Stay with Me

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/21091778.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: M/M
Fandom: Captain America (Movies), Captain America - All Media Types, Marvel Cinematic Universe
Relationship: James "Bucky" Barnes/Steve Rogers
Character: James "Bucky" Barnes, Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson (Marvel), Natasha Romanov (Marvel), Jarvis (Iron Man movies), Tony Stark, Rebecca Barnes Proctor, George Barnes (Marvel), Winifred Barnes, Rebecca Barnes Proctor's Husband
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Shrunyclunks, Captain America Steve Rogers/Modern Bucky Barnes, Slow Burn, Hurt/Comfort, mentions of trauma, Aftermath of Violence, Fluff and Angst, Mutual Pining, Smut, Angst with a Happy Ending, Captain America Big Bang 2019 | cabigbang
Collections: Captain America Big Bang 2019 | cabigbang
Stats: Published: 2019-10-19 Completed: 2019-10-26 Chapters: 9/9 Words: 79903

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Summary

When Bucky Barnes accompanies his family to a ceremony dedicated to George Barnes' activity, he expects free food and drinks, the occasional boring speech, and watching his dad blush furiously as he gets to finally meet his childhood hero. What he doesn't expect is saving Captain America's life and getting shot in the process. What follows is a slow road to recovery, eating hospital food (still disgusting), making new friends (Avengers!!! Seriously, the Avengers!) and pining over Captain America (he won't comment on that). It sounds simple, but it really isn’t!

Notes

A collaboration for the Captain America Big Bang Challenge 2019. A big thank you to the mods @CAPBB19 for their awesome organizational skills and their support.

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Art by the amazing and wonderful em-dibujsb, whose support was vital for the story and whose incredible art can be found here.

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I am greatly indebted to fancyh for her amazing work and comments, and for her incredible support. You can find her here.
Chapter One

Dear readers, this chapter deals with a mass shooting incident and the aftermath of it, hence the archive warning that the fic has (it is the only chapter in the story that contains violence). While it isn't as graphic as one might expect, the imagery can still be disturbing and triggering as the violence and repercussions of it are present. Therefore, if you aren't comfortable with this sort of thing or if you believe that you could be triggered, please turn back now. Your safety and well-being are the most important.<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Dad, if you don’t come down in the next five minutes, I swear to God I’m leaving and accepting the accolades in your name!”

“Bucky, indoor voice!” Ma shouted from the living room where his sister, Becca, was adding the finishing touches to her makeup as Aunt Liv supervised the entire process with a circumspect air. That, or she simply didn’t like the lemon cupcake that she was currently munching on.

“Hurry up, George!” Uncle Liam added his five cents in when it was clear that George Barnes had no intention of getting downstairs any time soon. Honestly, a three-bedroom brownstone in Brooklyn, New York, was far too small for the ruckus that the Barnes clan could create on any given day. From his seat on the couch, Uncle Ben shared a commiserating look with Bucky, then took another sip from his cocktail. Which was why Uncle Ben was his favorite – because commiserating about their family was their favorite sport. That, and making fun of cousin Callum, kind of the asshole of the family.

Bucky rolled his eyes then checked his watch again. From the corner of his eye, he could see
Michael, Becca’s husband, smirking as he kept on reading something on his phone as if the Barnes family still baffled and amused him in equal measure and he had given up making sense of them a long time ago. Though he should have been used to them by now with the whole being married to Becca thing for the past six years and whatnot. Though to be fair, they should all be grateful (Bucky included, yeah yeah) that Uncle Jacob and Auntie Matilda hadn’t been able to make it or the whole pandemonium would have surely imploded by now.

“Gosh, I didn’t think that dressing up for a ceremony in one's name implied so many changes of wardrobe,” Uncle Liam grumbled around a carrot cake, mouth half-full. Michael looked up, winced and then looked down at his phone again. “If your Grandpa Joe was here right now, I’m sure he’d mention something about real men and suits.”

“Oh, please, you owned maybe two suits in your entire life!” Uncle Ben was quick to point out. “In fact, you showed up to Aunt Mildred’s funeral and Richard’s wedding in the same suit last year.”

“I did not!” Embarrassment made Uncle Liam blush furiously, fingers slightly squishing the remains of the carrot cake. “Besides, even if I did, I won’t take fashion advice from the guy that wore a Hawaiian shirt to Bucky’s graduation. At least my suit was tasteful!”

“It was the same one!”

“Well, the blue one didn’t fit him anymore,” Aunt Liv interrupted them. She abandoned the rest of the cupcake on a tissue and washed its taste away with a small glass of orange juice. “The jacket was too tight around the shoulders.”

“Hey! You're supposed to be on my side!”

“Right, the jacket.” Uncle Ben grinned when Uncle Liam started sputtering like an angry cat.

Yeah, the Barnes men never did blush prettily – it was all done in splotches of red as if they all had allergic reactions to something. If they were particularly embarrassed – like Uncle Liam was at the moment – then the blush would travel down their throats in a seemingly unattractive pattern. Alas, Bucky had cursed genetics time and time again since this had been just another awkward trait he inherited from his dad's side of the family. Why couldn't they be normal like the Taylors? Ma's side of the family was disgustingly well-adjusted but at least their spats always had an equally disgusting level tone to it. Normally, Bucky would be more than happy to listen to his uncles' banter, but not today. Five more minutes and he'd go upstairs, drag Dad down, lock him in the trunk, usher the whole family out and then boom, he'd be driving like a maniac but at least they'd arrive on time.

Bucky prayed for patience as he checked his watch again and then looked up at the top of the stairs forlornly. Uncle Liam began enumerating Uncle Ben's lack of proper grooming at all family events (of which there were many), while Uncle Ben was replying with perfectly backhanded comments about Uncle Liam's 'love' of reusing inappropriate attires (which apparently was quite often). Having already spent an hour with just ten percent of the Barnes family, Bucky wanted to take a holiday on a deserted island. Permanently.

At long last, Dad came down the stairs with two ties in his hand, looking ridiculously flushed. For a man that had once argued with a judge about the concept of human dignity to the point that the judge gave in in the end but banned him from his court, Dad was like a little boy about to meet his hero. His brown hair, cut short especially for this occasion, was in disarray and his white shirt was untucked from his pants. Somehow, he still managed to pull out the miracle of looking put together.
“Put down the star-spangled tie, Dad!” Bucky ordered immediately as he silently begged for any divinity that was listening to spare him this torture. “You’d look ridiculous with it. Captain Rogers might actually puke in his mouth.”

“Dear Lord, who died and made you a fashion critic?” Dad grumbled but threw the tie on the hallway table and turned towards Uncle Liam, who wiped his hands and proceeded to help Dad with the tie. “Besides, you shouldn’t be speaking, Mr. I like blue in all shades and forms.”

“I look good in blue,” Bucky replied, finding himself patting his blue shirt almost immediately, which, miracles of miracles, hadn’t crinkled yet. “You, on the other hand, well, you’d look ludicrous with that thing around your neck. All of our forefathers would raise from their collective grave just so they could slap you.”

“Excuse you, I think that Captain Rogers would appreciate the touch of humor, at least.” Dad tucked his shirt inside the trousers as Uncle Liam gave the finishing touches to the tie, then helped him with the suit jacket.

“The touch of bad taste, you mean.”

“Hey, Blue Boy, cut me some slack! It’s not every day that one gets to meet his childhood hero.” George batted Uncle Liam’s hands away just so he could scowl properly at Bucky. Yeah, Bucky hadn’t been impressed by that since he was twelve and Johnny Mercer had convinced him to steal a bottle of rum from his dad’s private collection. It had been Bucky’s first and last foray into strong spirits.

“George, the boy loves blue, what can you do?” Aunt Liv chuckled before adding, “Remember when he was seven and he wanted to wear only those blue Captain America pyjamas?”

“Hey, firstly, I was seven, so of course I made terrible fashion choices. Secondly, I also liked small cars, The Goonies and lived in my treehouse for days.” Bucky pouted. “Nothing from that age should be held against me.”

“And no one does, but I might have such wonderful pictures from that time.”

“Send them, Auntie Liv! Becca crowed immediately as she put her make up brushes away. “I’m in need of new blackmail material.”

“While I always love to hear you all exchange jibes,” Ma interrupted them, waving dismissively at Bucky and Becca and grabbing her purse, “we should get going before I decide that disowning the both of you is actually a good idea.”

“How am I at fault?” Bucky whined but pushed Dad out the door before he could say anything else then followed him onto the sidewalk. The rest of the family burst out on the doorway like noisy human lava – slow to come out but devastating in the level of noise it could create. Everyone almost immediately began talking, overlapping each other. Really, the whole neighborhood must have known that the Barnes family was going somewhere.

“It’s always your fault,” Becca tossed back, pressing her makeup bag in Michael’s hands. Seriously, who invented sisters? Bucky wanted to know.

“Oh, look at me, I’m Becca Proctor, awesome English teacher, but a terrible little sister.”

“And don’t you forget it, moron!” Becca actually poked her tongue out at him, though she ensured that both their parents were still trying to usher everyone to their respective cars. Michael silently retreated to the safety of their car like a sly cat. Smart man! Though again, Bucky still couldn’t tell
how he and Michael had managed to become designated drivers almost as soon as everyone else announced their presence to the ceremony. If health had permitted, Grandpa Joe would have joined them as well. It was honestly a miracle that only so few of the Barnes members were able to attend, a miracle for which Bucky was profoundly grateful. He really loved his family and cared about them but for all things holy, they were an absolute rowdy bunch.

Bucky watched Michael enviously as the guy shuffled slightly on the driver’s seat to find a comfortable position, while he was still listening to them yelling about cars and best routes and whatnot.

“The whole family exhausts me,” Ma said in the end, firmly ending the overlapping conversation. “Both of you to your cars now! Liv, you and Liam go with Becca. Ben, you’re with us. George, stop fidgeting with your tie and get in!”

“My speech?” Dad asked, patting his pockets and thus re-enacting every distracted professor cliché ever. In exasperation at his own nervousness, Dad passed his fingers through his hair and that really didn’t improve the situation much, though Bucky was in no position to judge – since he’d cut his long hair last year, it’d been a continuous struggle between letting his short hair just be without any product in it and thus looking like Big Foot, or using product and praying that his hair wouldn’t look like it hadn’t been washed in three goddamn years. Sometimes, genetics utterly sucked!

“In my purse!” Ma took pity of him at long last. “Please, get in the car. Now!”

“Yes, dear!” Dad winked at Bucky and followed Ma to Bucky’s car. Becca poked her tongue out at him one more time but made her way to her Hyundai. Uncle Liam and Liv (melodic nicknames were another ‘thing’ in the Barnes family) were already making themselves comfortable on the back seats. Bucky quickly got into his blue Ford as everyone was settled and ready to go at long last. Soon enough, they were a sad part of the terrible traffic in New York at that time of the day.

Bucky smiled softly as he listened to Uncle Ben, Dad and Ma talking about what to say to Captain Rogers as they were going to officially meet him today. Dad had been a longtime admirer of Captain Rogers and his office still boasted one of the most comprehensive collections of books about Captain America and his impact on modern warfare and strategy, but also on civil rights and social activism. Well, if Bucky thought about it, the whole Barnes family had been fascinated with Captain America ever since Grandpa Joe had served in World War II and had been saved by Captain Rogers from the terrible fate that some of the prisoners had met at the Hydra camp in Azzano.

But out of the four Barnes brothers, Dad had always had the worst crush on the good old captain. So when they had relocated from Indianapolis to New York, when Bucky had been eight and Becca five, no one had been surprised in the least when George Barnes quickly built himself the reputation of a fair and just lawyer that loved to take on difficult cases, especially for people from the disadvantaged or disfranchised groups. Throughout the toughest cases, Dad had been a beacon of hope and justice, Captain Rogers’ memory and righteousness looming over his every action and legal fight.

It wasn’t always paying big money. There had been many times when his dad would come home with baked goods, produce, and one memorable time, a cat (which they kept because Mr. Whiskers was gorgeous and his parents would have had to pry him from Bucky and Becca’s cold and dead hands). Throughout the years, there had been talk about the District Attorney position and the immense support that he might have garnered for it, had he decided to run, but Dad had always been a hands-on kind of person and he’d wanted to keep grounded, believing his impact would be
Ma had rolled her eyes, then secretly smiled when her husband couldn’t see – while some extra money wouldn’t have hurt the family, she too was invested in George’s career and the good that he had been doing. Then, a few years ago, Dad was offered the position of ethics and political philosophy professor at Columbia University, and that he couldn’t refuse. Since then, he’d been writing books, teaching, accepting cases, and generally being a pain in the ass of the establishment.

Bucky patiently waited for the light to turn green and watched his parents in the rear-view mirror. They’d always been a socially engaged kind of family. Ma was a social worker, specializing in victims of domestic abuse, working with a lot of charities in order to offer the best opportunities for them to start over. In recent years, Ma had directly collaborated with the Pepper Potts Foundation and both Becca and Bucky couldn’t wrap their minds around it. Ma had met with Pepper Potts several times in an official capacity and apparently, one memorable time, Ma actually attended a meeting at the Avengers Tower. Though she didn’t meet Tony Stark or the rest of the Avengers, it had been pretty cool.

And it wasn’t just Ma that was brilliant. Becca was an awesome English teacher that worked at a high school in Queens in the morning and in the afternoon at a center for disadvantaged communities, tutoring students to help them overcome their lapses in education and get a better chance at beating the system that didn't care about them. Naturally, the center was privately funded by another charitable foundation that was publicly supported by Captain America himself. Dad had been extremely proud of that and he may or may not have called all his brothers to brag about his awesome daughter working with Captain America to bring literacy back on the streets of New York – or something similar that might have or might have not annoyed Uncle Jacob so much he didn't speak to Dad for a week (that was a century, in Barnes speak).

Bucky’s fingers tightened a little on the steering wheel as he took a left. His career path hadn’t been as clear as it had been for the rest of them and his personal life had been more of a mess than anything else. He’d postponed going to university by taking a sabbatical and working at his grandpa’s farm back in Indiana, then traveling along the Oregon Trail for the rest of the year, coming back with more questions than answers. Traveling had brought little clarity in Bucky’s life but his no non-sense talk with Dad had settled things.

Dad had always been the type of person to encourage both his and Becca's creativity, their independent thinking, so he'd indulged Bucky's need to find himself. But when Bucky returned with few answers and all the more confused, working as a waiter at a restaurant and not knowing what he wanted to do next, he'd begun to get worried. Which of course led to a screaming match, which finally led to Bucky coming out of the closet and crying on his father's shoulder when the man just embraced him and thanked him for the confession. He'd worked at the Italian place for another year before he enrolled in night classes and soon enough was working as a mechanic. He'd hoped that in a year or two he'd be able to open up his own shop, but for now, he was slowly building his clientèle list at Paul’s shop.

“Dad, try not to shake Captain Rogers’ hand too many times,” Bucky joked when there was a lull in conversation.

“I’ll try not to kiss him, that’s what I’ll try. Or bow, like a lunatic,” Dad spoke lightly, his lips curling into a soft smile. Bucky didn’t understand what the accolades were for, but the fact that Captain Rogers was going to be the guest of honor had made his dad’s year. Maybe even life. When Dean John Harris called Dad and mentioned who was going to be the guest of honor, George Barnes had to sit down and, later on, smoke the first cigarette in twenty-one years. He spent the following day talking on the phone, video conferencing with his brothers.
“I’m more afraid of what topics of conversation you might come up with.” Ma smiled conspiratorially to Bucky. “No current policies, please.”

“What?” Dad couldn’t hide his outrage, blue eyes narrowing at Winnie Barnes. “Then what’s the point in talking to him at all?”

“You want him to be just as angry as you are so that you go marching together to the Capitol.”

“Ma, please, I don’t want to hear about Dad’s dirty fantasies!”

“Bucky, shut up and drive!” Dad said, and seriously, his family was insane. “I just want to ask him a few questions,” his dad grumbled after a while. “Surely the man has his own opinions on what’s been going on for the last seventy-odd years in the world and especially in this country.”

“It’s been like almost six years, Dad, since he was defrosted. I’m sure that the man had plenty of time to familiarize himself with the politics of his own country.”

“Don’t say defrosted, Bucky.” Ma checked the contents of her purse, making sure that she had everything she needed. “It’s tacky.”

“How is it tacky? The man was defrosted.”

“He’s not a piece of meat to be defrosted.”


“While I’m glad that you have a good grasp on the English vocabulary, son, please stop. You’re giving me a headache.” Ma smiled at him in the mirror and he winked back.

“Got it, Ma.” Five seconds of blessed silence then, “How about unfrozen?”

“You’re testing me today, son. You really are.” Dad just chuckled and looked grateful for the reprieve from his nervousness. God, Bucky really hoped that Captain Rogers would measure up to his dad’s expectations or they’d be exchanging words. Though what exactly he could do to Captain America, he wasn’t sure, other than that it’d be painful and it’d hurt. A lot.

As soon as they arrived, both Dad and Ma were swept away by Dean Harris with his stiff smile, while Bucky and the rest of the family were redirected towards the main room by Professor Novak, who specialized in epistemology and decision theory, as he always liked to remind them. They were sat at an exquisitely looking table with each of their names carefully marked on good-plated sheets of paper. Bucky was beginning to feel under-dressed in his blue shirt and black slacks, eyeing his suit jacket with dread.

“Stop it, you look fine,” Becca interrupted his fidgeting. She gently covered his hand with hers and squeezed lightly. “You do look good in blue and there’s no point in taking your jacket as it soon will be stifling in here.”

“God, was I that obvious?” Bucky managed to offer her a wobbly smile but it must have passed the test because Becca smiled even more tenderly.

“You looked like you were about to freak out.”

“Well, not all of us can pull off a classic black dress like you.” He nudged her lightly as she chuckled.
“Well, there was that party when you graduated –” Bucky immediately covered her mouth with his free hand when it looked like Michael perked up. His brown eyes narrowed slightly in bemusement.

“You’ve sworn to secrecy, midget.” Bucky scowled at his sister. “Just as I won’t mention freshman year.”

“Exactly what happened during freshman year?” Michael asked, an amused glint in his kind brown eyes.

“Nothing special,” Becca answered quickly, pushing Bucky’s hand aside. “Really, a boring year in my life.

“Really? Doesn’t sound like it was boring,” Michael teased his wife.

Bucky tuned out their banter so he could have a look around the room and see if he’d spot anyone familiar. The room that had been rented for the proceedings was quite lovely. The ceiling was sustained by eight marble columns that created small alcoves on the first floor. Bucky thought that the elegant balconies with their carved façades had to offer a beautiful sight of the entire room, but apparently, only serious-looking security people were going to enjoy that. In fact, the security seemed to be doubled at this event with one person on each balcony, a few more at the two entrances downstairs. Probably due to Captain America’s presence.

There was also a small stage that had been created for the ceremony with a few chairs and a speaker stand. Fifteen or so round tables were carefully arranged to occupy the entire space in such a way that it wouldn’t give the feeling of overcrowding or a lack of harmony, offering people plenty of room to move around. There was also a bar and a candy bar and Bucky was already eyeing one of the chocolate mini-cakes that looked utterly delicious.

“Stop eyeing the sweets like a madman,” Becca interrupted his revelry rather rudely. She raised an eyebrow at him when she took a sip of her champagne, daring him to contradict her. Seriously, sisters were overrated.

“Excuse you, I wasn’t eyeing the sweets.” Bucky crossed his arms and pouted. “And besides, if I’m obligated to listen to boring speeches for at least two hours, I think I’m allowed to get as much sweet sustenance as I’m allowed.”

