched his fingers back, laying it on thick by checking he still had them all. “Swear to God, if we could bottle what makes you eat like that and stay that shape we’ll be richer than Stark.”

“What’s this ‘we’ business?” said Steve over his shoulder as he stacked cardboard cartons on the room’s tiny table.

“Oh, so you don’t want this Sam Wilson special delivery?”

Steve blocked the food with his body, slapping away Sam’s hands. Over on the bed, Bucky was watching the two of them. Was he remembering doing similar things with Steve? Usually forcing more than half the food onto him. Bucky would be able to do it again one day. It was a marathon, not a sprint.

“Okay, okay,” he said to Sam, “you can have a twenty percent cut.”

“That’s more like it.”

“Twenty-five if you brought cutlery.”

There were chopsticks in the bag, so Sam would be getting his twenty-five percent. Steve wasted no time in shovelling noodles into his mouth. Wherever he and Bucky ended up, there would have to be good restaurants with good-sized portions. One day, when Bucky was better, he could take him out to a restaurant on a date. An honest-to-God *date* where they didn’t have to pretend it was something else.

Sam was bent over Bucky’s leg, checking on things with his cannula and bandages. He was going to be so quick with the ‘I told you so’s, but Steve hoped that Sam would be happy for them in the end.
“Hey, Sam-”

There was a knock at the door and everyone paused to stare at it.

“Was Natasha coming over today?”

Steve could already tell by Sam’s face. He laid his chopsticks down and picked up the shield. It felt heavy on his arm as he stalked past Sam and Bucky.

On the other side of the door was Tony Stark. Through the peephole, Steve could see that he was wearing an expensive blue suit, his only visible weapons his cufflinks and impeccably knotted tie. No emergency suitcase suit in sight either, just a big plastic tub with a handle. As Steve watched, Tony took his phone out of his pocket. Inside the room, the landline started to ring.

“Steve.”

There was a warning note in Sam’s voice. Mute as ever, Bucky said nothing but his look was somewhere between fear and don’t do anything stupid, Rogers.

“Tony wouldn’t start anything here,” said Steve. “I’ll go out and talk to him.”

“You sure, man?”

The phone kept ringing.

“This time I’ll have the shield with me. And if he calls a suit then I’ll just have to be faster.”

He sat on the edge of Bucky’s bed to pull his shoes on. Bucky’s eyes on him was a tangible weight.

“Hey, don’t worry,” he said to that changed, but still so beloved face. “Just sit tight. Take care of Sam for me.” He didn’t think Tony would do anything, but this second chance felt so new and fragile. When he thought of their last parting - the low roar of the Insight Carrier falling into the Potomac - there were so many things he wished he told Bucky.

“I’m not going anywhere, Buck. I love you.”

He didn’t look at Sam, even though he was really good at the ‘I told you so’ face. Instead, he drank in the sharp angles of Bucky, committing them all to memory before he left.

Tony was leaning against the corridor wall, his phone still held to his ear. His eyes dropped to the shield held out in front of Steve.

“Hi, Tony.”

“Hi, Cap.”

He lowered his phone and swiped at the screen, cutting off the sound of the landline. Steve stepped into the corridor, shutting the door behind him. There was no one else in the corridor. Somewhere in a room down the corridor, a sports game was playing on TV. What game Steve didn’t know. He’d been avoiding the news of late and even more so since Tony had blasted his way into his home.

“I don’t have a suit with me. And it's just me. In case you were wondering.”

“I know. How’d you find us?”

“I followed Wilson. And you can tell him he made it hard for me. Even FRIDAY has trouble
“tracking one man in New York City.” Tony pushed a hand through his hair. “Look, I brought a peace offering.” He hoisted the plastic tub up. It was big, like the kind protein powder came in. “Super soldier replacement meal shakes. Just add milk.” He put it down just in front of him. “I can even drink some in front of you if you’re worried. A sip. This stuff clocks in at eighteen hundred calories a pop and I don’t have the metabolism you and…” He gestured at the door. “You and…”

“Bucky.” Steve could picture Tony breaking Bucky’s arm. He could picture the Winter Soldier with his hands around Howard’s throat. “His name is Bucky.”

Tony looked… tired. Not his usual tired where he sparkled with hyper energy after burning the midnight oil. Just tired.

“I know. You two… okay? I can get the medical staff over here in about ten minutes.”

“Nothing that won’t heal, but Bucky’s arm doesn’t work.”