“Two hours?” Uncle Liam might have paled a little under his natural tan.

“Of course, what did you think?”

“I thought that Dean Harris was going to make a small introduction of Captain America because come on, he doesn’t need any of this pomp. Then Captain America was going to talk, give George the accolades, have him talk, and that was going to be it.” Uncle Liam took a sip of his whiskey that he had already managed to grab from the open bar as if to fortify himself against the horrible nightmare of having to listen to a lot more academic discourse than he had planned to in the first place.

“Yeah, I don’t think it’s going to work like that. The last time Dad got us to one of these shindigs, Professor Schuyler spoke uninterrupted for one hour and three minutes.” Both Bucky and Becca shuddered in disgust. “Let’s just say that by the time he finished, I wanted to gauge my eyes out. Or at least perforate my eardrums so I didn’t have to listen to that man ever again.

“Always the dramatic boy,” Auntie Liv said with a fond smile.
“No, it really was that bad.” Becca patted Bucky’s shoulder then looked around the room that was more than half-filled at that point. “Luckily, I don’t see him tonight and I hope it stays that way. But if I catch one –”

Becca trailed away as a new commotion stirred up the room. Bucky turned as well just in time to see Captain America making an entrance and smiling shyly at the gentleman that immediately proceeded to gush over him. Bucky might have stopped breathing. His mouth turned completely dry and he found himself blinking several times as if the arresting beauty of Captain America might have been a mirage.

Bucky had seen the Avengers in various news interviews, press conferences, talk shows or congressional hearings – he’d been exposed to their faces, their beliefs, their heroics, and their principles time and time again since the attack on New York had brought them in the limelight. Like any other average human being, he had been fascinated by them but in a sort of distant kind of way. They were living in a completely different world than Bucky’s, a world where apparently, traveling to Asgard or around the universe was a daily kind of occurrence. They looked like Titans, they lived like gods, remote and absurdly apart, despite their involvement in the human affairs for the past six years.

And yet, there he was – the one Titan that had fascinated the Barnes family for the past seventy years, the one that had influenced their lives in one way or the other. And Bucky couldn’t think of anything else except how well that soft cashmere sweater encased the captain’s broad shoulders. How he had the build of a mean linebacker, but the soft smile of a kind person. How he towered over the others yet still hunched slightly onto himself as if he still wasn’t used to the attention that was being given to him, like he still wasn’t used to arresting the world’s attention and turning everyone around him into putty.

It was utterly ridiculous that it took Bucky almost five minutes to realize that Captain Rogers was accompanied by Black Widow and Falcon, and seriously, was there a prerequisite of good genes to make one part of the Avengers? She was looking utterly gorgeous in beautiful black high-waisted trousers and a red elegant silk top, her gorgeous red hair spilling elegantly in soft curls over her shoulders. And Falcon was a paragon of subtle elegance in a pair of dark blue slacks and a grey shirt with rolled out sleeves. They appeared to be graciously chatting with Dean Harris and his wife who had come to greet them as well. Bucky terribly needed a drink or ten to calm his libido because he might have been a gay man but one simple mortal could only bask in such beauty so far before he’d go insane.

Captain Rogers and his guests were then quietly shown to their table, which was the empty one next to the Barnes table, and both Becca and Bucky instantly turned their backs, ashamed to be caught staring unabashedly at them. Bucky drank immediately an entire glass of water, then giggled nervously when he noticed that both his uncles and his aunt had no qualms in openly staring at the table next to them. In fact, Uncle Liam was blushing like a school girl when a sudden calm voice made Bucky shudder.

“Good evening.” Uncle Ben almost spilled his drink over him, Uncle Liam sputtered and barely was able to mutter a hello. Bucky turned slightly and raised his eyes up and up and up only to be met with Captain America’s baby blue eyes, kind and soft, slightly crinkling around the edges. Fucking hell, he was absolutely gorgeous! Like staring into the sun! Had anyone ever told Captain America that he was gorgeous? Were there hymns and poems dedicated to him on the dark web? Bucky needed to find out afterwards. “I just wanted to introduce myself to the family of Mr. Barnes. I heard many good things about him and since I’m going to award him tonight, I thought I might as well introduce myself to his family.”
“That’s very kind of you, Captain Rogers,” Becca replied graciously when it was apparent that her entire family was going to just continue gawking like mumbling and blushing buffoons. “I’m Rebecca Barnes-Proctor, this is my husband, Michael.” They both shook hands with the captain before Becca proceeded to turn towards Bucky. “And this is my brother, James.” Bucky wiped his clammy hand on his slacks before slightly standing up and shaking hands with the man himself. Warm and calloused, his hand seemed to almost dwarf Bucky’s. He missed its warmth as soon as he let go.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Bucky mumbled at last, in a relatively calm voice. “Our father has been beside himself ever since he found out that you accepted to participate today.”

“Please, call me Steve.” His smile was soft. A war machine built for the destruction of the American enemies back in the old days and his smile was pure like sunshine. “I’ve heard a lot about his good work. It is an honor for me to be invited.”

“The honor is ours, sir.” Uncle Liam stood up and shook hands with Captain Rogers – ha, like Bucky was ever going to call him Steve, even in his mind. “It’s an incredible honor, sir. I’m Liam and this is my wife Olive, but we all call her Liv. And this is my brother Benjamin. George is our younger brother. We’ve been hearing stories about you ever since our father returned from the front.”

“He served?”

“Yes, sir. He was in the 107th. He was among the prisoners of war you saved from the Hydra Camp at Azzano.” Uncle Liam smiled softly and Bucky never thought he’d see such open affection on the old man’s face. Captain Rogers ducked his face a little, blushing slightly. “Our father wanted to come and meet you, sir, thank you in person but unfortunately, his health didn’t allow even a short flight.”

“I’m terribly sorry to hear that.”

“You’ll make up for it, sir, if you have a picture with us at the end of the ceremony,” Uncle Liam pushed further and yeah, no wonder he had been such a good real estate agent.

“Liam,” Uncle Ben hissed but Uncle Liam had no qualms whatsoever about it, especially when Captain America chuckled softly. Bucky might have been in love. Just a little!

“I’ll see what I can do about that,” he replied politely and yeah, the entire table might have swooned a little bit more.

“Steve, it’s time!” Black Widow appeared out of nowhere and gently took Captain America’s right arm. She turned her cold eyes to Bucky and watched him for a minute before smirking as if she had been able to read his thoughts and had found him lacking.

“I will see you later then.” Captain America waved at them awkwardly then returned to his own table. They were positively awww-ing and ah-ing at this point, but who could blame them? Becca turned to Bucky and grinned, flushed and her blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

“I might be in love,” she decreed.

“I can safely say I might be in love too. Becca, I love you, but it might be time to try something different,” Michael joked and his wife laughed out loud at his heart eyes. “Seriously, this guy is larger than life. I don’t know what I was expecting but seriously, I didn’t expect that.” Michael waved his hand up and down and still, somehow, everybody at the table understood exactly what
“Bucky might still be drooling.” Uncle Ben took his napkin and pretended to wipe the corner of Bucky’s lips. Bucky batted his hand away to the general amusement of everybody at the table. He could feel the tips of his ears hot like coals, a burning reminder that he was still able to blush heavily even at his age.

“Could you be louder than that?” he hissed and that made his family only laugh harder. “I don’t think they heard you on 5th Avenue.” He stood slightly straighter. “But Jesus fucking Christ, I really didn’t expect that!” Bucky leaned towards his sister and whispered just for her, “I might have jerk off material for the rest of my life.”

“Bucky, gross!” She slapped him over his head but laughed before adding, “Me too!”

“Becca!” He pretended to be outraged but Jesus, at least she had someone to vent her sexual frustrations with. He’d have to go home and get better reacquainted with his right hand. It was a truly exquisitely painful evening.

A hush fell over the room as everyone grabbed their seats at their respective table. As the important guests, including his father, appeared on the stage, Ma was brought back into the room and seated at the table next to Captain Rogers. She blushed heavily when the introductions were made and she only managed to wave awkwardly at them before the ceremony began.

It wasn’t as boring as Bucky had presumed it would be. Despite the long introductory speech that Dean Harris decided to make, he had managed to make it more interesting and it was a sad state of political affairs in America when there were still a lot of things to be said about ethics and political integrity.

Nonetheless, the tone of the ceremony was kept light, even when Captain Rogers was invited on stage at long last and managed to make a personal introduction to their father as if he and George Barnes had been serving together for the past few years. Throughout the whole short talk that Captain America gave, Dad openly stared at him like he was seeing for the first time the eighth wonder of the earth. Bucky would have to let him know that he hadn’t even looked at his children the way he had at Captain America then. Still, Dad was able to accept the accolades without fumbling much or blushing. He did shake the good captain’s hand a touch more than was conventionally accepted or necessary, but he also whispered something into Cap’s ear, though no one in the audience caught that. It did make Captain Rogers chuckle lightly so that was always a plus.

Dad kept it short and sweet, managing to sound both humble and funny. He thanked just about everyone under the sun, especially Ma, who blushed but looked proud and quite emotional. Bucky’s heart hurt in the sweetest way for his parents that had managed to be there for each other throughout the years, though he didn’t doubt that there had been times when it had been incredibly difficult to do so. His dad was famous in the family and his professional circles for always working hard, especially when he had a tough case to crack, that he’d forget at times to eat or visit his family. He hadn’t always been there when one needed him to be.

And Ma had taken a long time to learn to put distance between her job, the cases that she managed and the family life. Over the years, there had been countless families going through the Barnes house and both Becca and Bucky would wake up at times with strangers at the breakfast table as if that was the most normal thing to happen in the world. They weren’t necessarily a perfect family – there had been screaming matches along the years, the Irish stubbornness predominant still in their genes – but they’d been there for each other, accepting and loving. So at the end of the day, what more could Bucky ask for?
They clapped for their dad, Uncle Liam even hooted, proud and shining with love. Becca recorded just about every moment and Bucky might have taken a million photos but who was going to judge?

Bucky was just about to turn to Becca and make a comment about how Dad was going to sleep with Captain America’s picture under his pillow from now on so Ma should better watch out, when something small zinged past his ear and made the fruit basket on the neighboring table explode in tiny viscous pieces of fruit and wood. For a moment, it felt like all the noise in the room had been sucked out and everything ceased to exist. Then, between one second and the next, the whole room exploded in a cacophony of screams and horror.

A second bullet pierced through Dean Harris as if he was a piece of meat on a cleaver, making his entire body jerk and fall to the floor before anyone could catch their breaths. Bucky watched the scene uncomprehendingly for what felt like an eternity though it can't have been more than a few seconds. Then just as suddenly, what felt like all his blood rushed to his ears, pounding against his sensitive eardrums as he immediately grabbed Becca’s shoulders and pushed her to the floor, Michael instantly following their suit, covering for her from the flank.

Bucky scrunched his eyes closed and took a shuddering breath as another bullet exploded next to their table and another body fell to the floor with a grotesque thud. The small whimper of pain was snuffed out in an instant. In that insane moment, it crossed Bucky's mind that those were the sounds that would make up hell because there was no way a human being could just sound like that – grotesquely like a piece of meat, the physicality of it absurd. Becca was trembling in his arms, holding on to both him and Michael like a vice as if she was going to hold on good and hard and then maybe they were going to be all right.

Bucky bit his lip hard enough to bruise and opened his eyes again, daring to check behind him. Uncle Liam was bleeding from the forehead – he must have hurt himself when he hurled himself to the floor – but he had managed to grab Auntie Liv and push her under the table, which acted like a flimsy wooden shield. Uncle Ben had turned the chair into a shield as well, though it didn't cover much of his body, trying to keep himself as much as he could against Bucky, Becca, and Michael. It took Bucky less than a second to realize that Uncle Ben was using the chair and his own body as a shield against the onslaught of bullets to protect Bucky and the rest as much as he could.

He tried to make sense of the chaos around them but everything was absurdly surreal. There were bodies and blood all over the floor and Bucky couldn't attach names to them, their meaning to him lost. He forced himself to check for his parents but he couldn't see them. He couldn't see them. The enormity of the situation pressed against him like a vice, like someone literally was trying to tear his chest open and rip his heart out.

“Bucky, I don't see Mom and Dad! I don't see Mom and Dad!” Becca repeated frantically, her blunt fingers scratching the inside of his wrist, leaving bloody little half-moons that burnt Bucky.

“They were between Cap and Falcon!” Michael pointed out as he pressed next to his wife, his arms wrapped tightly around her. “They should be okay!” It didn't calm Bucky though because their parents' table had been the primary target. He could see that most of the bodies were around the central table. A new wave of bile rose at the back of his throat as he briefly squeezed Uncle Ben's hand. The storm of lead and metal, of splintered wood and ravished meat, seemed endless.

In the middle of the chaos, Black Widow was standing proud and tall and shooting up at one of the balconies in the opposite direction, no doubt the source of the initial attack. For an absurd moment, Bucky wondered where the hell she had gotten the gun, as the clothes that she had on wouldn’t have allowed a concealed weapon. She yelled something over her shoulder and Bucky followed her
eyes only to spot Captain America on the stage, trying to take the attention of the attackers on him without involving even more civilians, who were hiding under the chairs and tables, screaming and crying and god, god, Bucky couldn't see his parents. He still couldn't see them.

“Can you see them? Can you see them?” Becca asked feverishly as if she could read his thoughts, cowering under the table but still fierce and worried. “Bucky, can you see them?”

“No. No, I can’t.” He frantically looked around, trying to see whether Ma had time to hide under the table, whether she’d been able to duck just before the rest of the bullets rained on them like a metallic wave of death. A cold sweat broke out on his back, his mind going in circles, trying to picture where his parents were when the whole hell broke loose. He had turned to Becca. Why had he turned to Becca? He should have paid attention. He should have paid attention. He furiously scrubbed at his eyes, willing the tears away because he refused to think that something bad happened to their parents. No, his dad was larger than life – nothing was capable of hurting him. But he’s human, a vicious voice whispered in his ears and God, no, he couldn’t. He couldn’t contemplate anything happening to his family tonight. He’d rather die than face that.

Then suddenly, just as abruptly as the whole chaos had imploded around them, it completely stopped. Bucky flinched as the pit in his stomach grew bigger and bigger. Muffled sounds of crying and small gasping or gagging sounds could be heard but nothing else. The rest of the room looked like a hurricane of devastation had fallen upon it. In the middle of the entire chaos only three people were standing: Captain America, tall and proud on the stage, a merciless god of war, a half-smashed chair still in his hands; Black Widow, a small gun in her hand, scanning the upper balconies as if the entire structure was guilty of the sin. Bucky dared to look up as well to notice that the previous security men that had stood guard there were no longer. Bile rose to the back of his throat and it took several hard swallows to stop himself from gagging and throwing up right there on the floor. And lastly, but not least, there was Falcon towards the back of the room, a small drone flying around him, as if giving a soundless report. His stern face was set in stone, implacable.

“Natasha?” Bucky heard Captain America saying and he returned his attention towards the man. She signaled something without taking her eyes from the upper balconies, but it was clearly not good news from the way Captain America’s face darkened further and his attention turned towards the other balconies as well. Falcon’s drone flew higher, silent and menacing, as it began scanning the upper floor.

“Stay down, people!” Falcon ordered immediately when a few people tried to stand up. “The threat isn’t over yet! Stay down!” A few whimpers broke again, another few of them fully crying, but everyone listened to Falcon’s orders and stayed down.

Bucky checked his parents’ table again but he couldn’t see anything apart from Dean Harris’ body and Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ! He could hear Mrs. Harris softly crying but he couldn't check the other side of the table because of the long table cloths that spilled now around the floor like broken wings. The bodies were scattered around like human sacrifices at the altar of a merciless god and Bucky couldn't comprehend, just couldn't understand the useless violence of it.

Something terrible twisted inside his chest, leaving him almost breathless. He couldn’t stay there without checking on his parents – he needed to know, he needed to know. Maybe they were hurt and needed assistance and the Avengers were currently engaged, trying to protect them. If he’d walked to the other table, he would have made five, maybe six paces. But he would need to crawl. If he kept his head down, all he had to do was crawl.

He turned back towards Becca and met her eyes. She was holding Auntie Liv’s hand and Michael’s
with the other. If worst came to worst, she had Michael and Uncle Ben there to protect her. Uncle Liam was bleeding next to Auntie Liv but it looked shallow and not life-threatening. And Uncle Ben – Jesus, he really needed to have a talk about Uncle Ben’s tendency to sacrifice himself for the others. He was scanning their surroundings as much as Bucky had done and seemed ready to fight.

Bucky looked back at their parents’ table, then back at Becca. She understood in a second what he was planning to do and her eyes widened. Over the years, at Thanksgiving dinners, various graduation or birthday parties, and other family pot-lucks, Becca and Bucky had been mocked not only for the musical nicknames that made them sound like a comic duo from the fifties, but also for the unnatural way in which they were able to communicate at times. One look was sufficient for Bucky to know when Becca had been pestered enough about her future prospects and one gesture of Bucky’s was enough for her to know that he was annoyed and needed saving.

He looked back at their parents’ table and Becca nodded in response, eyes liquid and soft. They needed certainty. Above anything else, they needed the certainty that their parents were fine and that they’d still be a unit after that. Bucky pressed to the floor and pushed. Uncle Ben made an abortive attempt to stop him but missed. He hissed and Bucky looked over his shoulder to meet his eyes, scared and confused. Then he returned his attention back to his task and crawled again. The movement was enough to attract Black Widow’s attention, who must have caught a glimpse of his intent because she coldly said in what might have normally been her soothing voice, but sounded cold like granite.

“Get back, civilian!” She sneered as she checked the upper surroundings. “They’re fine, just stay back!”

She’s lying, that vicious voice returned despite the utter relief that made his legs feel like Jello. But she’d have no reason. Except maybe hide the devastation that was expecting them and make him compliant so that he didn’t endanger himself or some other bullshit. But he didn’t want to endanger everyone else. He didn’t want to make Black Widow wish she’d stomped him like the cockroach that he felt like at the moment. She wouldn’t lie. She wouldn’t lie, would she?

Captain America came off the stage and approached Black Widow cautiously. One look from him made Bucky wish he could slink back under a table and never return to the surface. Don’t do anything stupid, the eyes said, hard like vibranium, devoid of any warmth and reassurance like they’d previously been. Bucky was about to listen to the silent order when he spotted something from the corner of his right eye. Later on, he’d think about this moment – the only one he’d remember crystal clear from that particular evening – and wonder how much he understood what was going to happen. Had he been just one space further down the floor, a little bit higher or even slightly to the left and he might have missed the metallic glint in the small alcove just above the main entrance. Perhaps, initially, it had been designed like a booth for the guy with the lights or a DJ. Bucky couldn’t tell the original use, but he watched the metallic glint and understood in less than a second what was about to happen.

Terrible moments brought terrible clarity. Instinct screamed at him. The only way to act had been decided before he could even make his legs move. To the roar of his blood in his ears, Bucky pushed himself up and sprinted towards Captain America. Space and time dilated. It felt like ages, indeed eons spanned between him and the good captain before his whole body slammed into the other man’s, hard and terribly bruising. It was pure momentum that had propelled him with enough force to move the human wall that made up Captain America’s body. Between one breath and the other, they were falling to the ground. Bucky could only spare a thought of maybe being in time when excruciating pain speared through his body like a lance made of heat, hotter than the light of a young star. In a cacophony of sounds – another gun triggered, a gasp and a horrified scream – Bucky crashed to the floor on top of Captain America’s body with a horrible shuddering lurch.
Pain exploded on the left side of his body, his lungs suddenly caught in a mean vice that squeezed them out of every particle of air. Bucky blinked as his body was carefully laid on the floor – he must have sunk to the bottom of a dark ocean, everything darkening at the edges, all sounds muffled and far away. He blinked again and tried to breathe as a cold fire spread to his left side. *Bad idea*, he thought in a distant kind of way. Maybe he shouldn’t breathe, maybe he should hold his breath for a long minute. He was at the bottom of the ocean after all.

Then for the briefest of moments, his entire horizon was made of Captain's startling face – *the bluest of blue*, Bucky thought in a sort of excruciating delirium – and it looked absolutely desolated. Bucky couldn’t understand why the Captain's face was crumpled in a sort of quiet devastation and he wanted to soothe it as much as he had wanted to shield him from that glint. That goddamn glint of death. Another moment then he was gone.

His father’s face suddenly appeared in his field of vision, his blue eyes bluer than the sky on a summer day. Someone made a horrible sound, animal-like, making Bucky’s hair raise in terror, then Ma appeared as well on the other side of him. Her hands hovered over him in a devastating sort of embrace, indecisive of whether they should land. Like a half-abandoned prayer, she soothingly pressed her left hand in his hair. They were okay, his brain seemed to focus on that simple fact. They looked okay.

“Shhh, it’s going to be all right, baby boy,” Ma said, voice horribly hoarse, silent tears spilling over
her cheeks. “It’s going to be okay. Help is on its way. You just hold on! You hear, Bucky? You just hold on!”

God, Bucky wanted to joke about it, maybe say you hold on or something of the likes because his whole ribcage felt on fire and each breath was painful. So painful! Suddenly, his entire body jolted and he screamed in agony. Someone was pressing on his left side, that person was flaying him open, scorching hands digging into his insides.

“I’m sorry, son! I’m sorry!” Dad looked utterly devastated. “God, I’m so sorry.” It took a long moment to realize that his dad was crying because he was the one that was pressing. Pressing on what? Bucky couldn’t remember anymore other than that the pain was terrible and he needed it to stop. The darkness at the edge of his vision grew in strength. He was exhausted. He just needed to rest a little.

But he had ruined Dad’s day. His mind was sluggishly trying to come up with the reason but couldn’t remember. Maybe it wasn’t important. He moved his hand as much as he could and pressed it against Dad’s side, who immediately grabbed it and squeezed it. Ma made another terrible sound, like a wounded animal as she kept on squeezing his other hand. It was a soft and warm and barely-there kind of touch. Maybe he should tell her to squeeze harder. He could take it. It couldn’t even come close to the flare on his left side. He couldn’t speak, his mouth dry like a husk, his tongue heavy and swollen, but his dad must have understood what he was trying to ask because he immediately said, “We’re okay, Buck, everyone is okay.”

*Good,* Bucky wanted to say. *I love you all.* But his lips refused to move and his vision was darkening still, so much so, that he could barely see Ma anymore. Then the entire ceiling seemed to explode in red and black colors and then there was nothing.

Chapter End Notes

The awesome art for this chapter can be found [here](#). It’s absolutely amazing and wonderful (there aren’t enough epithets in the English language to do it justice) and em-dibujsb should be showered with praise and love. Seriously, look at the extraordinary art! <3333 happy sigh and heart eyes

A massive thank you goes to fancyh as well because her job as a beta reader was all the more made difficult by the fact that English is my second language. But she was kind and patient and I owe her a lot. Please know that all the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. :)
Interlude 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Becca Barnes-Proctor

They weren’t going to receive good news, Becca thought as soon as she watched the medical team enter the small waiting area. Becca couldn’t remember how they all got here – the screams had been terrible and drowned everything else out, and she still couldn’t get that thud out of her mind. The thud of Bucky’s body collapsing to the floor on top of Captain America as if he was a rag doll with no will of its own. The slight hitch of his breath. Even through the cacophony of her parents’ misery, she could hear him.

Becca rubbed her hands together then pushed them hard into the meat of her thighs as she stood up straighter. From the corner of her eyes, she could see her parents standing up straighter as well, though Dad looked a hundred years older and Mom was on the verge of collapse. Becca really didn’t know how much more her parents could take before they too would need medical attention. Michael still had his arm wrapped around her shoulders like a warm anchor and Becca was grateful – so grateful – because she was exhausted and insanely angry. Irrationally angry – it did cross her mind that she’d rather scratch those doctors’ eyes out or rip their tongues out rather than listen to what they were about to say.

She pushed the tips of her fingers harder into her thighs, swallowing convulsively. Mom began to softly weep even before the doctors took a seat at the small round table that was covered with half-eaten sandwiches and empty coffee cups. Becca was sure that her family made a pitiful sight with their evening wear, crinkled shirts, smeared make-up and hair in disarray, hands still stained in her brother’s blood, though they had washed and washed and washed.

The last doctor that entered – tall and wiry with a lithe quality to his body – spoke first. “Hello, my name is Dr. Rahman. I am the surgeon in charge of Mr. James Barnes’ care and treatment. These are my colleagues, Dr. Reyes, who was the anesthetist assisting me,” the petite lady with kind almond eyes gently nodded at them, “and this is my fellow surgeon, Dr. Connolly.” The man on Dr. Rahman’s left side, with a shock of auburn hair and stormy green eyes, nodded solemnly at them.

They all nodded in acknowledgment and quickly introduced themselves, without any flourishes, without any embellishments of the type: My name is Becca, I’m James’ little sister. When he was fourteen, he grabbed all his money and bought me the Penguin collection of Alexandre Dumas’s novels because I kept on saying I wanted to be Athos and I kept on bossing him around in French that must have sounded horrible coming from me. He didn’t snap once at me. He’s my brother – he came when Eddie broke up with me after three years together, brought ice cream and tear-jerker movies because he wanted me to let it all out. James is my brother – he broke his arm when he was eleven. It had been one of the scariest days of my life.

“What’s the situation, Dr. Rahman?” Dad asked, each word broken into a thousand little pieces. Becca blinked her tears away and concentrated hard on what the doctor was trying to say.

“I know that one of my nurses ensured that you were up to date with everything that was happening in the theatre. But please, let me explain the situation a little. As you are already aware, James was brought to us with a gunshot wound on the left side of the upper abdomen.” Dr. Rahman pushed his glasses a little higher on the bridge of his nose. “The impact of the bullet caused major damage
to the spleen. What it basically did was break its covering and thus cause a rupture. Unfortunately, we had to do an open splenectomy.”

“In plain English, Doc,” Uncle Ben snapped. “What does that mean?”

“We had to remove James’ entire spleen.”

“But that’s okay, right?” Auntie Liv intervened, her blue handkerchief a tangled mess in her left hand. “I’ve heard that it’s possible to live without the spleen. People do it all the time.”

“It’s not that simple, ma’am.” Dr. Rahman cleared his voice before continuing, “People don’t know this, but the spleen is actually an important organ in our body, performing a vital duty: that of fighting off infections. The procedure wasn’t easy either. An open splenectomy – or basically, open surgery for the removal of the spleen – involved a large surgical cut on the left side of James’ abdomen. It was imperative to perform it as soon as possible as the ruptured spleen had caused life-threatening internal bleeding.”

Mom’s agonizing sobs shattered the dismayed silence that had descended upon the room and not even Dad’s gentle words or caresses could calm her down. She batted his hands away at first but soon enough, she collapsed into his open arms, seeking the comfort that only a parent could give in that excruciating moment. His arms tightened around her before Dad was even able to look back at the team of doctors.

“Are you going to tell me next that my son’s heart stopped doing the surgery?” The horrible wet lurch in Dad’s voice made Becca flinch.

“No, Mr. Barnes, but unfortunately, due to the duress of the procedure, one of his lungs collapsed.” Dr. Connolly was the one that chose to answer. “I’m not sure how familiar you all are with what a collapsed lung means, but imagine that our lungs are balloons that always inflate and deflate. Due to trauma that the body experienced, James’ left lung began to lose air and then no longer inflated properly due to the buildup air in his chest cavity. We had to deal with that as well. At the moment, he is intubated to help him with his breathing.”

“During the surgery, we also had to make sure that there was no additional damage to the organs that surround the spleen, namely the stomach, the colon, and the pancreas,” Dr. Rahman rushed to give them at least a feeble relief, his words almost tumbling out of his mouth like rocks in a landslide. “I’m happy to say that, apart from some minor bruising on the pancreas, which we’ll keep on monitoring, there was no other damage to the adjacent organs.”

“That’s good news, right?” Becca’s mumbled question made the doctor nod perfunctory to her.

“Yes, it is.”

“What aren’t you telling us, Dr. Rahman?” Uncle Liam crossed his arms and frowned when it was clear that there was more to come, that Bucky’s collapsed lung and internal bleeding weren’t necessarily the only issues. The good doctor took his eyeglasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You have to understand that, with any major surgery, there is a slight chance of infection. In James case, the danger increased ten-fold with the removal of his spleen. So he’s at high risk of developing internal infection. We’ve immediately started a course of strong antibiotics in the hopes that we’ll stave off the risk of the infection. However, we can’t guarantee that it’s going to work.”

“Can this infection become life-threatening?” Uncle Ben asked and thank God for her uncles
because Becca surely couldn’t ask these terrible questions.

“Unfortunately, yes.” The entire room exploded in a mess of sobs and sharp intakes of breath. Immediately, Dr. Rahman raised his hands in an appeasing gesture. “I’m not saying that this is happening at the moment, but usually, after a spleen removal, infections develop quite quickly and can make a person severely ill. Medical data shows that such an infection can become lethal in roughly thirty percent of the cases. Now, normally, I wouldn’t be worried for James – he’s a healthy young man, no major surgeries in his medical history. Apart from an appendectomy when he was seventeen and a broken arm when he was eleven, he didn’t have significant health issues. Which is promising. However, he has lost a lot of blood before and during surgery. His body is weakened due to the trauma that it had suffered.”

Becca pushed her hair behind her ears convulsively and tried to delay the question that was mostly on everyone’s minds. Mom was openly crying now, her sobs accompanied by Auntie Liv’s in a symphony of pain and suffering. Becca couldn’t ask the doctors what they were trying to say in their fancy medical talk. She couldn’t ask because saying those words out loud would mean giving them a reality and she couldn’t. She couldn’t do that to her brother, that goddamn moron, who thought that jumping in front of a bullet for Captain America was actually a good idea. She would have killed him herself if her whole heart hadn’t ached with the lack of his presence.

“So what you’re saying is that James might not make it?” Michael’s voice had broken halfway, but he had managed to push the words out almost in a snarl. Becca looked up at her husband and squeezed his hand tighter.

“I’m saying that we need to prepare for the worst. At the moment, James is in the intensive care unit of our medical wing. He’s intubated and we’re keeping an eye on his blood pressure. He’s also connected to multiple IV lines. We’re keeping him comfortable by administering painkillers plus a strong course of IV antibiotics to try and prevent infection as much as we can. Some of the side-effects of these antibiotics are quite hard on the body, however, the benefits far surpass the risks.” The doctor leaned forward and finally rested his hands on the cluttered table, his fingers intertwined. “I don’t want to lie to you. The next forty-eight to seventy-two hours are critical.”

“Can we see him?” Mom asked in a small hoarse voice as if she was no longer sure whether she would be allowed to see her own son.

“Yes, of course. Captain Rogers arranged for the immediate family to be able to access James twenty-four/seven,” Doctor Reyes answered in a mild voice. “No more than two people at one time though. An apartment will be made available for those of you who will have to wait for their turn. It’s important to keep the risk of infection to a minimum, so please wash your hands before and after you leave the room and wear the medical caps, gloves, and gowns that the staff will provide you with.”

“Thank you.”

“Also, we will need to ask additional questions related to James’ vaccinations but also related to some common infections that he might have had in the past.” Dr. Connolly filled in the despondent silence. “I will bring a list and I will ask one of you to tick all the ones that you think James had or might have had in the past.”

“Even if he will recover well – and if he passes the seventy-two-hour mark, I don’t see why not – he has a long road ahead. A full recovery would normally mean four to six weeks of medical monitoring, though that could be done at home. But he will always be more susceptible to infection. For instance, even the common cold can become dangerous to him. But we will talk more about it when we reach the seventy-two-hour mark.”
“Are there any questions that you might like to ask at the moment?” Dr. Reyes looked around the room at the sea of bowed heads and teary eyes with a commiserating look on her face.

“What are the chance of James survival at the moment?”

“In the next seventy-two hours?” Dr. Rahman stalled. His fingers became white-knuckled in their own grip. “Thirty-five, maybe forty percent.” Becca shook her head in dismay and hid her face inside Michael’s neck, gently anchoring her. She scrunched her eyes closed and breathed the soothing scent of her husband, the gentle brush of his breath. “After that mark,” she could hear Dr. Rahman as if from a great distance, “the chances drastically improve.” A slight hitch of breath, another sob, then, “I promise we will do our best for your son. We will fight for him until the very end.”

“Please, just take care of my baby boy,” Mom sobbed the words. Becca’s fingers tightened suddenly on Michael’s shirt, fisting the material. It was a certain type of new agony to hear Mom broken like that. “Just please.”

“We’ll do our best, Mrs. Barnes. We promise we’ll do our best.” Dr. Rahman stood up, followed by his colleagues. “I will ask the first two people that want to see James to please follow me now. You can then create a rota amongst yourselves. The only time you will be asked to leave the room will be when the medical staff will perform all the changing of IVs and make all the other necessary medical checks.”

Her whole body was shaking as she managed to watch her parents immediately stand up and follow the doctors. She was sure that should she need to stand up for anything, she would collapse like a rag doll. Besides, she’d need all the necessary strength to see Bucky in that bed. Her fingers tightened on Michael’s shirt, white-knuckled and throbbing. She should do something. Maybe pray. Comfort Auntie Liv, who was now crying louder. Hug her uncles. Pray. Seek more comfort from Michael. Make phone calls. Pray. Pray. Pray.

Becca scrunched her eyes closed and breathed.

**

Becca was staring down into her coffee, eyes sandy and sore. She’d been sleeping here and there, trying to pry Mom away from Bucky enough to eat something or sleep a little. It’d been a difficult mission and only the promise of fresh clothes, more comfortable and thus more promising to keep her time with Bucky, had convinced Mom to step outside for a few minutes at a time. Even then, she’d been in a rush to return by her son’s bedside. Mom had taken a shower in record time and had managed to munch on a sandwich before Becca even ate half of hers. Becca didn’t have it in her to tell Mom to take it easy, that she’d need all her strength in the days to come. She let her go but made sure that Michael would be the one to go next so that Dad could take a break as well.

In fact, all of them had been sleeping here and there, living mostly on coffee and sandwiches that were brought to them with freakish regularity. Her uncles and auntie had refused to leave their side and had tried as much as possible to help Mom and Dad with their vigil. Becca spared a thought to the rest of their families. When they were all brought to the Avengers Tower (that was still so shocking Becca refused to think about it), they were advised – strongly advised – to keep Bucky’s situation secret and just say that they were all fine, waiting to be debriefed. Even promise that they’d contact the family as soon as possible. This was an already murky point because hiding something from their families could only get them so far before the Avengers Tower would be assaulted by the Barnes, Proctor, and Taylor families, demanding to speak with their relatives. Not even the Avengers could face this terrifying union – Becca knew all too well what she was talking about.
They’d been offered an apartment three floors up where they could rest or sleep. Becca had to ensure that her uncles and auntie would get some rest as well by basically blackmailing them into thinking that they’d be no use to Mom and Dad if they were exhausted. It had been difficult as it was to convince Mom and Dad to leave their son’s bed even when begged and pleaded with.

Becca pinched the bridge of her nose, pushing the tips of her fingers into her eyes a little harder. The exhaustion that had spread through her body was bone-deep and relentless. Almost thirty-six hours since Bucky had been shot and they still couldn’t breathe.

“Do you think it’s my fault?” Dad’s question made Becca’s hair at the back of her head rise. She looked up at her father, sitting across from her at the small table, looking old and diminished. He was dressed in a blue t-shirt and black sweats, courtesy of their host, but they all hung on his frame like washing on a dry line. He kept on rubbing his unshaven cheeks, pressing his blunt fingers nails on the small cleft that reminded Becca so much of her brother.

“Dad, no, don’t even think about it,” Becca managed to croak the words. She wiped a stray tear running softly on her left cheek.

“Maybe I spoke too much about Captain America.” Dad shrugged and rubbed harder at his right cheek, a despondent mirrored image of Becca. “Have I made my son think that I valued him less than Captain Rogers? Have I made him doubt of his importance to me?”

“Dad, please, don’t think like that. Please.”

“But how else could I think?” He lowered his eyes and gripped the coffee mug tighter. “My son decided that saving the life of a super-powered soldier was more important than his own life. Goddamn it!” He slammed his hands on the table, its echo harsh in the deathly silence of the room. Becca flinched, not sure how to proceed.

In the end, she gently placed her hands over his and squeezed them gently. “Dad, we can’t possibly know what went through his head. I’m not sure that he’d remember anyway. But I’m sure – I’m absolutely certain that he’s never thought like that. He’d never think that you love or appreciate him any less.”

“You say that but I can’t help thinking that this is all my fault. Maybe if I hadn’t talked so much about Captain America, maybe if my family hadn’t spoken about him so much… this whole hero worship that now sounds so goddamn trivial and unimportant.”

“Dad, that way lies only madness. All these scenarios won’t help the situation. Plus I honestly don’t think that they’d make a difference.”

“Yes, maybe.” Dad’s jagged smile was painful to witness. “Your mom can’t even look at me. Maybe –”

“Dad, seriously now, don’t go there.” Becca squeezed his hands tighter. “I’m sure that Mom doesn’t blame you in any way. She’s simply exhausted. She’s so overwhelmed with her own pain that she can barely face yours. But no, I don’t think she blames you for anything.”

“You’re a good girl.” Dad’s eyes betrayed an abyss of responsibility and pain. Becca sincerely doubted that this would be their only discussion on the theme. It was all the more vital that her brother would wake up sooner just so he could also put all those doubts to rest.

“Everything is going to be okay, Dad.”

“I hope so.” Dad brought her hands to his mouth, kissing them gently, then looked at her with
liquid eyes. “I hope both you and Bucky never doubt that we love and care for you above all else. I’d use ten Captains as a shield if it meant that I’d protect your life.”

“I love you too, Dad.” Her heart surged against her chest, doubling the time of its beats. “And I’m sure Bucky never doubted your love for him.” She sighed but kept her hands on her dad’s. “That being said, I’ll rip a new one into this moron once he wakes up.” The pale shadow of a smile lingered on her dad’s lips. “I’m not joking. We’re in the right place anyway. Next time he’ll think twice before jumping in front of a bullet for any of the Avengers.”

“I see you think there might be a next time.”

“Well, taking into consideration his level of idiocy, could you honestly doubt it? Dad, please tell me now before he wakes up. Was he adopted? Dropped in the head when he was little?”

Dad chuckled awfully wet. “No, nothing like that.” He took his hands away, then wiped at his face. “But I remember that one time, Bucky was running after Johnny Mercer – remember that kid? – and came back with this ugly cut on his calf. He must have been seven or eight. And as I drove him to the hospital while your mom was holding him in the back seat, he kept on trying to comfort her.” Dad slowly wiped the tears away. “I swear to God, I’ve never seen a kid more prone to accidents than your brother.”

“He did break his arm.”

“True. He always had bruised kneecaps and elbows, small cuts and lesions. Each one of them gave me heartache. I remember coming home from the hospital, after he broke his arm – and almost felt like burning down your grandpa’s hayloft. It was a visceral hate for that place.” Dad sighed and rested his chin on his hands. “I just wanted him to be happy. That’s all a parent ever wants for their child. To be happy. And even the thought that I might have made him believe that I’d want him to do something like that – to sacrifice himself for Captain Rogers …. it’s unbearable. I can’t stand it.”