“I can fix that.” Tony messed up his hair again. “Look. That was not my finest hour. I mean, I made a killbot not too long ago, but I’m not especially proud about how I beat up a man with a feeding tube.”

“I’m sorry about your parents, Tony. I should have said something. Anything. But I stand by what I said. It wasn’t Bucky’s fault.”

“And the other stuff?” He coughed. “The… l-word?”

“I meant that every day since 1930. Apart from us, only Sam knows.” Someone shouted at the game, muffled through the wall. “If you wanted to, you could probably ruin me even in this day and age.”

“C’mon, Steve. I wouldn’t. I can keep my mouth shut when it’s important, believe it or not.”

Something happened in the game and faint cheering noises reached them. Steve lowered the shield. “I’m getting your floor fixed if you want to come back. And the Compound will be open for business soon.”

“Thank you, Tony. But it’s not only up to me. There’s two of us now.” Now he had Bucky. Bucky had to be consulted, given the choice about where he wanted to live. Captain America was never meant to be a solitary role. And if Erskine’s death meant that he was the only super-soldier then he’d surrounded himself with Peggy Carter, the Howling Commandos, the Avengers. Bucky.

“Can I?” Tony gestured at the door. “I’m not going to tire the guy out, I know he’s fragile, but I got some stuff to say.”

“He’s not fragile. He’s the strongest person I know. But I can ask.”

Steve knocked on the door and Sam opened up. Bucky had moved to the end of the bed, the cannulated leg folded up beside him, and he visibly exhaled when the door closed again.

“It’s okay. Tony’s offered our place back.”

“That’s good!” Sam crowded him and Steve hugged him back. “Steve, man, that’s great.”

“He wants to talk to you, Buck.” Bucky’s eyebrows lifted. “You can say no if you want-”

“You can always say no here,” interjected Sam.
“He’s not going to hurt you. Not if I have anything to say about it.”

Bucky plucked at his sweatpants. He curled his toes in the carpet and the bed covers. Then he nodded, beginning the slow process of moving back to his pillow pile. His metal arm was slung over his thigh, the hand dangling. Steve waited until Bucky had sat up and settled his metal arm and his leg onto pillows. Then he brought Tony in.

Bucky watched him unblinkingly. For a moment everyone held their breath.

“So. Hi, Cap’s boyfriend.”

Bucky inclined his head a fraction.

“How’s your arm?” Tony put down his peace offering, mechanical puzzle calling to him. He peered at the arm and its buckled plates. “Wow. I did a number on that.” He glanced up at Bucky’s solemn eyes and then quickly back down. “Sorry by the way. That was… not my finest hour. I got FRIDAY following leads. Tracking down the sons of bitches who ordered this. If I’m lucky… if we’re lucky, at least one of them is still alive to stand trial. You meet the legal department yet? Good, expensive people.” He rubbed a hand across his mouth. “Look. You and Cap are a package deal and, under the whole apple-pie exterior, he’s a pretty good judge of character. So as far as the Avengers see it, you’re part of us now. Come back to the Tower, go up the Compound, get your own place, whatever. You got our support.”

Bucky reached over and grabbed a pad of hotel stationery from the bedside table. He wrote for a few minutes then tore off the top page and passed it up to Tony. He held it delicately by one corner between thumb and forefinger. Tony took it. He read it and then tucked it away in his pocket, the words a mystery. If it was between Bucky and Tony, then Steve would respect that.

“Okay.” Tony came back round, patting Steve on the shoulder. “Call me, Cap. Even if your room isn’t ready, we always got plenty of space.”

When Tony left, Sam said,

“Barnes told me while you were out there. The word autonomy - which I’m seeing a lot these days - made an appearance.”

“I know it’s very soon,” said Steve. He gravitated back towards Bucky and the smile he got was worth every moment of pain. “But it was true what Tony said. We’ve always been a package deal.”

Bucky lifted his hand and made a little gesture between Steve and himself. Him and me.

“You’re both adults. Just be careful. And I’m not going to keep accepting just ‘autonomy’ as a reason, you know.”

Bucky opened his notebook and there was indeed the word AUTONOMY written on the page, underlined with a slash of a penstroke. Underneath that he wrote:

Let’s go home.
Two months after Bucky walked into Avengers Tower, stinking and more than half-starved, he was curled up on the couch and reading his way through the world of Earthsea. Sam had given him a big omnibus volume as a bribe or a distraction for moving out of the Tower. But it had been easier than Bucky had thought. He’d sat in the passenger seat next to Steve, all his possessions in the back of the car, and watched the city give way to the suburbs and then the trees. He liked the Compound and their comfortable suite of rooms, but he would have liked most places so long as Steve was there.