“I’m sure that he’d never think like that. My idiot brother had always had a heart of gold. Maybe he didn’t even think about it. He just acted. Ms. Romanov did say he must have been the first to see the shooter and –”

A light knock on the door interrupted her and Dad was quick to say enter to the person on the other side.

Captain Rogers had always seemed larger than life, but up close? That impression was magnified tenfold. It wasn’t just the way he carried himself, the large vastness of his shoulders or the way he looked as if he swallowed two linebackers for breakfast. It was in the sharp jut of his jaw, in the way his blue eyes were kind and yet distant. This wasn’t a guy in need of saving. This wasn’t a guy worth her brother’s life, she thought absurdly hatefully.

Becca bit the inside of her cheek so hard that she tasted blood, in the vain hope that she’d manage to abate the ugly thoughts that swirled in her mind. Captain America was accompanied by Falcon and both of them carried their frowns like badges of honor. At least they’ lost their uniforms and they were dressed more casually, giving them an almost human look.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes. Mrs. Barnes-Proctor.” His voice carried the tone of a man used to being listened to, yet shy about it. “I’m sorry to disturb you but do you mind if we talk a little? It’s pretty important.”

“Yes, of course.” Dad gestured for the empty chairs at the table and both Falcon and Captain
America sat awkwardly. Even in the direst of circumstances, Dad had never lost his Midwestern manners.

“We are sorry to barge in at such a difficult time,” Falcon said in a gentle tone, his almond eyes kind, and understanding, “however we have some important information about the shooting that we’d like to discuss with you.”

“Of course, Mr. Falcon.”

“Sam, please.”

“What happened?” Becca asked sharply and refused to avert her eyes when Captain's own blue eyes rested on her.

“We’ve identified the shooters,” he answered, at last, his voice calm and efficient, as if he was just debriefing them and not talking about an event that had shaken the foundation of her entire family. “They were part of a Hydra sleeper-cell, apparently self-contained and acting in a final and desperate attempt to bring… me down.”

“How many people were killed?” Her harsh question made Mr. Wilson’s frown deepen, but he answered nonetheless in a level voice.

“Six people dead, four in serious condition, but we think they’re going to make it. Ten with minor injuries. None of the perpetrators were apprehended alive.” He paused a little. “And then there’s your brother.”

“Bucky?”

“Yes.” Captain America cleared his voice. “At the moment, we've managed to keep the names of the victims away from the media. However, we'll shortly have a press conference.” Captain’s mouth crumpled in unhappiness. “We'll give a short report and all the information we currently have on the shooting. We'll also release the names of the murdered victims. However, we would like to keep the other victims’ identity a secret to protect their families and also to protect their time convalescing. For now at least. But James is a special case.”

“Why is he a special case?”

“Because he was hurt protecting me and because we brought him to the Avengers Tower for medical care.” All of a sudden, Captain America sighed and his shoulders stooped dejectedly as if all the air had been squeezed out of him.

“I don’t understand,” Dad echoed her own confusion.

“If Bucky’s name is released amongst the others, the press is going to wonder why he was the only one brought to the Avengers Tower for medical care.” All of a sudden, Captain America sighed and his shoulders stooped dejectedly as if all the air had been squeezed out of him.

“It has already put him in harm’s way,” Becca said viciously. “What the hell are you trying to say? That you don’t want to release Bucky’s name to the public? That you’d actually want to hide what he’s done for you?”

“Mrs. Proctor-Barnes, what—”
“Becca, for crying out loud!”

“Becca,” Mr. Wilson – Sam – said gently, not even remotely exasperated by her belligerent attitude. “The reason why we’d insist on this, at least until James wakes up, is because this could prove dangerous for him. He’d be hounded by the news outlets, he’d be pestered by reporters, making his recovery much more difficult. Not to mention that there are all sorts of unsavory characters out there that would love to get their hands on a guy that saved an Avenger. We’re not always a popular bunch.”

“We simply suggest,” Captain America continued, “to keep his name away from the press for now. Once he wakes up, if James decides that he wants to go public with a statement and tell the world what has happened, of course we’ll respect his wishes.”

“But for now we should keep our mouths shut,” Becca concluded and jerked her forearm away from her dad when he tried to appease her. She couldn’t say why she was so angry – why she’d been especially angry at Captain America – but she was.

“No, no, we can’t hide what happened to him! God, don’t you people get it? We have a huge family! They’ve heard about the shooting; our phones have been ringing non-stop. There’s no way to hide the truth from them – they’re worse than the press. Yeah, we didn’t say anything yet about Bucky but we can’t keep this from them much longer.”

“Becca, I know you’re angry,” Sam said in a soft voice, “but there’s –”

“Of course I’m angry! Jesus Christ, you people are unbelievable!” she shouted and stood up suddenly, her chair falling down with a loud bang. She was crying again so she furiously wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. “I’m so angry at those stupid fuckers that decided to hunt you down when innocent people were present. I’m angry at my brother for choosing to sacrifice himself for a guy who’s a super-soldier. Literally. How fucked up is that? And now you guys come with all this bullshit about not telling our family what has happened. At least give us that. Jesus Christ!” She threw her hands in the air in absolute exasperation though deep down there was a twinge of pain.

She grabbed her chair with jerky moves and set it right before sitting on it again, sniffing loudly. She blew her nose on a used tissue and wiped her face again. Then squeezed her dad’s hand in comfort. She stared back at the two Avengers in front of her, her ears ringing with the remnants of her anger.

“I’m sorry. I’m just – I’m sorry,” she crunched the words between her lips as if they were solid poison.

“No, you don’t have anything to apologize for.” Sam offered her another tissue, which she accepted gratefully. Man, he was really good. Becca gave him that. Captain Rogers was facing her and Dad, a sort of devastated look on his face. Becca watched Sam look carefully at his friend and they both fell silent. He added after a while, “How about if we spin the story differently?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll release James name amongst the other victims’ at some point, but we won’t mention anything about where he’s being cared for. If the press notices anything, we’ll say that he was the only one in critical condition and in order to save his life, we brought him to the Tower.”
“You think it will work?” Captain’s question was hoarse and jagged around each vowel.

“I don’t see why not.” Sam shrugged. “I’ll ask Pepper to spin the story with her PR team when the time comes. And after, if James wants to give his account to the press, then we’ll take it from there.” Captain America nodded but said little else.

“Could we inform our family of what has been going on?” Dad asked, at last, his voice slightly calmer than Becca’s. “Our family members have been worried sick since the news broke out and they’re not easily appeased.”

“Of course.” Sam smiled reassuringly. “I’d suggest not to tell them yet about Bucky’s bravery though. Just for now. We all know how loving family members are.”

“I understand.” A shaky intake of breath, and then a wobbly smile set on Dad’s lips. “Now if only that stubborn boy decides to fight for us.”

They smiled reassuringly back but didn’t offer platitudes. Becca lived under no illusion that they weren’t aware of Bucky’s medical report. She carefully watched Captain Rogers as he stood up and said goodbye to them. He appeared tired, a deep frown marring his face and making him look even more foreboding. She bit her lip. She was angry at him. She was angry in a way she hadn’t been in a long time.

But as she returned to her coffee, ignoring her dad’s chastising, she wondered how much longer her anger was going to last before giving way to despair.

**

Fifty-six hours and Bucky developed a fever. All bets were off. No one slept or breathed during the following six hours until an exhausted Dr. Rahman came to announce that the fever was going down. The terrible new symptom was well controlled within the next four hours, and no further medication had been added to the already long list that Bucky was pumped with.

**

Seventy-three hours and twenty-seven minutes. Becca paced in the corridor as her parents were inside Dr. Rahman's office. She'd been sleeping when they were called in, one hour longer than she had been planning. She scowled for good measure at her husband, who perfectly ignored her. Thirty-one minutes. Jesus, could they come out already? Thirty-six minutes. Was this clock even moving?

A door opened and her mom was the first to come out. She was crying. For the past three days, Becca had been exposed to all different sorts of tears: painful tears, exhausted tears, despondent tears. Mom looked up and smiled, and Becca?

Becca allowed herself to burst into tears for the first time in three days in front of her mom. Mom's warm embrace was welcomed and well-received. Becca clung to her for a very long time after that.

**

Bucky looked better, Becca thought as soon as she saw her brother in the new room, the anxiety of wishful thinking filling her up. Almost ninety hours since the surgery, the doctors had decided to move Bucky from ICU to his own medical room, trying to keep him more comfortable. The risk of infection wasn’t completely gone but it would be manageable as long as they continued to abide by the standard rules. They still had to wear gowns and medical hats, but at least now, they were allowed to touch him as long as they washed their hands before and after.
Becca shuffled in her seat and then rubbed her eyes with her hands, before taking all in again. Despite the exhaustion, she felt like this was the first breath of fresh air in days.

The room in which Bucky had been moved was large and airy, with a beautiful panorama of the Manhattan skyline. It had comfortable chairs and even a couch. But most importantly, Bucky wasn’t connected to so many machines and drips. They had taken out the tube, though there was still a nasal cannula and the band of the blood pressure machine hadn’t disappeared either. He was still connected to the heart monitor, but there weren’t so many needles in his arms and feet. Becca had been horrified to see that doctors had connected one IV to a vein in his left foot – luckily, that was now gone.

She took comfort in seeing her brother in the hospital bed, sleeping and breathing on his own. The doctors advised that it wouldn’t be long now until he’d wake up. However, apart from stirring a little and even a slight flutter of his eyelids, Bucky continued to sleep like the male wounded version of Sleeping Beauty.

It’d been days upon days since the last time Becca heard her brother’s voice. Her fingers brushed softly over Bucky’s scraped knuckles. Ever since he had started working as a mechanic, she’d watched his hands make their own symphony praising her brother’s life – his elegant fingers that could still caress the keystrokes of a piano would have callouses upon callouses, bruised or scratched knuckles, grime under his fingernails. He’d wash his hands with the strongest kind of soap, he’d rub his hands raw in a poor attempt to get rid of the grime. She’d make jokes each time she saw him but secretly, she’d been proud of him.

Fuck! Fuck! Why didn’t she tell him? She’d always been proud of their close relationship, their way of always being in touch and feeling comfortable with discussing their problems. Becca had been the first to find out that Bucky was gay, she’d been the one on whom he practiced his coming out speech, prepared for their parents. Bucky had been the one to drive to Philadelphia three years before, dropping everything, to help her and Michael after being stranded at the airport for more than twenty hours. Time and time again, they’d been there for each other but his gesture had still taken her by surprise.

Every time she closed her eyes, she could still see him – the way he looked at her over his shoulder. The way his eyes hardened, determined and unshakable. And she could still hear him crying out in pain when his father had pressed a thick napkin on his wound at Black Widow’s suggestion. She sighed heavily – it seemed there had been a howl lodged in her throat for days now, begging to be released.

Becca rubbed at her sore eyes hard. She was exhausted. She was tired of crying, tired of trying to read the vital signs of her brother like a nobody trying to piece together the secret meanings of the Rosetta stone. The futility of it all was grinding on her nerves. She briefly spared a thought to her parents who had finally agreed to go and sleep a few hours, hoping that by the time they’d wake up, their son would be awake too. It was a sort of hellish helplessness to watch a loved one sick or injured, unable to help, unable to soothe the pain. Unable to heal. Unable to do anything but sit and wait.

Michael silently pressed a cup of steaming black coffee in her hands and sat next to her. He’d been awake for much longer. She’d been lucky and got some hours of sleep some time ago, but her husband had been the one doing the rounds, making sure that her parents would accept to switch with Uncle Ben or Uncle Liam, that Auntie Liv had stopped crying each time she saw Bucky. That Becca herself was well and that she’d go and grab a few hours of sleep, a coffee, or a meal.

She sweetly kissed his cheek before she took a sip of her coffee. They drank their steaming coffees
in silence, its smell bitter and delicious, even for a tea addict like Becca. She sighed after a while, then rested her head on Michael’s shoulder, the hot cup an anchor to this world. Immediately, her husband began to soothingly run his fingers through her hair.

“I’m so angry,” she admitted in a careful whisper. It had taken her a while to realize that her cold fury towards Captain Rogers wasn’t logical, that he didn’t deserve her blame or her rage. Sitting by Bucky’s bed, the clarity of the entire situation dawned on her like a sort of sneaky anticlimax. Michael’s fingers didn’t stutter when he heard her say again, “I’m so fucking angry at him.”

“Bucky?”

“Yeah.” Becca watched her brother’s chest rise and fall, its movement reassuring. “I’m so angry that I could scream.”

“You could.” Michael set his cup of coffee on the floor, then the same did to hers and they hugged as if they hadn’t seen each other in years. Her husband really gave the best hugs, only topped by her mom’s. It had been one of the reasons why she’d fallen in love with him in the first place. That and the beautiful shy smile that lingered at the corner of his lips, tender and sweet like a beautiful summer rain the first time after he kissed her. “I bet these guys have a screaming room – you know, with always being frustrated at the world and everything. They must have a room specially designed to vent their anger.”

“Or a punching room. Just for punching, nothing else. Just punch stuff to make one feel better.”

“And inexhaustible supplies of coffee.”

“Or tea.”

“Or tea, fine, you snob. Inexhaustible supplies of coffee and tea and cookies.”

She could feel her lips twitch, “And a room with all sorts of mechanic parts and whatnot to make the inner geek in Bucky fangirl all over the place. God!” She sobbed, the word a mangled mess of sounds as her fingers convulsed on her husband’s gown. She bit the inside of her cheek hard, but her pain was relentless. “God, he might have never annoyed me again with his fucking nerding over Stark’s whatever crap or the latest model of car he managed to get going.”

“He’s going to make it, honey.” Michael pulled her into his arms and god, she’d never been so grateful for the difference in height between them as she was in that moment. She pressed herself tighter into her husband’s chest like she could burrow inside of him forever. She hid her teary face inside his neck and breathed, her arms wrapped tight around him. “He’s going to make it,” Michael reiterated and tightened his hold on her.

“He’s such an asshole. He had to save Captain America’s life. That goddamn jerk!” Becca cried softly. “I’m going to kick his ass.”

“So he’s a brave asshole.” Becca could hear the soft smile in her husband’s words. “But maybe refrain on the kicking his ass until he wakes up and recovers so that he can get to fully appreciate the error of his ways.”

“You’re going to help me.”

“I will?”

“I’m five foot four. He’s six feet. Of course you’re going to help me.”
“Well, I did say for better or for worse.”

“That you did.”

“Though I’m not sure that the Avengers are going to let us harm him in any way. He’s their hero now, isn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Becca bit her bottom lip hard. Another shuddering breath then, “I may have been a little rude to Captain America.”

“A little?”

“Okay, maybe a lot.”

“It wasn’t his fault, Becca,” Michael said. “You can’t blame him for Bucky’s decision. He can’t assume responsibility for everyone and everything all the damn time. He may be a super-serumed soldier but he’s still a human being.”

“I know, I know.” Becca stood up and sat down again in her chair, then grabbed her husband’s hand and held on tight. “I think – I mean, maybe because I was furious with Bucky; maybe because I couldn’t be angry with him, I had to be with someone else. But,” she swallowed hard, “at the same time, Captain America saves people all the time. Why couldn’t he save Bucky?”

“Maybe because he needs saving too.” Michael smiled then nodded his head towards Bucky. “If the Avengers save the world all the time, who then saves them? Maybe they need heroes too and Bucky was the hero that Captain America needed. And in sacrificing himself, Bucky saved not only Captain America, but also the people that the Captain will save in the future. His kindness will have a great impact, even if he chooses never to talk about it.”

“You’re too kind,” Becca said softly and gently kissed her husband on his generous lips. “I admit that I didn’t think about it like that. And while it doesn’t offer me much comfort, it’s a nice thought. But I’m selfish and I want my brother fit and healthy again.”

“Of course you do.” Michael gently cupped her cheek and looked into her eyes. “But remember that it was your brother’s choice. He did it in a matter of milliseconds. And his decision must be respected.”

“Even though it got him hurt?” she mumbled, pouting a little.

“Even so.” He pressed another kiss to her forehead. “But it does say a lot about what kind of person he is. And it makes me proud to call him brother.”

“You’ll make me cry again.” A stray tear rolled down her cheek and Michael’s thumb gently brushed it away.

“You can cry, honey. I’ll be here for that too. Giving you tissues.”

“Letting me wipe my nose on your t-shirt if we’re out of tissues?”

“Maybe not that.” He caressed the Avengers logo on his dark blue t-shirt under the green gown. “I mean, I’m not giving this back in a million years. They might have to pry it from my cold dead hands.”

“Wow, this turned dramatic rather quick.” She gave him a wry smile. “I love you. Even if you put a t-shirt above my safety.”
“Well, for better or for worse, right?”

“For better or for worse,” she muttered and turned her attention back to her brother. They kept their vigil long after midnight. She hoped she’d be here when he’d awake at long last.

Chapter End Notes

As always, a massive thank you goes to fancyh as well because her job as a beta reader was all the more made difficult by the fact that English is my second language. But she was kind and patient, and I owe her a lot. Please know that all the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. :)

Chapter Two

There was a horrible metallic taste in his mouth.

Ironically, this was the first thought that occurred to Bucky, even before the annoying beeping of the machines around him penetrated his consciousness. There was a horrible metallic taste in his mouth, his throat sore as if scraped raw in his absence then assembled later on in parts that no longer fit. Bucky tried to swallow, but bile rushed at the back of his throat so fast, it took everything in him not to turn his head away and throw up. He took several shuddering breaths – in through the nose and out through the mouth – in a feeble attempt to control his body.

It didn’t help that someone must have put a barbell on his chest, possibly to observe how long it would take before his whole ribcage would collapse. The bone-deep exhaustion that lingered in every flutter of his eyelids, in every small twitch of his fingers alerted him that the world was askew like a painting hung up slightly crooked.

He didn’t want to open his eyes. The barbell on his chest pressed its weight harder, and his left side was on fire as if old gods clawed at his body over and over again. A punishment for an unknown sin. It sounded like a legend he had once read. Long ago, when the world was not made of confusing and terrifying shapes, unformed and unclear, as if the world had been erased by gods and now was in the process of being recreated. It took longer than normal to realize that his dry eyes were now opened, taking in the reality of his surroundings at long last.

Sleepily, he groaned and rubbed at his eyes, worn out, then pushed away the nasal cannula. He raised his head a little and looked at himself to assess the situation, ensuring all his limbs were still intact, all the while clutching at his left side. Someone might have tried to rip something from inside of him or something because that was exactly what it felt like. Once he was satisfied with the general overview of his body – all limbs still intact, drips attached to his right arm, blood pressure band attached to his left, pulse button on his pointing finger, sticky pads stuck to his chest – he looked around as if any detail noticed would give away where he was or why he was there.

His foggy memory didn’t help to settle his dilemma, to his increasingly alarmed breathing. His pulse line scratched an ephemeral painting on the monitor, singling that something wasn’t right. Something must have happened – maybe he was stabbed or attacked or beaten up – but the scenarios that he kept on coming up with didn’t feel either true or real. Something worse then.

He groaned again. Another shuddering breath. Then – then the certitude that he had been shot. The impact was still buried in the deepest recess of his mind (Bucky hoped it would stay that way) and the how’s and the why’s were lost to the incommensurable shock of lying in a hospital bed. He couldn’t say why his train of thought kept on derailing and the repetition of I’ve been shot sounded real and plausible but it did.

Bucky groaned as he pushed the heels of his palms into his eyes, trying to get a grip on himself. Because the goddamn room in which he was was not an ordinary hospital room. He pressed one more time, then taking a deep breath, he took his hands away and checked his unusual surroundings.

A giant window showcased the nightly landscape of a New York that had fallen into restless slumber the usual way in which all major cities around the world did. Bucky would have
recognized the cityscape from another million cityscapes. And he might have been mesmerized by
the colorful lights that floated into the night like weightless angels if it hadn’t been for the thought
yet again that his medical cover would have facilitated this in no way shape or form. No way.

His eyes glided over each item in the room, all his attention focused on each detail, his heart rate
going up a little. The room wasn’t huge but it was big enough to host a couch, a comfortable-
looking armchair, three even more comfortable-looking chairs around his bed and a small table on
which rested several medical supplies and a box of gloves, but nothing else. There was an array of
machines around him and a plastic cupboard, which looked filled to the brim with just about
anything that a doctor or a nurse might require.

For what?

 Fuck, how did I get here? And how the fuck was I shot? His pulse rose steadily. Fuck, fuck, fuck!
Abruptly, he turned his head again – not the best idea with how the room swam for a brief moment
as if the old gods reached him again – and checked the nightstand, which had only a glass of water
with a blue straw in it. No phone. There were no Get Well cards anywhere in the room. There were
no flowers, no balloons. His family would have swarmed the place with all this shit. This wasn’t
normal. This wasn’t normal.

Where the fuck was he? What kind of hospital was this?

Why was he shot? Why was he…? Shit! No time to find out! This was not normal. He shouldn’t be
here in this fancy hospital room with that night sky that looked out of this world. Exactly. Out of
this world. This whole thing could be a set-up. Bucky had read all about the superhumans when
they crawled out of the shadows after the Battle of New York, when it seemed that every little New
York corner had its own superhero. He’d read about how some of them came into being, hushed
whispers of human experiments done firstly by Hydra and then by every fucking amateur evil
genius with psychopathic tendencies.

Jesus Christ! What if someone had taken his body and experimented on him? Maybe they thought
he was dead or nearly dead and they wanted to check and see how a stupid new super serum
worked. Bucky read things! He knew things! His hands began to shake as he kept on smoothing the
thin sheet that covered him. Jesus Christ! He wasn’t going to stay here and get experimented on!
He wanted to be normal. No fucking superpowers for him, thank you very much.

Swallowing hard, he moved his clammy and trembling hands to unclasp the blood pressure
machine. The IV drip was next and blood flew everywhere the moment he pulled that needle out,
too shaken to pay attention other than to his need to get out of there. Ignoring the trail of blood and
the shrill sound of the machines, he attempted to stand up and promptly collapsed back in the bed,
clutching at his left side as if someone might rip his wound open. Ow! Jesus Christ, what did they
give him? Why did he still feel like the world compressed his entire body, eyes sandy and sore,
throat burning with thirst? What was in that fucking thing? he thought bitterly as he scowled at the
drip.

Another shuddering breath, then Bucky stood up again and the world spun bitterly around him like
a roller coaster going in circles over and over again. Bucky made a sound and had he not felt the
vibration of the sound inside of him, he would have said that it wasn’t him. No human should
make the sound of a dying animal, scraped raw. His entire left side burnt like fire, excruciating and
merciless, but freedom was better than waiting around here to see what the hell they were planning
for him. He wasn’t going to be a new Hulk or whatever.

What did they give me? What did they give me? he asked himself as he used his hands to push his
legs over the edge of the bed – comfortable with a blue soft-looking afghan at the bedside – and
promptly crashed to the floor. Hard.

“Ah!!” he yelled in agony, his entire body shaking, a cold sweat breaking over his back, goose-bumps staining every patch of skin. He couldn’t move, he couldn’t move. Jesus, he’d never been in so much pain! Not even when he was eleven and he fell from the hayloft. The dust particles had flown around him back then and the world had swum around his eyes, but the pain in his right arm had not been so terrible as the hideous throb in his left side.

Someone must have flayed him open and then put salt on his wounds because it was the only way to explain the excruciating torment through which he was going. Tears ran down his cheeks and Bucky bit his right forearm hard in an attempt to stave off any future sound. God, he only needed a small break from this agony! I’ll be good, I’ll be better just please, God, make this pain go away! Jesus Christ!

“Mr. Barnes, you need to calm down. You’re safe here.” The automatic voice – British, cold, unfeeling, coming out of nowhere and everywhere all at once – sent his heart into overdrive, blood rushing to his ears like a wall pressing from the inside.

“The fuck?” He spat the words as if they’d make sense of the new world in which he had woken up. Then a horrible, shuddering whimper. Did it come out of him?

“My name is Jarvis, I am the artificial intelligence that governs the mainframe of the Avengers Tower.”

“Right,” Bucky mumbled as he used the feeble force in his arms to push himself on the cold floor. Another flare of agony speared through his left side. He was sweating as if he had been running a marathon. “The fuck I’d be in the Avengers Tower for? Hmm?” At this rate, he was going to die on this fucking cold floor like a miserable worm. Bucky rested his forehead on his forearm for a moment and panted into the cold hard surface. Another wave of frustration ripped through him. He couldn’t move. It hurt so much.

“Mr. Barnes, please don’t move! You will open your stitches and risk infection again.”

“What the fuck did you do to me? Where the fuck am I?” he sneered even as he pushed himself further.

“Mr. Barnes, you are in the medical wing of the Avengers Tower. You were brought here after being shot in an attempt on Captain America’s life. You saved his life, sir.”

“Yeah, sure thing, pal,” Bucky mumbled. He bit his bottom lip hard, then he gathered his courage to crawl further.

“Please, sir, restrict your movement. Help is on its way.”

“Could you please stop talking?” Bucky gasped for breath as if there wasn’t enough oxygen in the room. Saved Captain America’s life. What a fucking stupid notion! Bad guys were just as bad in coming up with credible scenarios as they were in the movies. Like he was going to believe that.

All of a sudden, the door opened and immediately at least three medical staff entered the room. To a cacophony of shouts and his name being said in three different voices, alarm pulsing through each syllable, Bucky could only see three sets of sneakers (one black, one white, and one blue). He immediately batted away their hands.

“Mr. Barnes, please, let us –”
“Please, sir, just –”

“Stay the fuck away from me! Don’t you fucking touch me!” he snarled like a fucking cornered animal, but he didn’t give a shit. He wasn’t going to make it easy for them, no way these fucking assholes were touching him. He shouted in pain as another sudden movement jolted his left side. He was thrashing and trying to break free from their questing hands.

And then –

“James!”

All movement seemed to cease, all sound snuffed out of the room and those assholes stepped away immediately. Bucky raised his eyes and stared at Captain America himself. The reality of his surroundings screeched to a halt. Captain Rogers’ mouth crumpled in unhappiness, his brow furrowed in a frown the size of Mariana Trench. But Bucky was safe! If Captain America was here for him to get him out or something then he was safe.

“Mr. Barnes – James, please!” His voice was shaken up and out of breath. Seriously, had Bucky not been in complete and absurd agony, he would have appreciated how much concern clouded Captain’s blue eyes. Bucky pushed himself on his forearms, trying to make himself smaller. The absurd thought of crawling past them was snuffed out – there was no way now. The presence of Captain America – not a hallucination, it couldn’t be a hallucination – surrounded him like a comfortable blanket.

“Don’t let them touch me! Please, don’t let them hurt me!”

“I won’t! James, you’re safe here.” There was a certain type of gentleness that lingered to each of Captain’s words, the type that was used to soothe wild animals and anxious babies. “May I please touch you?”

“Yes.” The word came more like a hiss, a mumbled assent as he laid back to the floor, resting his sweaty forehead against the cold surface of the floor.

“Let’s get you back to bed.” Captain’s arms came gently around him and Bucky moved over sluggishly, the world pressing against him. He felt shoved down to the bottom of a murky ocean, the only real thing the terrible pain spearing through his left side and Captain’s gentle hands on him. So gentle. Bucky whimpered when Captain Rogers wrapped one arm around his torso and the other under Bucky’s knees then tried to bring him up.

Bucky howled as a new wave of white pain flared up, agony coursing through his veins.

“It’s okay! You’re okay. I’ve got you! We’re almost there.” Captain’s voice was so kind, his words washing over Bucky – he pushed his face into Captain’s neck and whimpered again. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. We’re almost there.” Bucky’s fingers convulsed on Captain’s t-shirt, fistling the material in a tight grip.

An eternity melted away by the time they made it to his bed. Bucky’s thoughts were dull and slow now, the pain too great to be faced. The medical staff – if that was what they really were and god, but Captain America wouldn’t lie to him, would he? – had gentle hands on him, trying to connect him to those machines, shouting medical terms at one another, things that didn’t make any sense to Bucky’s addled mind. More people invaded the room, all around him. Where the hell had they been before? He was out of it with pain, the world was one mass of hurt and Bucky wanted it to be gone. Obliterated. Anything. Anything.
“Don’t leave,” Bucky mumbled, tongue thick and clumsy. The words came out jagged and painful to utter. “Don’t leave me alone with them. Don’t leave!”

“I won’t! I promise. I won’t.”

His last coherent thought was that they’d have to pry him from Captain America with the jaws of life because no way he was going to let him go. He couldn’t let him go. *He couldn’t.* Captain Rogers was his only link to a world of safety.

“Don’t leave me…”

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you.” Cap’s voice penetrated the hellish darkness that surrounded him, the shadows that crept on him, but his hand could still feel Captain's warm hand. A wide calloused hand holding his. “I got you. I’m not going to leave you.” *You’re mine now. Completely mine.* How strange that Bucky had feared this moment more than anything else. To hear someone saying those words. Was he Cap’s now? Or was the captain his? That automatic voice said that he had saved Captain’s life. If that was the truth then…. Bucky’s thoughts turned sluggish, thick like molasses, slowly draining away.

He surrendered to the unconsciousness off that murky ocean.

The world flickered in and out and the shadows were more or less defined. The machines beeped here and there, his hands were being held here and there. Gentle hands. Wide thick hands. Warm hands. The room was inundated with light and more comfort. Angry voices. Someone crying. And his fingers quivered each time in emptiness, each time finding his anchor. Bucky could breathe only when holding those fingers, that hand. It had to be that hand.

The reality crept around him like a silent cat, tiptoeing softly around him. When he opened his eyes, the Manhattan skyline was plunged in orange and pink and purple and it was one of the most beautiful sunsets he’d ever seen and dear lord, but if the world was ending then, by all means, it should end like this. With that muted pain in his left side, drowsy and comfortable, the world beautiful and yet at a distance.

“You said that he would be safe!” Ah, yes, now he understood what had made him wake up. The vicious voice sounded nothing like his sister and yet totally like her. Bucky turned his head to the other side of the room where Captain America was facing the angriest sister in the world, while Michael was trying to calm her down. She shoved him away with her left shoulder and pushed further into Captain's space.

She was utterly fearless and cruel. She looked at Captain America like she wanted nothing more than to skin him alive and possibly wear his skin like a trophy. It was an ugly look on her face, one that Bucky really didn’t want to see on her anymore.

“Rebecca, I promise you that —”

“You can’t promise me anything!” Her voice was hard, face set tight. “We entrusted him to you. You said someone would be here with him so that we could go get some rest.” She shoved an accusing finger to his face and surprisingly, Captain America actually turned smaller, as if his shoulders were hunching onto themselves. It hurt. The fuzziness of his mind prevented him from comprehending why the whole situation was wrong but it was and it hurt. “You said that someone was going to be here at all times. That you’d be here at all times. That he wouldn’t wake up alone.”

“Becca, please. Enough,” Michael intervened, setting a calming hand on his wife’s shoulder, but she couldn’t hear him, his gesture absent for her.
“He’s the most important person for my family. Can you get that? Does this get through your thick skull? He’s worth ten of you.”

“Becca -”

“No, no, he needs to understand that I’ll be keeping him to the promises he makes. This is unacceptable. I don’t want to find out that my brother opened up his wounds because he was left alone. We need to be vigilant.”

“Becca, please,” Bucky said softly because he couldn’t bear the face that Cap made, the way his blue eyes darkened further as if he had swallowed up a storm, devastating and merciless.

“No, Bucky, no! He needs to –” Becca swung around, eyes comically wide, and then her face just – Crumpled. “Bucky?” She sobbed his name.

His stupid nickname had never sounded like the answer to a prayer until now. She put her hands over her mouth for a moment as if that would be enough to suffocate the ugly sobs that were coming out, tumbling out one after the other, a rockslide of ugly pain. Then she slowly took a few steps towards his bed and unable to do more, leaned forward and hugged his legs hard and fierce, her harsh cries unstoppable. His gentle hand over her arm made the sobs only harsher. He wondered how long she had kept them inside of her, how long she had had been refusing to cry if only to let it out.

He looked up at the other men inside the room. The world was fading again and he blinked several times, trying to stay awake if only to be able to comfort his sister.

“It’s good to see you, Bucky.” Michael said gently and he too stepped closer to the bed, his hand gently resting over Bucky’s shoulder, his eyes suspiciously liquid.

“Good to see you too, pal.” His voice sounded hoarse, each word a painful shard inside his sore throat. Yet he persevered. “Did she give you grief?”

“We’re not joking about this, James Barnes!” Becca glared at him from around his knee level, cheeks splotched red, eyelashes thick with tears. “We’re not joking about this.”

“I wasn’t joking.” He licked his lips, cracked and dry, his eyes already fluttering close. He was so tired, making it difficult for him to find the words.

“You were planning on it and I won’t have it.” Her arms squeezed his legs a little tighter.

“Don’t be mean to Cap,” he mumbled, eyes already closed, drifting away into the comfortable silence of his dreams. The world melted away in silence.

Each time reality seemed to sneak up upon him like a silent cat, his awareness coming in false starts and fizzling endings, until at long last the outside world would penetrate his consciousness and make him open his eyes. He had been sleeping with his face towards the window, a crick in his neck an uncomfortable reminder that he had kept that position for a while. This time however the Manhattan skyline was hiding behind Dad, who was wearing the most atrocious shade of green Bucky had the displeasure of seeing.

Bucky blinked a few times, not sure his dad was really there, one hand holding a newspaper and the other gently resting on Bucky’s forearm, as if to confirm that his son was still there beside him and no one was going to take him away from him. How funny that would be! Bucky thought, loopy from the pain relief medication and probably too much sleep. He wanted to stay awake this time. As much as he could.
Dad shuffled a little in the chair and sighed, narrowing his eyes – he always made the same face when he read something in the printed press like he wasn’t sure where the article was taking him. At times, if he didn’t agree with what he was reading, he’d stop. Listen to this, he’d say to Ma or whoever was close and read the fragment with the utmost disdain, self-satisfied in the knowledge that somehow the other person would agree with him. And most of the time they did. But there were other times when they’d contradict him and then the whole world would explode in arguments and counter-arguments. Bucky smiled groggily. Basically, a typical Saturday dinner at the Barnes house.

Bucky’s throat was dry as a husk and sore but he couldn’t make himself open his mouth. His dad looked exhausted. In the comfortable daylight that inundated the room – was it morning or afternoon? Bucky couldn’t tell – his dad’s unshaven cheeks, slightly sunken, spoke of nights wasted in vigil and Bucky’s stomach sunk to a new level of low when he realized that it must have been because of him.

He closed his eyes, ignoring the pinching pain in his left side that was growing a little in intensity. A slight shuffle on his right made him open his eyes only to see Ma by his bedside, a tablet leaning on her knee precariously. Her reading glasses had slipped half-way down her nose, revealing the dark circles under her eyes. Her hand too was resting on Bucky’s other forearm, and for a moment, Bucky wanted to sink to the depth of their love, let it wash over him in gentle waves and forget about the growing pain that seemed to penetrate his consciousness with a sort of stubborn determination.

“Hey, Ma,” he muttered at last, licking his lips. Both hands tightened on his forearms like comforting vices.

“Bucky! Ma said, his name like an amen and a prayer and a forgotten dream all wrapped in one. “My baby boy.” The tablet crashed to the floor as she rose abruptly and gently cupped his cheeks, kissing him on the forehead and basically drowning him in her tears.

“Ma, I’m okay.” How inadequate his words sounded, how terrifyingly far from the truth they were. “Hey, Dad,” he rasped when he felt his dad’s cheek press against his in a muted embrace.

“Hey, son.”

Bucky closed his eyes, allowing himself to be anchored by the gentle caresses on his parents, by Ma’s silent tears and Dad’s anchoring grip, allowing himself to feel like a child again.

“Are you guys okay?” he croaked and Ma immediately offered him a straw, through which he took small sips of water. He grimaced when it didn’t wash away the metallic taste in his mouth and the sores stung a little past the comfortable mark.

“We’re all fine, baby,” Ma said gently as she made herself sit on the chair at last and pick up the tablet only to abandon it on the nightstand next to Bucky’s bed. She held on to Bucky with both hands, unable to mask the sheer relief that flooded through her, the reddened eyes, the worry.

“Uncle Ben and –”

“They are all fine, son,” Dad answered and gripped just as tight as before. “No one was hurt.” Apart from you, was left unsaid but very much implied. Was it selfish that he was relieved? That no one had been hurt, apart from him? Was it selfish?

“I –” Bucky frowned as he failed to remember what he wanted to ask, his tongue prodding none too gentle to a mouth sore. “I think I saw Becca and Michael before. Were they really here?” God, his
voice sounded weak and raspy like he had taken a shot of gravel and sand.

“Yes, you spoke briefly to them.” Ma squeezed his forearm tighter. “They said you weren’t much awake after that. How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been hit by a bus.” Bucky groaned. “Also, my mouth feels funny.”

“Mouth sores?”

“Yeah.”

“The side-effect of one of the antibiotics that they administered,” Dad quickly clarified for him. “Dr. Rahman said that they’d pass once you’d wake up and start drinking and eating on your own.”

“Dr. Rahman?”

“The doctor in charged with your care.”

“How long was I out?”

“Enough.” There was a hardness to Ma’s voice that Bucky couldn’t miss, even if he was still confused. A stray thought pushed its importance at the forefront of his mind.

“Are we really in the Avengers Tower?” He asked because –

He wasn’t there. He wasn’t there. And he promised. He said he wouldn’t leave, he’d –

He swallowed the bile at the back of his throat and bit his bottom lip hard. The machine did a slightly alarming sound.

“Yes, we really are.” Dad shuffled in his chair, coming closer to him.

“Dad, I think I did something.” Bucky squeezed his eyes shut tighter. “Uhm, I think I might have –”

He said he wouldn’t leave me alone with them. Had he left? Had he left me at the mercy of –

“Bucky, breathe, son,” Dad’s voice penetrated the panicky fog that had invaded his mind and Bucky took a shuddering breath and then another and then another. When he dared to open his eyes, at last, he immediately hated himself. Ma and Dad looked absolutely devastated.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, the words bitter and clumsy in his mouth. “I’m sorry – I think I might have woken up before and there was no one – but it must have been a dream.”

“It wasn’t a dream.” The horror that penetrated through each word in Ma’s small sentence made the guilt come crashing down like an anvil falling down from the sky at a terrible speed.

“Did I hurt anyone?”

“No, Bucky, of course not!” Ma finally gathered enough courage to take one of her hands away from his arm and run her fingers soothingly through his hair. It was the one thing that had always made him feel more comfortable, alleviating the distress since he was little. “When you woke up, you were confused, but you didn’t hurt anyone.”