“It’s starting,” said Sam who was pouring coffee in the kitchen area. Bucky closed his book, putting it down on his to-read pile down on the floor.

He’d brought two big boxes of books upstate. When he was bringing in the last one, the bottom had fallen out, scattering books over the floor. He’d spoken then for the third time, and both Sam and Steve had heard his heartfelt “aw, fuck”. Steve had bent over double laughing. He’d kept laughing on and off for thirty minutes even though Sam said it would give Bucky a complex. Bucky didn’t mind. They’d helped him pick up his books and the corners of Steve’s eyes crinkled just a little when he laughed.

Sam took the other end of the sofa, passing Bucky’s mug down. The TV showed the conference room on the other side of the Compound. Reporters were arranged in neat rows and crowding at the back. On the stage were Natalia and Tony Stark and stepping up to the podium was Steve.

He’d known, intellectually, that he loved Steve ever since he remembered him on the Insight Carrier. But it was like knowing the bare facts of a thing compared to knowing. More and more, every day, he loved him. The lights turned Steve’s hair to gold, his eyes to a most amazing shade of blue. He wore his suit, but not the helmet or shield. It made him look less like Captain America, Bucky realised. In the old propaganda reels and posters - at least in Bucky’s murky memories - they’d always put him in the helmet. He was certain that he’d always liked Steve Rogers more than Captain America.

“Good afternoon,” said Steve. “Thank you all for coming. I know it’s further to go than you’re used to, but we promised that it’ll be worth the trip.” Steve’s smile flattened out turning serious. “Last year, classified files from both SHIELD and Hydra were made available on the internet. Some referred to a Hydra assassin known as the Winter Soldier. Though known in the intelligence community for some years, he was considered a myth by most. A ghost story to frighten recruits. After all one man couldn’t keep appearing over and over again for an entire century.

“After Washington, we can provide an answer. With Hydra’s access to cryofreeze technology and the right person, the Winter Soldier could keep appearing over the years without ageing. And with mind-wipe tech, they could keep him under their control. You see, the Winter Soldier was not a willing Hydra agent. He was an American PoW.” There was a sudden upswell of conversation and shushing. “An American PoW,” repeated Steve, “who was tortured both physically and mentally.”

(“You okay, Bucky?” said Sam and Bucky nodded, loosening his grip on his mug.)

“-so they could force him to do terrible things in their name. A man whose memories were wiped and altered so many times that he didn’t even know his own name.”
Steve took a deep breath. Before he’d left just an hour ago, he smiled and said,

“You change your mind, Buck, just let me know. Even if I’m on the podium.”

But Bucky had shaken his head. They’d discussed it over and over - Steve talking and Bucky writing - and there was no other option.

“The Winter Soldier’s name is James Buchanan Barnes.”

Immediately journalists were on their feet, waving recorders and phones in the air. Steve said nothing, just stood there with his best Captain America face until the noise died down again.

“Bucky came to Avengers Tower two months ago to seek help and has been undergoing treatment with our medical staff. I’d like to take a moment to thank them for their kindness and dedication. The exact details of Bucky’s ongoing recovery will be kept private and we ask all of you to respect that.” He was beautiful when he was stern as well. “At this moment in time, he’s safe and well.”

“Is the Winter Soldier an Avenger?” shouted a balding man in the second row.

“The Winter Soldier was a fiction of Hydra’s,” said Steve. “Whether Bucky joins the Avengers will be entirely up to him.”

Emboldened by that answered question, a blonde in the middle of the crowd joined in.

“How does it feel to have your best friend back?”

“Pretty good,” said Steve, the white flash of a smile turning him back into Steve Rogers. “Pretty damn good, if you excuse the language,” he added to a murmur of laughter. “Which brings me to the second part of this announcement.”

Bucky had spoken for the second time when Steve returned from a mission one month ago. He’d skipped showering and changing to come straight down to see Bucky. Building dust had clung to his hair and there was a long splatter of goop across his chest. When Bucky had set eyes on him, he’d said “Steve” softly but clear as day. Now Bucky’s mouth parted like he could call out to Steve through the TV. Nothing came out, but Steve didn’t need the encouragement.