“I thought they’d taken me.” It made so much sense at the time. Bucky stared in the depths of the blue afghan that wrapped around the lower half of his body. He frowned harder. “But then Captain
Rogers was there and –

“You woke in the middle of the night,” Dad spoke in what Bucky used to call his victim voice. He was extra gentle to the people that had gone through incredible hardships and had been pushed beyond their capabilities of endurance. He’d never push, a solid reassurance in his quiet presence. And Bucky drew strength from this as he tried to pay attention to his dad’s words. “Captain Rogers had sent Becca and Michael to sleep and promised to look after you. He was called in for a short assessment on an urgent situation and he had placed a nurse but then she – well, I don’t know what her excuse was but she wasn’t there when you woke up. Long story short, you almost tore open your stitches.”

“He said he wouldn’t leave,” Bucky mumbled. “He said he wouldn’t leave.”

“And he didn’t. You wouldn’t let go of him.”

“Right.” Bucky ignored the sudden fiery sensation in his cheeks and squeezed Ma’s hand in soft reassurance. “I’m fine now, Ma. Relax. I promise that I won’t try and break out again.”

“That’s not even remotely as funny as you think it was.” She scowled at him.

“I wasn’t trying to be funny.”

“I’d better call Dr. Rahman. He said he wanted to see you as soon as you were awake again,” Dad said but appeared to be unwilling to let go of Bucky. It took an inordinate amount of time before he tightened his grip and then finally let go.

“Looking good in green, Dad.”

“Now I know you’re trying to be a smartass.” Dad shook his head but couldn’t hide the smile even if he tried.

“Dad, I’m wounded. You should be nicer to me.”

“I’m blaming you, just so you know,” Dad added as a parting jab, winking at Ma, who shook her head at both of them. She rubbed her eyes none too gently, the pale smile afterwards a shallow reminder of the pain she must have felt. Bucky took her hand in his again and squeezed lightly.

“I’m fine, Ma. Or I’m going to be fine.”

“I know that now, Bucky.” Ma brought his hand to her mouth and kissed it gently. “But I didn’t know before.” She sighed as if someone was squeezing out all the air from her lungs. “The first seventy-two hours after your surgery were critical. And even after – when you uhm, almost opened your stitches again – it hasn’t been easy. It really hasn’t.”

“I’m sorry, Ma.” Bucky ignored the sudden lump in his throat, which must have been the size of a melon.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. Maybe though try not to jump to the oddest conclusions the next time you wake up and you get confused about your whereabouts.”

Wide thick hands gentle and safe. So safe. He had been safe. Those eyes… those incredible blue eyes. It must have happened and yet the entire moment expanded light years ago, its echoes only reaching him now. And wasn’t that a ridiculous thing to think?

Bucky swallowed thickly. “I promise, Ma.”
“Ah, Mr. Barnes!” A doctor dressed in green scrubs with a shock of red hair and a wide smile entered the room, a thick paper file in his right hand. “I’m Dr. Connolly, I’m one of the doctors in charge of your care.”

“Hi, I’m James Barnes.” What a stupid thing to say, Bucky thought even as the man approached his bed and Dad closed the door. The doctor had basically seen his insides, so a first name basis should have been established by now. Ma stood up and stepped aside so that Dr. Connolly and Bucky could shake hands. “Bucky for most people that know me.”

“Good to officially meet you, Bucky.”

“Good to meet you too, Doc.”

“Please have a seat.” The doctor gestured for his parents to grab a chair and they all took a seat around Bucky’s bed. It was a sensation quite familiar to Bucky – the one very much alike to being called to the principal’s office and having a new one ripped. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been shot,” Bucky’s answer went slightly tilted, half a question and half a statement but the doctor smiled understandingly.

“It’s all right, we don’t need to speak about it now.” Dr. Connolly smiled reassuringly. “Well, you were brought here with a gunshot plague in the upper left part of your abdomen. You were lucky in the sense that the bullet didn’t touch any vital organs. However, it damaged part of your spleen so we had to remove it.”

“But that’s not so bad… right? Do people – uhm, do people get to live without a spleen?”

“Yes, they do. But it’s not so easy. The spleen is one of the most important organs to fight off infections. Without it, you will be more prone to infections, viruses and other common bacterial infections that generally shouldn’t cause you any issues.”

“It won’t stop you from having a normal life if that’s what worries you. But you will have to be more careful. We will need to bring you up to date with a series of vaccines and you might be on
prophylactic antibiotics for a while.”

“How much is a while?”

“At least a year.”

“Wow, okay.” Bucky cleared his throat. He looked at his parents, who listened to the conversation carefully, their mouths crumpled in unhappiness and Bucky couldn’t bear to make things even more difficult for them. “Well, okay, Doc. I’ll do whatever you want me to do.”

“That’s actually a relief to hear.” Dr. Connolly grinned. “After the other night, I thought that we might have to wrestle with you.”

“Oh, damn, sorry, Doc. I was just –” Bucky hung his head in shame. “I was just really confused.”

“Of course, that’s understandable. But I’m pleased to see you doing much better. Now let’s talk about how you’re feeling and how we can make you more comfortable.”

For the next half an hour, Bucky answered to Dr. Connolly’s questions as truthfully as he could, while feeling increasingly exhausted. In fact, by the time, Dr. Connolly finished his interrogation, Bucky was almost asleep again, mumbling confusingly. A nurse had come and gone in the meantime, after checking his vitals and ensuring that he received a new dose of pain relief. It made him groggy and tired and soon enough he slipped into oblivion again, his parents by his side as always.

Bucky watched the metallic glint in the midst of his dream with a terrible sense of foreboding. The metallic barrel would follow his every move even when he was trying to take a step to the left or to the right. The pure sense of terror flooded his veins, his body going way past the natural sense of flee or fight. The metallic glint of it appeared ubiquitous. For an awful moment, Bucky wondered if he should just let it have his flesh, just sacrifice himself and be done with it all rather than relive this over and over again. He pressed one step forward and suddenly his entire world exploded into a new wave of pain. The shock of it was so great he jerked awake.

“Hey,” a gentle voice said as a soothing hand settled on his shoulder, pressing slightly into the meat of his muscles. “I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

Bucky looked up at Captain Rogers, groggy and confused. His heart continued to hammer against his ribcage as if it was trying to get out of it. He swallowed convulsively and rubbed his eyes for what felt like ages before daring to say anything.

“Well, that wasn’t predictable at all,” he mumbled but it only made Captain Rogers frown all the more at him. “Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, James.”

“James? Oh.” Bucky swallowed hard. “Nobody has called me James in a while.” He bit his lip in an attempt to center himself as the last remnants of the nightmare disintegrated. The soft light gave the room a sort of suspended reality quality to it; the colorful skyline of Manhattan at night only enhanced that sensation. Bucky rubbed gently at his eyes again, ignoring the twinge of pain on his side. It must have been really late. The silence appeared to have conquered even the world outside, the usual muffled noises of activity outside door utterly absent.

Bucky peered through his lashes (yeah, he was the master of subtlety) at Captain Rogers, whose hair was in disarray, the hard line around the corner of his lips impressing upon Bucky (even at that late hour) that Cap had to be tired. Or worried. Or both. Also, he was wearing a soft-looking black
t-shirt, which had a small hole around the collar, and okay, but that? That had to be endearing right? Captain America, just as human as the rest of them losers. Damn, Bucky might have been shot, but this was really endearing.

He bit the inside of his cheek. He needed a new life. Or ten.

“What’s the time? Bucky asked, his voice rough with sleep and the ashes of his nightmare.

“Almost two o’clock in the morning.” Captain Rogers straightened a little and took his hand away, Bucky missing its warmth instantly. Cap set the book that he must have been reading on the nightstand, then focused back on Bucky like he was ready for a debrief or something. “Do you want a bit of water?” Captain Rogers asked gently and when Bucky nodded in assent, grabbed a glass, poured fresh water and gave it to Bucky, who greedily drank it, this time without the help of a straw. “Do you want to talk about it?” Bucky shook his head. It took several sips and spilling some of it on him for Bucky to finish it but it helped and the water alleviated the dryness of his throat. He leaned back against the pillow after a while and watched Captain Rogers making himself more comfortable in the armchair.

“You don’t have to stay with me,” Bucky mumbled after a while. He realized that he and Captain Rogers were alone for the first time since he had woken up in a panic, ready to escape. His fingers tightened on his afghan. “I promise I won’t try to break out of the hospital again.”

Captain Rogers stared at him for a long minute before he shook his head and said ruefully, “Becca was right.”

“What?”

“About you making jokes when least appropriate. And bad jokes at that.”

“Nobody appreciates my sense of humour anymore.”

“Did anyone ever?”

“Ouch. Captain, that hurt!” Bucky could feel his lips twitch in an approximation of a smile. The good captain only rolled his eyes at him in mock exasperation. “And I’m already wounded here.”

Captain Rogers pointedly looked at him. “Not funny.”

“It was a little funny, sir.”

“I’m sure that you’ve earned your right to call me Steve by now.”

“Then I’m Bucky.”

“Bucky.” The name rolled softly in Cap – Steve’s mouth. His name sounded silly yet imbued with importance. “May I ask how you managed to garner such a moniker?” Steve wisely changed the subject of conversation and Bucky was too comfortable to pick up on that.

“I’m blaming Ma for that. Though technically, it’s my fault.” Bucky smiled. “Apparently, when I was little, I kept on telling her that I didn’t like to be called Jimmy, to the point that I stopped answering her every time she called for me. So then she switched to Bucky – my middle name is Buchanan. Buck or Bucky for short.”

“And it stuck.”
And it stuck to the annoyance of all my relatives. *That’s not a name of an adult, it sounds absolutely ridiculous*, blah blah blah. But the truth is that now it’s hard to answer to James. In fact, I’m so unused to be called James that it’s difficult for me not to turn around and see who’s this James people want to talk to.” Bucky bit his lip before asking, “Did you have a nickname, Cap-Steve?”

“During the war, not so much,” Steve answered, crossing his arms, leaning back a little. Bucky did his best to ignore the bulge of Cap’s biceps. Really unfair for all the simple males out there, himself included. “But since I woke up, Tony has been calling me all sorts of names. Capsicle amongst them. The others just call me Steve or Cap.”

“Capsicle?” Bucky chuckled. “Well, I bet he doesn’t call you that all the time.”

“Not all the time. Just when he’s mad at me that I can’t keep up with all his tech chatter.”

“Sure. Sounds reasonable.” Bucky shuffled a little and made himself a little more comfortable, ignoring the twinge on the left side that was slowly becoming a throb. He hid a yawn behind his hand and blinked barely at Cap. “You know, I wasn’t joking when I said you don’t have to stay with me. I promise I’ll be okay.”

“It’s the least I could do.”

“Cap –”

“Steve.”

“Steve.” Bucky could hear the way his voice turned gentler, almost intimate, and he couldn’t help his blush from flooding his cheeks. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“Are we really going to have this conversation right now?” Steve asked in a no-nonsense tone. His clenched jaw was not a good sign. But what did Bucky know? He was still on the good kind of meds. “I can tell you, Buck, that the least I owe you is my life.”

“You save mine and countless others every day.”

“It’s not the same.”

“How’s that not the same?”

“Because this is personal, Bucky.”

“Well, it’s also personal to me. It’s personal to the people you saved and the people that loved them,” Bucky wiped at his face and looked on above Steve’s left shoulder, biting the inside of his cheek, not sure how to say what needed to be said. “Honestly, I don’t remember much. But from what I do remember, I didn’t think much about it. I just acted.”

“Which says a lot about you actually.”

“That I’m a hot-head that should be more careful?”

“That you’re a kind and generous person. But also, that yes, you’re a hot-head.” Bucky chuckled and focused back on the chiseled face of Captain Rogers. Really, the perfect proportions of his features were ridiculous. But Bucky also knew that they weren’t a result of the serum; he remembered those rare pictures at the Smithsonian Museum that showed him before the serum. Thin and shorter, but with the same big blue eyes. Dressed in a grey suit, hair combed on the side.
His features were so beautiful, so mesmerizing. Wistfully, Bucky wished he had met Captain Rogers before the serum.

He was so lost in his thoughts that it took him several seconds to register that Captain Rogers – Steve, Steve, *Steve* – gently took his left hand in his, mindful of the IV line and held it tight. He’d come closer, his blue eyes staring into Bucky’s, unyielding and open.

“Thank you for saving my life, Buck,” he said softly, almost whispering. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Steve,” he replied as seriously as he could because somehow he understood that it was really important for Steve to have this. This little moment, just the two of them, like this: holding on to each other. They held on for what must have been an inappropriate amount of time but Bucky couldn’t seem to be able to let go. Steve’s hand was wider than his and so warm, peacefully anchoring. “Can I at least say sorry for trying to break out when I woke up the first time?”

“No, no, that’s my fault as well. I should have been with you so you wouldn’t be confused if you’d wake up.” Steve’s contrite face was almost funny.

“Seriously, pal? Is there anything in your life for which you don’t assume responsibility?” Bucky smiled and squeezed gently Steve’s hand. He was calling Captain America Steve and holding his hand. This was nice. His eyes fluttered closed, warm and fuzzy again.

“Yes. Tony’s bad jokes and Nat’s terrible cooking.”

Bucky chuckled and opened one eye to look mockingly aghast at Steve. “Are you dissing Black Window’s cooking? Nice knowing you, pal.” Bucky closed his eye, the exhaustion making him lethargic and sleepy.

“Nice knowing you too, Buck,” Cap replied gently, his words barely above a whisper.

“Hey, Steve.”

“Yeah?”

“You still holding my hand?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm, feels nice. Just don’t leave.”

A slight hitch of breath. “I won’t.”

“Stay with me. Don’t leave.”

“I won’t, Bucky. I promise.”

“Hmmmm.”

“Go to sleep, Buck.”

And Bucky did.
Chapter End Notes

The awesome art for this chapter can be found here. It's absolutely amazing and incredible and em-dibujsb should be showered with praise and love. Seriously, I'll never waste an opportunity to praise her art. <3

A massive thank you goes to fancyh (my hero!!) as well because her job as a beta reader was all the more made difficult by the fact that English is my second language. But she was kind and patient and I owe her a lot. Please know that all the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. :)}
Chapter Three

The following morning, Bucky woke up as the sun was silently sneaking inside the room, pressing around all corners and spilling messily around the edges of the window. It was still early morning, the skyline tinged with soft hues of golden and pink. God, it was beautiful!

A wave of gratitude washed over him, its ripples taking away the last twinges of sleep. To be able to enjoy that – the warmth of it, the beauty of it – Bucky’s fingers twitched on the sheet. It was as miraculous as Steve’s hand in his last night. He could feel his cheeks alight with that terrible Barnes blush. He really made Cap stay here throughout the night? Bucky bit his bottom lip and watched the book that still lingered on his nightstand, the only sign that Cap had ever been there. He reached for it and gently traced the letters on it with the tips of his fingers as if he’d trace the edges of a butterfly’s wings. *Tell the Wolves I’m Home*… Sounded interesting, Bucky hadn’t read it but maybe he should.

He rested his hand by his side again. He rubbed his eyes and sighed as all traces of sleep were gone. It wasn’t going to last for long, he could tell. He’d start the momentum by being refreshed and so present and then softly he’d ebb away, carried on the wings of that silly exhaustion. He drank a glass of water that was always there, ready for him to drink it, and then watched the sky getting bluer and bluer. A sunny day across Manhattan.

He’d be on his second cup of coffee by now. If this had been a usual workday. Wait a minute, was this even a workday? Who knew at this point and it didn’t matter anyway. It was the odd sensation of feeling that everything had happened a million years ago and at the same time, yesterday. The temporal gap between his recollections and the present day seemed a dark abyss filled with the actual memory of what had occurred. He was afraid that there was no safety net underneath.

He had to admit, being shot put all things in perspective – how strange to crave for the routine of going to work, every day nine till six, going to his parents afterwards sometimes and coming home with leftovers to last him for a week; going to the gym or getting a drink with the guys after work; going grocery shopping, listening to Mr. Creek complain about the price of bread, doing *The New York Times* crossword, having late lunches with Becca and Michael on Sundays, early dinners with everyone at their parents’ house… Small things, little things. His life. And he almost lost it all.

A sudden thought zapped through him. His fingers smoothed the sheet covering his bed, his hands suddenly clammy.

“Jarvis – uhm, are you there?”

The following moment of silence pressed against Bucky from all sides. Then –

“Yes, Mr. Barnes. How may I assist you?”

“You’re real.” A sense of awe washed over him. This was amazing.

“Yes, sir. Well, I am as real as an artificial intelligence might be.”

“This is amazing.”

“Thank you, sir.”
“You can call me Bucky. I don’t mind.”

“Of course, Mr. Barnes.”

Bucky shook his head and smiled, settling better on the bed and staring up the ceiling. “I didn’t know robots could be sarcastic.”

“Well, I am not a robot.”

“Of course. You’re an AI with a particular British name and accent.”

“Mr. Stark designed it so.”

“Mr. Stark designed you?”

“Yes.”

“And he came up with the name Jarvis?”

“I’m afraid he did.”

“Would you have liked another name?”

“Like what, sir?” There was a faint trace of amusement now in Jarvis’ voice.

“I don’t know. Pete? Mike? Juan? Li? François?”

“Now sir is just mocking me. Would you have preferred Bucky?”

Bucky choked with his own spit. “Now that’s just mean.” He pouted and shuffled a little in his bed. Then smirked at the ceiling. “How about Bernard? Or Ricardo?”

“Or Jimmy?”

“No, definitely not that.”

“I see sir is very much against his own name.”

“I don’t know why, but ever since I was little I hated being called Jim or Jimmy. I still think that had Ma simply called me James, I might have survived it.”

“And Buchanan or Bucky for short is better?”

“In a way.” Bucky shrugged. “I guess it sounds silly but there are few Bucky or Buck’s out there.”

“That is true, sir.”

“Now Paul – that’s my boss – he has a son called Luke because he’s always been a nerd that loved Star Wars. And Jerry – yes, as in Tom&Jerry or Jerry Garcia – that’s one of my colleagues, by the way, he has a daughter called Cassandra because apparently his wife was a fan of Greek legends.”

“So she named her daughter after one of Priam’s daughters that foretold the fall of Troy but was never listened to?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. How did you know?” Bucky bit his lip. “Actually, stupid question. Of course, you’d know. But yeah, maybe they didn’t think this through.”
“Buchanan is a rather old name to be baptized. Was there a tradition in your family?”

“Not necessarily.” Bucky shrugged. “My great-grandpa on my father’s side was called Buchanan – apparently we look very much alike. But I’m not sure whether he was the inspiration or my parents just wanted to give me an odd name. And I guess I also wondered what they –”

“Bucky, who the hell are you talking to?”

“Jesus Christ, Becca!” Bucky shouted as his left hand flew automatically to his chest. His heart monitor immediately registered the distress. “Can’t you knock? Or wear a goddamn bell?”

“I knocked, dipshit, but apparently you were too busy talking to yourself.” Becca entered fully into the room, a steaming cup of coffee in her left hand, and took a seat on Bucky’s right side.

“Well, I wasn’t talking to myself. I was talking to Jarvis.”

“Who the hell is Jarvis?”

“That would be me.”

“Fuck!” Becca startled so hard that she almost dropped her coffee cup.

“Language, Becca!”

“I will talk however the fuck I want because the ceiling has just spoken to me.” She scowled up. “Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Jarvis and I am an artificial intelligence that governs the mainframe of the Avengers Tower.”

“Aha. And how come I haven’t heard you before?”

“You didn’t need to be aware of my presence unless required.”

“And Bucky did?”

“He is a special case.” Again that subtle dose of sarcasm.

“Of course he is. When isn’t he?”

“He is right here.” Bucky pouted. “Also, Becca, what the hell you coming in with this coffee? Are you planning on torturing me?”

“A little, but I didn’t think you’d be awake.”

“Yeah, I’ve been up for a while.” Bucky looked up politely, though technically Jarvis could be everywhere around them. “Jarvis, do you mind if you leave me and my sister alone for a moment?”

“Of course, Mr. Barnes.”

“Thank you.”

“What is it?” Becca asked, a worried crease between her eyebrows. “Are you in pain?”

“No, not that. I wanted to ask you something before Ma and Dad showed up.” Bucky swallowed hard. “Becca, how are we going to pay for this? My medical cover is basic. You know that Paul
can’t afford more and this,” and he gestured to the comfortable room, “this is way above my pay grade. I might have to –”

“Relax!” Becca actually dared to smile at him. “We don’t pay for anything. Well, technically, you don’t pay for anything. I don’t know why it’s all ‘we’ all of a sudden.”

‘Shut up, you know you love me! Also, what the hell do you mean free?’

“Free of charge, gratis, complementary, I got more.”

“Hahaha, make fun of your wounded brother, who was worried that the medical bills might drive him to a life of triple jobs and selling his body.“

“First of all, no one would pay for your body, you’re not that sexy and you’re pushing forty.”

“I’m thirty-two!” Bucky shouted outraged.

“Secondly,” Becca pushed on with a mighty roll of her eyes, “none of the shooting victims are going to pay for any medical care. Steve assured me of that. But they'd have made an exception anyway for your gesture, even if you'd been the only person shot.”

“My gesture?”

“You saved his life, Bucky.”

“I just pushed him. I’m sure that –”

“Aaand if you continue that line of thought, I promise you I will choke you with your pillow, moron.” Becca sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose before scowling at him. His sister really lost her sense of humor in recent days. He wondered why that was. “Bucky, don’t sell yourself short because none of them do. Yeah, I might have been rude to Steve, and Sam for that matter, but they’ve been preparing for every scenario for you. And I’m grateful for that.”

“I’m sorry. I just, uhm –” Bucky shrugged and pushed his fingers through his not so nice hair. Ugh, maybe he needed a bath. “I just – I don’t want to make anyone feel guilty or like they might owe me something.”

“And by anyone, you mean Steve?”

“Since when did he become Steve?” His turn to scowl. “I remember shouting.”

“And I remember you begging me not to be mean to Cap. Someone had his priorities straight.”

“I wasn’t begging.” Bucky bristled, turning his scowl to full blast. “You know, you’re supposed to be kinder to me. I was shot and everything.”

“Yeah, trying to save a man that most likely would have survived that shot and would have healed quicker.”

“We don’t know that.” Bucky bit his lips, then added softly. “He’s just a man, Becca. Flesh and bones like us. And he could have died. He isn’t immortal. None of them are.”

“Maybe Thor is.” Becca took a sip of her now lukewarm coffee. “And Hulk.”

“I don’t think Hulk is immortal.”
“Can you imagine Bruce Banner getting old and thus Hulk as well? That would be hilarious.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t gossip about them in their own house.”

“Technically, it’s Stark’s house.”

“Technically, but also –”

The door of the room opened louder than it normally would and in strolled none other than Tony Stark, Iron Man and Avengers extraordinaire, followed by Bucky’s parents and Falcon, all three of them in various degrees of bewilderment or confusion.

“Well, if it isn’t my newest resident. Alive and kicking if I might add!” Mr. Stark exclaimed as soon as he made eye contact with Bucky.

“Mr. Stark,” Bucky mumbled, a little stunned. It was difficult to comprehend Stark’s presence in this room, but it wasn’t difficult to notice that Mr. Stark looked like he had already had three or four cups of coffee despite the casual look that he was trying to convey.

“I’m sure it’s a pleasure to meet me, but today I think it’s a pleasure to officially meet you. I hope you are happy with your accommodation.”

“That’s more than fine, sir. Thank you. Also, before anything else, thank you so much for covering all my expenses, Mr. Stark. Both for me and for everyone affected.” Bucky might have been hooked on the good meds, however, there was only one guy that could cover the medical expenses without even checking the bills and that was Iron Man himself.

“Oh, please, it’s the least I could do, especially for the man of the hour.” Stark waved his hand dismissively. “Although, I did hear that you pulled a stunt that might have given my friend a heart attack.”

“Yes, sir.” Bucky blushed slightly.

“Please, call me Tony. Good old dad was Mr. Stark and I try my best not to be like him.”

“Tony?”

“What?”

“Nothing, sir. Sorry. I was just testing what it feels like to be on a first-name basis with Iron Man.”

“Oh!” Stark exclaimed delighted. “Nobody told me you were a little shit.”

“I do try, Tony.”

“This is no way to speak to your landlord and savior.”

“I wouldn’t if you were that.”

“I bet I can buy your building by lunch.”

“I don’t think it would give you much satisfaction to own that building, sir.”

“Please, it would be worth if only to see Cap's face. Also, please stop calling me sir. It’s really annoying. I do prefer Your Highness, Your Genius, or Your Mighty Hero, if you really insist on being so polite.”
“I think I’m going to stick with Tony, thank you.” Bucky smirked.

“Tony, if you could please not exhaust Bucky before I speak to him.” Sam pinched the bridge of his nose like a dad trying to reign in a difficult teenager.

“Who’s Bucky?” Tony looked over his shoulder confused. “I thought his name was James.”

“Yeah, but everyone calls me Bucky.”

“What kind of name is Bucky?”

“Well, what kind of name is Tony?”

“Please, kid, don’t try to pull that line on me.”

“I won’t take any shit from a guy that named his AI Jarvis!”

“Oh so you’ve been making friends.” Tony grinned again and god, yeah, maybe his manic energy was exhausting but Bucky really enjoyed his exchanges. And it looked like his family too, if he’d judge by the way they were all trying to hide their baffled smiles behind their cups of coffee. Also, he needed to have a word with these guys about bringing coffee into his room when he couldn’t have any yet. “Jarvis, you’re fired! You weren’t supposed to reveal yourself.”

“I will hand in my resignation this afternoon, sir.” The AI startled his parents enough to scald themselves with the coffee – good, that’s what they all deserved for messing with him – but Becca just complacently watched the ceiling like she was in on the secret for quite a while and not ten minutes ago.

“I will not accept it.” Tony gesticulated wildly. “See what I have to put up with? Well, I’ll leave you in Sam’s more than capable hands.” Tony clapped his fellow Avenger on the shoulder. “And arms,” he added, feeling up Sam’s biceps with a leer. Sam pushed him none too gently. “If there’s anything you or your family need, let me know.”

“Sir – Tony,” Bucky said quickly, feeling like Dorothy coming out of the tornado, “before you go, thank you very much for everything. I could have never paid for all of this.”

“It’s the least I could do, kid.” Tony’s voice turned warmer, his eyes softening, “I do appreciate the hell you’ve been through. Please, let Jarvis know if you need anything and I’ll make sure it happens.”

“I don’t need anything else, sir, Tony I mean, but I appreciate it.”

“Good, good. See you later, alligator.” And just like a hurricane of noise and energy, Tony Stark left the room as if he had just managed to save the day once again. And he did; at least for Bucky. Because he really didn’t want to think about the implications that his medical costs might have had on his family. Even with his and Dad’s plans combined.

“Right,” Sam dispelled the baffled silence that descended on the room, “and on that note, hi, my name is Sam Wilson. Nice to meet you, Bucky. Your sister talked a lot about you.

“Hi, Sam.” Bucky shook Sam’s hand. Warm and safe. “And you shouldn’t believe anything she said.”

“Hey!” Becca pretended to slap him on his knee but her touch was delicate and kind. Sam chuckled.
“How are you feeling this morning?” Ma asked as she fussed a little around Bucky, filling up his glass of water, fluffing his pillow, mindful of his restricted movements and all the machines to which Bucky was still connected.

“Fine, Ma.” Bucky hid a yawn behind the back of his palm. “A little tired. Must be because I woke up so early and couldn’t sleep anymore.”

“That’s good. I’ll go and grab you some breakfast then.”

“Ma, I’m –”

“I hope you’re not going to say fine.” She scowled at him a little.

“Yeah, no, I mean – sure,” Bucky stuttered. “Breakfast sounds fine.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“I’ll come and help,” Becca offered as well. “Make sure you pick all of Bucky’s loathed food.”

“Brat!” He smiled indulgently though and after they left the room, he turned his attention towards Sam. “Sorry about that.”

“No, no, it’s cool, man. I know how families can be.”

“Do you have any siblings?”

“Nah, but tons of cousins.”

“I know the pain.” They shared a commiserating look between them.

“So the reason why I wanted to see you this morning was that we wanted to speak with you about something.” Sam proceeded to explain to him why the Avengers thought it would be better if he’d keep it to himself that he went and sacrificed his life for Captain America. Something about security risks and fear of repercussions, but all Bucky could hear was the imminent danger to which his family would be exposed, which immediately triggered an unsettling uncoiling in his chest.

“My family would be in danger?” he asked at last when it appeared that Sam had nothing more to say.

“Possibly. We don’t know yet. The people that attacked the building were part of a Hydra sleeper-cell. I’m not sure how much you were told.”

“Not much.” Bucky’s tongue was thick inside his sore mouth. “Could you please tell me exactly what happened?”

“Bucky, maybe this isn’t the best of times,” Dad intervened, his hand anchoring on Bucky’s forearm.

“No, I want to know.”

“I think it’s best if we inform Bucky of everything, Mr. Barnes. That way he’s aware of the whole picture.” Sam’s eyes were warm and understanding. “It’s a lot for any regular person, but the fact that we sit here with just a few losses when there could have been so much heavier – well, it’s not as often as I would like.”
So Bucky listened about Hydra sleeper-cells and the people that had attempted to murder Captain America in particular, but wouldn’t have minded taking everyone to hell with them. Sam’s tone, though, struck Bucky even more than the information that he was relaying – it painted a normalcy of what happened, a regularity of incidents that cost lives and blood and livelihoods. Seriously, how could these people go through this time and time again for the greater good? Sam Wilson, with his gap between his teeth and his kind smile and the way he’d explained things clear and concise. Sam Wilson, made of flesh and bones. No serum to knead his sinews and tendons, knit him back together quicker.

“I understand, Sam. I appreciate you telling me all of this.” Bucky looked up to see that Becca and Ma had returned to his room and had listened to Sam, faces set tight and hard, carved in the stone of their flesh. Dad’s hand was squeezing him a little tighter than it was comfortable but Bucky couldn’t find it in him to say anything.

“I’m sorry that you and your family were caught up in this.” Sam’s words might have sounded empty and trite, but coming from this guy, they came out as genuine. It must have been his warm presence or his kind eyes.

“No, it wasn’t your fault. Anyone’s for that matter, other than the bad guys.” Bucky shrugged. “But I’m not going to say anything.”

There wasn’t much that Sam could say to that, so he chose not to say anything and warned Bucky as he stood up, “Nat, I mean Black Widow, might come and ask you a few questions later one if that’s okay.”

_But the despair of being unable to reach him in time. The ceiling fading in red. A white flare of pain. The bluest of eyes. Hands holding him down._ Bucky scrunched his eyes for a moment and swallowed hard, urging the bile at the back of his throat to remain there.

“Bucky?” Dad’s voice sounded far away, muffled by the ringing of a phantom loud bang.

“I’m fine,” he gritted through his clenched teeth. “Just give me a minute.” His jaw hurt with how hard he must have clenched it. He fought so hard against the sudden wave of nausea that it took him a while to register that he was taking deep breaths by listening to Sam and everyone in the room. He opened his eyes and looked at his family that was breathing in time with Sam, supportive and there. “I’m fine,” he repeated after a while, determined to will it to reality.

“No, you’re not.” Sam’s hand rested on his shoulder. “But you will be. I will let you eat now. I’ll speak to you later.”

Bucky nodded, not sure whether he’d be willing to talk about it again. He’d got all the information that he’d required. He seriously didn’t want to have another conversation about it. And his family seemed to be of the same opinion because after Sam left the room, they all smiled, relieved, and began talking about everything and nothing. They were so good, in fact, that Steve hadn’t come with Sam until much later.

The following day, late in the afternoon, as everyone was out for a late lunch or early dinner, Black Widow came to see him as Sam had advised. There was a sense of danger coming off her in waves, her body deceptively relaxed like a beautiful panther ready to strike at the slightest sign of danger. Her gaze appeared to encompass the whole room at once and still made Bucky feel like an insect under the microscope – it wasn’t pleasant in the least and it made Bucky annoyed with himself when a cold sweat broke down his back. She had the talent of making him feel guilty without being guilty of anything at all.
Nevertheless, Black Widow introduced herself as Natasha Romanov – *Please, call me Natasha* – and shook hands with him then grabbed a chair and sat down. In a measured tone, she explained once again why she was there and whether Bucky would agree to answer a few questions. He warned her that his recollections of the event weren’t the best but she still proceeded to ask as much as she could.

“You don’t have a lot of information to offer me,” Natasha said as she leaned back in the end, settling more comfortably, when it was clear that Bucky was fumbling for something to give her. Which was basically a big pile of nothing.

“I did say I don’t remember much. I wasn’t lying.” Bucky shrugged and picked at a small thread of his afghan. “I really wish I could remember more.”

“No, you don’t.”

“No, I don’t.” Bucky offered her a wry smile.

“And you’re happy with withholding the fact that you saved Captain America’s life?”

“Yes. I honestly don’t know why everyone thinks that I’d go and brag about that.”

“A lot of drinks at the bar? A memoir on *The New York Times* best-seller’s list? Your fifteen minutes of fame?”

“Yeah, I don’t drink that much. And I can’t write about an event that I can barely remember happening.”

“Several appearances in the televised media would pay handsomely. Not to mention that you’d be a hero to the nation.”

Bucky rolled his eyes, embarrassment coloring his cheeks. “I’m not much of a hero. Yeah, I can pat myself on the back and say *good job*. But you know what? Maybe I didn’t even want to save his life. Maybe I just wanted to run away from there and I crashed into him. Maybe I wasn’t brave at all.”

“Quit it, Barnes. This false modesty doesn’t suit you.”

“It’s not false modesty. Any scenario could be possible, couldn’t it?”

“Yes, but you forget that I was there.” Her eyes turned warmer. “I saw you saving my friend’s life.”

“If you say so.” Bucky shrugged again and bit his bottom lip. “He’s saving everyone all the time. All of you, for that matter. I’d assume that it’s only fair for the table to turn every now and then.”

“You’re a bit unreal, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.” She smirked at him, sharp and knowing.

“Was this a test?” Bucky asked when the pin finally dropped on him.

“More of a reassurance.”

“Right, you mean a test.”
“Of a sort.”

“How?”

“You must know how unusual your resolution is. Most people would jump at the opportunity to talk about probably the greatest thing they’d ever done in their banal life.”

“I hope that my life won’t amount just to he saved Captain America’s life once and lost his spleen in the process.” He scowled at his hands, something terrible clenching at his chest. “No offense, but I hope I do manage to do something else as well.”

“Like what?”

“Like opening my own garage. Be the godfather of one of Becca’s future children. Read the books on my to be read list. Travel and see at least some parts of the world.” Bucky’s fingers clenched on the soft wool of the afghan as he looked up at Widow. “Maybe I can’t say that I save the world on a regular basis but I hope that my life, small and insignificant as it may seem, means something more than that moment. At least to me and to those that love me or will get to love me.”

They looked at each other for a long moment in silence. She appeared to be reading the most obscure files of his soul. Yet there was a trace of warmth that had not been before there, the kind of warmth that it was usually saved for cute children and naughty animals. Still, it made Bucky relax a little. He shuffled a little on the bed, breaking the moment.

“I’m sure it will be so, James,” she said, at last, her voice smooth and thick like a twenty-year-old bourbon.

“Please, call me Bucky.”

“No adult man should be called Bucky. I will call you James.”

“Got it.” He smiled and watched her stand up, elegantly making her way to the door.

“For what is worth though, James, I thank you for saving my friend.” This time the beautiful tiny twitch of her lips was worth a million grins. His heart stuttered a little in his chest.

“You’re welcome, Ms. Romanov.”

“Natasha.”

“Uhm, Natasha.” Bucky might have swallowed hard. Just a little. She left him alone, wallowing in the incredulity that now he was calling a few of the Avengers by their first names. What was his life?

It was this incredulity that carried him in the following days of his recovery. As he began to spend more and more time awake – and that was a relief unto itself – the awareness of other people’s feelings on the matter crept steadily into his consciousness. It wasn’t just the relieved smiles of his family each time they would open the door and get to see Bucky awake; it was the pleasant way in which Dr. Rahman would explain the next steps of his treatment, the mild tone that he kept and the way he was patient with Bucky’s questions.

It was the way in which Dr. Connolly would crack some jokes and discuss with Bucky classic cars. The nurses who usually kept an eye on him were more like mothers. Nora with her endless patience, smelling of lemons, who talked about her daughter, who was a lawyer and worked for ACLU. And Latisha who always smelled like apple pie and talked about her two nephews all the
time. Bucky had to agree they were absolutely adorable with their chubby cheeks, dimples and freckles and all.

Bucky wasn’t sure he deserved to be treated with such kindness – it wasn’t like he had saved the world or something. But still, he basked in the love of his family and the kindest of everyone involved in his care.

“It itches,” Bucky complained for the millionth time, his nose twitching.

“You’re face will itch if you don’t stop squirming,” Dad grumbled, handling the electrical razor with as much finesse as one could when their subject was constantly complaining. “I thought you promised you’d behave.”

“Well, I lied.”

“Yeah, I can hear that.” Dad rolled his eyes but his fingers moved gently on Bucky’s face as he angled his chin just so before starting the electrical razor again. Bucky huffed but didn’t say anything else.

Nora had brought a medical chair for Bucky so that he could have his first shower (he preferred to call it that, though it was far from being a normal one). While he was recovering at a pace that seemed to please his doctors, Bucky still didn’t have much strength to walk by himself and he’d tire easily. He’d be able to walk to his bathroom but then as soon as he’d get there, he’d need to sit down immediately while gasping for air as if he’d run a marathon. Luckily, Dad had spared him the humiliation of falling down in the shower and helped him wash with gentle hands. And now he was taking care of Bucky’s beard that itched and bothered him for too long.

“Thanks, Dad,” Bucky muttered softly when they were done and Dad inspected his face as if trying to find the catch in a promising contract. The deep blue of his eyes softened further when he caught Bucky’s.

“You’re my son. You have nothing to thank me for.” Dad patted his cheeks warmly and helped Bucky dress in his t-shirt. The discomfort was worth it when he finally smelled the scent of his usual detergent.

“God, it’s good to wear my clothes.” Bucky sighed then pulled the cloth to his nose and inhaled a little. “Why is it that hospitals smell like hospitals no matter where you are?”

“It must be the medication and the disinfectant.” Dad put the towels away in the box that Nora showed him.

“Pete said that they’re using a specific disinfectant that had been created specifically for the medical wing by Dr. Banner.” Bucky watched his sagged cheeks in the mirror, darkened now by a five o'clock shadow. Damn, he could do with a double cheeseburger and a large portion of fries. “It’s more effective than the usual ones used in hospitals. Dr. Banner is planning on producing it at a larger scale and donating it to selected hospitals in a trial.”

“Who’s Pete?”

“The guy that cleans up my room.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Dad gave him an indulgent smile in the mirror. “Did you drive the poor man crazy with questions?”

“No!” Bucky pretended to be outraged as Dad’s smile widened. He took a deep breath and stood up
with his father’s help. “I might have been bored out of my mind though.”