“A lot has changed in America since I was born. Some of it for the better. We still have a long way to go in some ways, but in the 40s no one could have imagined a world like this. Kind of a big shock when I was unfrozen, but I had good people around me. I made a family here with the Avengers… and I lied to them. I lied because I thought their opinion of me would change. That I might disappoint them. But that wasn’t the case.

“In 1930, Bucky Barnes and I became romantically involved.” Now the noise really began. Bucky slid off the sofa and knelt behind the coffee table, glaring at everyone on screen in case a threat presented itself. “We were childhood sweethearts. And we were together until… Until I lost him. And now we’re together again.”

Bucky had started to smile without realising. There was a banner on the bottom of the screen, scrolling through a few short messages: ‘The Winter Soldier revealed as Bucky Barnes’, ‘Captain America comes out on live TV’.

“I know,” said Steve, “that things aren’t perfect even in the future. I know what some people will say because I heard enough of it back in the 30s and 40s. They’ll say that by standing here in this uniform, telling you these things, I’m making waves or rubbing it in their faces. That I’m a disgrace to the name Captain America. And I have something to say to those people.
“I have always been this way. I’ve always loved Bucky, even when I thought he was dead. Without him, without that love, I would have never gotten the chance to put on this uniform. I wouldn’t have been the man that I am today. And if standing like this can help someone who might be struggling or alone then I’ll gladly do it.

“Most importantly, I could never have imagined, back then, that I would live in a world where I could openly love Bucky Barnes as he deserves. Now that I have him back, I’m not going to waste this second chance.”

As he deserves. Bucky rolled that phrase around in his head. Steve had told him “I love you” when he left earlier. Like he did on every good day. Like he did on every bad day. He’d even said it during last month’s very bad week - the one that had driven Bucky into his bed to hide.

A memory had resurfaced. Hydra had sat him down at a vast table, laden with a banquet. Obstinately it had been guard duty, but there had been no IV packs for four days. Every time a heaped plate was placed in front of him, they’d laughed because he’d been starving but unable to take even a mouthful.

He couldn’t face his replacement shakes without that memory playing in his head, laughter echoing in his ears. His weight had plummeted until they’d hooked him up to another NG tube. But Steve had sat with him, on the floor next to his bed, and read to him and talked to him and told him he loved him just like a good day.

Bucky pressed mute on the clamour of the press and turned to Sam.

I want, he said with his hands, to tell him today.

“Today?” said Sam. Today? said his hands.

Yes. After this, it'll be a nice- Bucky paused then finger spelt S-U-R-P-R-I-S-E .

“Finally letting him in on the super-secret project. You know he’ll be thrilled. He’ll get all misty-eyed.”

Bucky nodded. That was very true, but he liked it when Steve was happy. It puzzled him sometimes on bad days, but it didn’t matter because he’d remember on his good days. In his pocket notebook, he wrote down the word ‘surprise’ to look up in ASL later. Then he went to his room.

There was plenty of shelf space for books and things. Bucky had been steadily accumulating books, from the internet and the Avengers. Once, accompanied by Steve and bundled into layers of clothing, he’d gone to a second-hand bookshop in the city. On the bottom shelf were his files. Doctors were red, white, or yellow, for his body, food, and head. Memories were green. His sign language lessons were in the black file. And then there was the blue file that he’d prepared for Steve. He cradled it to his chest with his two working arms and carried it into the living room.

On the TV, they’d gone back to the studio which meant Steve would be here soon. Soon he would have the file. Then, even if touching or eating came slowly, they could communicate. Steve would be good at sign language with those big, beautiful hands of his.

“Don’t forget lunch,” said Sam from the fridge. He passed out the lunchtime replacement shake, which today was blueberry. Stark had gone through a phase of adventurous flavours with mixed results. Goji berry and pomegranate had been fine. Pizza flavour not so much.

Thirty minutes later, Steve arrived, looking like he’d been through one hell of a workout but a good one. And the minute he set eyes on Bucky, his shoulders relaxed, his smile grew.
“Hi, Buck. You see it?”

Bucky nodded and gave him a thumbs-up. Sign language or not, there was nothing left to say. There was no future if James Buchanan Barnes wasn’t brought into the light, past seventy years and all. And there was no future for them if they fell back into old habits, the hiding and the lies. That was the conclusion they’d come to together.

“You were great, man.” Sam threw his arms around him and they hugged. “How do you feel?”

“Good. Really good. Lighter.”

Bucky would agree. Steve did look better. Like he was glowing he was so happy. He loved him.

“Well, go take the monkey suit off,” said Sam. “Unless you don’t want in on the Wilson-Barnes secret project.”

“Really?” Sam had called it. Steve was thrilled. Steve was goddamn giddy and he didn’t even know what the project was yet. He loved him. Bucky gestured with his left hand - his working left hand - in the direction of Steve’s room.

When Steve came out again, dressed in a nice shirt too, Bucky had the file in his hands and Sam was sat with him at the table.

“So,” said Sam, who had to do the intro, “you remember I gave Bucky some options for communication? That’s what we’ve been working on.”

Bucky handed over the file, suddenly shy. It wasn’t the way the old Bucky had talked but it was a start, wasn’t it? The first page had small pictures of hands each labelled with a letter. A was a closed fist, thumb out. B was a palm outwards. Steve drank it all in. Blue eyes ran over each one, locking it away forever in that brain of his.

“Sign language?”

“Latest advancement in super-soldier communication.”

Bucky tapped the table and when Steve looked over he held up his right hand. First came a hand with two fingers extended like an imaginary gun. That was H. Then a fist, thumb over the fingers, little finger extended. An I. Then rapidly, because this was Steve, a closed fist, thumb out. B was a palm outwards. Steve drank it all in. Blue eyes ran over each one, locking it away forever in that brain of his.

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“You might have to slow it down, Bucky. Steve only.”

“That was my name, right?” said Steve, because he was that fast, he was smart even before the serum. Bucky wasn’t all there yet, but he remembered his fella being so smart.

“You saw that sheet for about two seconds, Steve.”

“I think I got it all,” said Steve, with false modesty. “I mean if I want to say Bucky it’s this.” Palm outwards; then two fingers pointed up; a C made with his hand; a victory sign with a thumb between the extended fingers; and finally thumb and little finger extended, rest of the fingers folded down.

“You’re ridiculous, Steve, and I hope you know that,” said Sam, but without any heat.

S-O-R-R-Y, signed Steve.
Bucky tapped on the table again. He made an ‘A’ sign and circled it around his chest.

“Is that ‘sorry’?”

Steve repeated it. The next sheet in his file had that sign and Bucky showed him. He demonstrated more for Steve, please, thank you, I don’t know, tired, hurt, falling from his hands. He did the sign for Sam which was a modified version of wing, right hand held stiffly and moved forward in a quick dive.

“If you want to join in on the lessons, it’s on Bucky’s calendar,” said Sam. He got up, stretching. “Now if you all excuse me, I got some non-super-soldier stuff to do.”

“See you at dinner?”

“Sure thing, Mom.” Sam put his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Hey, I’m proud of what you did here today. Took a lot of guts.”

Steve smiled,

“Not really. Not when it was for Bucky.”

Sam was almost at the door when he turned to deliver his parting shot,

“You know with all the tight shirts and working out I’m amazed no one figured this all out sooner.” Steve flipped him the bird. “Getting good at sign language, Rogers.”

And then Bucky and Steve were alone.

“Hey, do I have a sign?”

Bucky nodded. He’d given it a lot of thought, looking through ASL dictionaries for words like handsome, stubborn, and asshole. But in the end, he made his own. Unique as Steve himself. A flick of his right hand over his heart towards the star on his arm. The red paint was coming off, showing the metal underneath. He wondered if Steve knew which paint would stick.

“Do you have one?”

Bucky shook his head and pointed between the two of them like you and me then finger spelt D-E-C-I-D-E.

“I’m sure we could come up with something.” He put his right hand to his mouth and moved it out like he was blowing a kiss. Thank you. “Thank you,” he said out loud, “for sharing with me.”

Steve was absolutely beautiful. No Captain America about him unless you counted all those good qualities he’d brought into the role. Bucky loved him.

He held up his right hand, middle fingers folded down, thumb and other fingers extended.

“What’s that one?” Steve looked over his sheets, “I don’t see it.”

Bucky only smiled and slid back into place on the couch.

“You’re so mysterious,” said Steve, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

Muted presenters moved their mouths on the TV. Banners crawled across the bottom of the screen. The presenters looked happy, but if they weren’t then it wouldn’t matter. He had Steve.
He could tell Steve had Googled right the first time by how he smiled. Up he got - so solid and real that it was no wonder that he’d broken through Hydra programming - and he did the same sign back. The one that meant *I love you.*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, for leaving lovely comments, and kudos-ing. I hope you loved reading this as much as I loved writing it.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!