“Of course you were.” Dad’s arm around his waist tightened a little. “But I’m so happy that you can still get to ask all the questions in the world.”

“Dad…” Bucky turned more towards him but Dad had another idea. He pulled Bucky in a tight hug, mindful of the lines that were still coming out of him.

“Bucky,” Dad's voice sounded cracked and echoed horribly in the small bathroom. Bucky tightened his arms around Dad as well.

“I'm okay, Dad. I'm okay.” Bucky mumbled into his dad's shoulder. “I promise I'll be okay.” They stood embraced for what seemed like forever, but Bucky knew that this was something that his father needed and he wanted to give his parents as much reassurance as he could. He hoped that it would be enough to assuage their worries but the certainty that it was going to be a long road ahead had permeated his heart.

It took him a few days to realize that Steve never visited him during awake hours. In fact, Steve didn’t visit him unless it was late at night and absolutely never when one of Bucky’s family members was around. He would guard Bucky against nightmares and loneliness by sitting by his side, and, more often than not, he’d read a book or watch something on his Stark pad or simply stare out on the window. In the soft light of the room, at times, he’d appear implacable, his jaw clenching and unclenching, fingers gripping the rails of Bucky’s bed as if they personally offended him.

Other times, Bucky would startle awake or groggily flutter his eyelids open and Steve would be there, fuzzy and warm, gently taking his hand and holding it. His eyes would be the bluest blue, his long eyelashes almost mesmerizing (Bucky seriously didn’t want to think about the implications of his observations; he would rather live in beautiful unadulterated denial).

Still, as much as he disliked the situation, without exception, when Bucky would wake up roughly around six o’clock in the morning as Nora or Latisha, his usual nurses, would come in and do the checks, Steve wouldn’t be there anymore. Sometimes, he would leave his book or his newspaper, a tiny sign that he had been there, even if Bucky hadn’t woken up at night. And Bucky would ache with his absence because however absurd it might have sounded, he needed the reassurance of Steve’s presence. He hated that he couldn’t speak properly with Steve, that he’d be too sleepy or too groggy or too damn tired to string more than a few sentences together, and be too much of a smartass or just too damn panicky.

Therefore, after another night when he completely missed Steve and his warm hands on the account that he slept throughout the whole night, Bucky made the executive decision to fight against sleep and wait for Steve. A fact that didn’t escape Latisha when she came to make the last checks for the night, roughly around eleven o’clock. Bucky was good at pretending though, so he complained about everything from the metallic taste in his mouth that wouldn’t disappear no matter how many times he’d drink water or brush his teeth to the food that he was given each day (so bland at times that it made him almost cry – apparently, hospital food was hospital food no matter where one was being admitted to).

Then, when he grew tired of monologuing, he decided that taking in his room was better than looking at Latisha and the way she ensured that the needle was positioned correctly and that there was no risk of an air bubble or a blockage.

In the last few days, as his family was allowed to inform their extended members of Bucky’s situation, his room had steadily filled with flowers and get well cards and even a teddy bear (he...
wasn’t three, thank you very much; also, he bet that was from his cousin, Richard – that little asshole had it coming). They were delivered with constant regularity, although Bucky suspected that the nurses wouldn’t give him any of the boxes of chocolate or cookies that were most certainly delivered (he knew his family like the back of his hand). He was sure of that. Damn, did he crave some cookies! Double-chip chocolate cookies and a tall glass of milk and some fries and a hamburger and some –

“You’re not planning another escape, Mr. Barnes, are you?” Latisha grumbled when he continued to innocently flutter his eyelashes at her. She had just finished taking his blood pressure, which apparently was the low side of the spectrum but keeping steady.

“I thought I told you to call me Bucky.” He smiled coyly. “Also, if by planning an escape you mean, sitting here nicely and watching a movie that Jarvis will kindly provide, then yes, I’m planning an escape. From my reality.”

“You know you don’t fool me, right?” Latisha pushed away the blood pressure machine and watched him unimpressed. “I have three sons and two nephews. These puppy dog eyes mean nothing to me.”

“How about pouting?”

“Now, that works even less.” She sighed and after she adjusted the drip on his right arm, ensuring that everything would be safe for the night, she looked back at him. “Just make sure that whatever you’re planning, you won’t hurt yourself.”

“I’m really not planning anything.”

“Hmm. Whatever you say, Mr. Barnes. But if I need to collect you from somewhere bloodied and hurt on my shift, you won’t like me very much when I’m done with you.”

“I promise no blood and hurt will be involved.” Possibly. But Bucky wasn’t about to add that. She stared him down one more time absolutely unimpressed, then wished him goodnight and left him at that.

He settled to patiently wait for Steve, ensuring that this time he was as wide awake as possible. Also, that he was wearing a clean blue t-shirt (yeah, blue really was his favorite color) and some black sweat pants, his black socks with tiny strawberries (a present from Becca) completing his look. He was freshly washed, combed and ready to spend some quality time with Steve.

But when the clock struck midnight and the guy wasn’t in Bucky’s room, something hurtful churned in his chest. He was sure that by then, Steve should have been here. And it was stupid to feel so entitled over his time with Steve but he really wanted to be by his side. He pinched the bridge of his nose and then looked out on the window. The black veil of the night was pierced by the tiny lights of a slumbering Manhattan.

He couldn’t rationalize his need to see and speak with Steve. He bit his bottom lip hard, his throat suddenly tense. Maybe he should forget about it all together and not make this any harder for himself. At the end of the day, Steve Rogers didn’t owe him anything.

Bucky watched the clock turn to one o’clock, his fingers white-knuckled on his sheets. This was stupid. He leaned back against his pillows. Maybe Steve was on a mission. Maybe he wanted to sleep peacefully and not waste his precious time with Bucky and his nightmares and – damn, he was really wallowing in self-pity right now. His fingers squeezed the material tighter. Well, in that case, Steve should come and visit during the day and stop with this nonsense.
That was it.

Bucky decided to pull on his big boy pants and take matters into his own hands. He wasn’t going to wait for Steve any longer. He stood up a little straighter and pushed off the sheet and the afghan.

“Jarvis, pal, are you there?”

“Yes, Mr. Barnes. How may I be of assistance?”

“Do you know if Steve is at the Tower?”

“Captain Rogers is currently in his own apartment.”

“He has his own apartment at the Tower?” Bucky whistled, impressed.

“Yes, each Avenger has their own apartment within the Tower.”

“Are you allowed to share this information with me?”

“It is common knowledge, Mr. Barnes. I am hardly sharing any state secrets with you.”

“Now I feel hurt for some reason.” Bucky scratched his cheek. “Jarvis, I’ll need you for a recon mission,” he said, feeling his jaw clench as he slowly brought his legs to the edge of the bed.

“Whatsoever it is you are planning, Mr. Barnes, I would strongly advise you against it.”

“I’m planning on going to Steve and talking to him and you’re going to help me get there.”

“The floors pertaining to the Avengers and those of Mr. Stark are password locked, sir.”

“You could override them though, right?”

“Technically, I could.”

“Jarvis,” Bucky spoke softly into the emptiness of his room, “I’m not planning to kill him if that’s your concern. I just want to talk to him.”

“I would find very hard to believe that sir is ready to kill Captain Rogers when sir almost died saving his life.” A long moment of silence, so long in fact that Bucky almost vibrated with the need to just dash out of the room. “Very well, Mr. Barnes, I will help you. However, I will continuously monitor your vitals and if the data is alarming, then I will call the medical staff in.”

“Agreed. But not unless they’re really alarming. Like over the top alarming. Like –”

“Mr. Barnes, better men have attempted and failed to negotiate with me. Please, refrain from doing so and proceed to the elevator before I change my mind. So to speak.”

“You’re bossy.” Bucky stood up, a long shuddering breath accompanying his effort. “This is going to be a piece of cake,” he gritted through his teeth. Though in recent days he had been able to stand up and go to the bathroom all by himself, he hadn’t been able to make it more than a few paces without getting tired and needing to sit down somewhere.”

“Your vitals suggest otherwise, sir, but please, let us continue lying to ourselves.”

“A few uplifting words from you would go a long way, pal.” Bucky made it to the door but didn’t open it until he received confirmation from Jarvis that no one was on the corridor. If Latisha got a
whiff of Bucky’s plans, she would hand his ass back to him so fast, he wouldn’t know what hit him. He took a deep breath and slowly made his way to the elevator.

“This isn’t so bad,” Bucky mumbled as sweat drops flooded his forehead and his hand trembled as he pressed the button. The sudden cold sweat that broke on his skin told another story, but he swallowed hard against the bile at the back of his throat and pressed on. He had a mission tonight and he sure as hell didn’t want to retreat.

The elevator door opened with a silent ding and Bucky released a faint sigh of relief when he spotted no one inside of it. He hobbled inside the car, dragging his IV pole carefully so as not to disengage anything.

“Oh, Jarvis, now what?” he mumbled as he rested his back on the plushy interior and swallowed again. The AC was on and it helped with his nausea.

“I will take care of it, sir.” The elevator doors closed and the sudden change in gravity made Bucky groan. The nausea was getting stronger but he gritted his teeth. He sure as hell wasn’t going to puke all over the Avengers elevator. No way in hell. He took another deep breath and tried to ignore the way his stomach rolled then sank further to the floor.

“Mr. Barnes, I don’t like the readings.”

“I’ll be fine, pal. Just give me a minute.” Bucky bit the inside of his cheeks. God, he’d been so good at walking by himself short distances. Why did it have to be like this?

“It has been more than a minute, sir.”

“Jarvis, please.” He could hear his voice shake but he fisted his hand that wasn’t holding the IV pole and pressed his nails inside his palms, leaving half-moon marks inside of it. He could do this as long as this elevator would get there. Jesus Christ, how long did it take to get to Steve’s apartment? “I’m almost there, right?”

A drop of silence. “Yes, sir, almost there.”

The eternity of waiting for the elevator to stop and for the damn doors to open was excruciating. Time itself seemed to dilate, every second an eternity unto itself. Bucky swallowed hard. It was a reprehensible thing to experience time so differently when a person was unwell, the bad moments always prolonging with a cruelty that was utterly unwarranted.

“Here we go, Mr. Barnes.” Jarvis’ automatic voice was actually comforting and it prepared him for the sudden stop of the elevator. Yeah, he wasn’t going to repeat this trip any time soon.

“Thank you, Jarvis.” He opened his eyes and stared at the door that normally would take five steps to reach but which at the moment seemed miles and miles away. This time and space bullshit was really irritating. But Bucky was going to make it. Fuck, Latisha was going to strangle him tomorrow morning with his own IV line if he fainted now.

“Take your time, Mr. Barnes. I will hold it here as long as it’s necessary.”

“You’re a pal.”

“While I am familiar with such vernacular, I have not been called a pal before you, sir.”

“Maybe you should then.” Bucky steeled himself and finally emerged from the elevator. The wall-to-wall carpet was so soft, tempting Bucky to just rest on it a little but there was no time. “Is this
“Yes, Mr. Barnes.”

He ran his fingers through his hair a few times and then knocked on the door. In the silence of the corridor, it resounded loud and bothersome. When there was no answer, apprehension began to descend upon Bucky like a cold autumn day and a cold shiver grazed his spine. Shit, this had been such a particularly bad idea! What was he thinking? Maybe he should have stayed in his room.

“Bucky?” He had been so caught up in the anxiety of a bad choice that it took him several seconds to register the fact that Steve had opened the door.

“Fuck, tone it down, pal! Seriously!” he chose to say because Steve was absolutely ridiculous. Honestly, this man should just be outlawed and let the rest of the male population be happy and relieved that such a specimen was no longer used to compare them with. Because no human being should look this adorable with mussed hair and sleepy eyes. And especially not with that t-shirt, which hung on his shoulders like that, showcasing them so well that Bucky had an irrational desire to bite them. And those sweats – nope, he wasn’t going there. Bucky needed to get the hell out of here and stop with all this nonsense for his own good.

“Tone down what?” Steve asked, trying to hide an amused tilt of his lips.

“This,” and Bucky gesticulated wildly at Steve’s person. “All of this.”

“You’re not making any sense.” Steve blinked, confused. “Also, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Can I answer this question after you let me in and I sit down? Because I’m about to puke all over this goddamn floor and I’d rather not embarrass myself further tonight.”

“Of course, Buck! Sorry.” And Steve opened the door wider and gently cupped Bucky’s elbow, more of a silent attempt of supporting him rather than guiding him. And thank God that the couch wasn’t far because Bucky didn’t exaggerate that his need to throw up was stronger than ever. As soon as he sat down, Steve all mindful of his IV line, Bucky leaned back and closed his eyes, willing the world to stop spinning around him like a crazed flying saucer.

“Do you need anything?”

“A glass of water, please,” he mumbled because his Ma wanted him to keep his good manners all the time. Five seconds or an eternity later, depending on how one looked at the problem, Bucky opened his eyes and grabbed the glass of water from Steve with trembling hands, drinking it with small sips. After he finished the glass, Steve arranged the pillows of the couch and helped Bucky lean on them, stretching wide on the comfortable couch. His legs were weak like they were made of jelly and his heart was pounding against his ribcage, but thank heavens for small miracles because his surgery scar didn’t hurt and his hands, although clammy, ceased to shake so badly.

“Mhmm, this is heaven,” Bucky said as he looked at Steve taking a seat at the edge of the couch, having brought another glass of water just in case. “I might have to steal your couch when I’m discharged, just so you know.”

“You wouldn’t stand a chance, Buck. If I breathe a little harder in your direction, you might just crumble to the floor.”

“No need for personal attacks, punk.” Where did that come from? “Besides, I have Jarvis on my side.”
“Yeah, that still wouldn’t help you much.” Steve leaned a little closer to Bucky, one of his hands resting gently on the Bucky’s arm. “Buck, what are you doing here?”

“You didn’t come.”

“Excuse me?”

“You didn’t come and I was waiting for you.” The sudden emotion that surged inside of him made his voice sound gruff. Steve’s eyes warmed even more.

“I was trying to give you time away from me.”

“Well, you didn’t think things through, pal. I don’t want time away from you.”

“Bucky –”

“Look, I know this sounds utterly ridiculous,” Bucky barged on, the tips of his ears on fire. “I have no right to ask for your presence when we’re practically strangers. And it’s strange to feel such a connection to you.” Bucky tried to keep the eye contact but it was impossible to face Cap's baby blues, so he looked over Steve’s shoulder. “I wish I could sound reasonable and logical but there’s nothing other than –” Bucky swallowed hard and bit his lip. “I had to see you.” *I needed to see you.*

“You know, while I was mostly awake and coherent.”

“You have all the right to ask me anything, Bucky. You saved me.”

“But I don’t want to ask you things and you to give me these things out of sheer obligation.” The frustration tasted bitter. Ignoring the wave of exhaustion that crept around him from all sides, Bucky closed his eyes against the onslaught of emotion.

“It’s not that, Buck. It really isn’t.”

“It’s stupid, I know it’s stupid.” Fuck, his cheeks were now burning so hard and he really didn’t need this sort of embarrassment when just a few days ago he had begun to go to the bathroom on his own. The reality of how much of a monumentally bad idea this had been hit him like a freight train. He opened his eyes, their soreness a moot point. “I shouldn’t have come here. I shouldn’t have said anything. I better go.” And he made a move to stand up but it was Steve’s large hand on his chest that stopped him.

“You are the bravest man I’ve ever known, Bucky Barnes,” he said as if he was giving a public address to the Congress. Until a minute ago, he might have spoken with Steve, but the declaration was all Captain America.

“Why? Because I keep on embarrassing myself?” Bucky grumbled but settled down again. Those pillows were quite fluffy, thank you very much. It most definitely wasn't because of the warmth that had spread across his entire ribcage, a simmering sort of pleasure radiating from Steve's hand on him.

“You are the bravest man I’ve ever known, Bucky Barnes,” he said as if he was giving a public address to the Congress. Until a minute ago, he might have spoken with Steve, but the declaration was all Captain America.

“You’re not embarrassing yourself at all.” Bucky lowered his eyes, bashfully scratching at the back of his neck. “To be fair, Buck, I did plan on coming to see you. I feel unsettled if I don’t check myself how you are.”

“Then why don’t you come throughout the day?”

“Well, in case it escaped your notice,” Steve replied hesitantly, “your family isn’t my biggest fan at the moment.”
“Becca said she apologized.” Bucky narrowed his eyes. “I double-checked with Michael to make sure it’s true.”

“She did.”

“Then?”

“They’re all mad at me, Bucky. Just because they are polite about it, it doesn’t mean that they aren’t angry. Besides, I don’t want to impose upon their time with you when I can have the nights.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” Bucky snorted. “Pal, they’re not angry at you. They’re angry at me.”

“At you?” And who knew that Captain America's eyebrows could frown so adorably? Everything about this man was adorable (Bucky also terribly craved something to blame for these observations. Really, it was the meds).

“Yeah.” Bucky's head began to pound with exhaustion but he needed to say this out loud. “They’re angry at me because I tried to save a super-powered soldier without even thinking. Because I risked my life and made them go through this. We’re an ordinary family, Steve. The closest we’d ever come to real violence was when my cousin Callum called me a faggot and Becca sucker-punched him. Uncle Jacob wasn’t happy about that.”

“Your cousin called you that?”

“Yeah, let’s just say that not all my family members were happy when I came out to them.”

“I’m sorry, Buck.” Steve’s thumb drew soothing circles on Bucky’s chest and nope, he most definitely shouldn’t think about that.

“I’ve been called worse, pal, don’t worry about it.” Bucky ignored the pang of remarking such a dreadful truth in such a bland manner. But he was one of the lucky ones, one of the ones that had kept his direct family, that hadn’t been thrown out just because of who he found attractive. He had been privileged in ways he’d never comprehend. “So see,” he added when the silence between them became too deep, “they aren’t mad at you. It will take them a while to forgive me. So if I have to endure extra smothering and eating bland food, then it’s fine. By the way, those peas from today were disgusting, Steve. How come you guys don’t have better hospital food?”

“I don’t know.” Steve’s thumb didn’t stop.

“You’d better find out.” Bucky scowled at him for good measure but then he could feel his face relax. “Please, come and spend time with me, Steve. I think we’d make great friends. Let’s just pretend that this is a great way of getting to know each other better. You know, with you holding my hand and me being utterly pathetic.”

“You’re so far from being pathetic, Buck, that it’s not even funny,” Steve said fiercely.

“You’ll do wonders to my ego, Steve. I’m telling you.” Bucky stifled a yawn. “So friends from now on?”

“Friends.” They shook hands on it and Bucky closed his eyes in sudden delighted exhaustion.

“I think I might be falling asleep on your couch,” he mumbled, his words slightly slurred now that the adrenaline rush was over.
“You’re not sleeping on this couch no matter how comfortable it is. Come on! Up we go.”

The arms that picked him up tensed around him in an awkward embrace as he felt himself being lifted up and carried across the room. He'd never been with someone that would be capable of carrying him and had he not been utterly worn-out, he'd be a little turned on. Amazing as it might be, Bucky's stomach rolled in uncomfortable lurches and his headache was slightly getting worse.

“Are you carrying me and my IV pole?” Bucky mumbled without opening his eyes but hiding his face in the crook between Steve’s neck and shoulder, his arms wrapped loosely around his shoulders. There was so much safety in these arms that could crush bones and tanks. *He smells like sunshine,* Bucky thought, pressing his nose against Steve's skin a little tighter, trying to be inconspicuous.

“Yeah,” Steve answered.

Bucky felt his lips twitch. “You’re so strong.”

“Not strong enough.” The despondence in Steve's penetrated the fuzziness around Bucky's mind.

“Strong enough for me.” He took a slow breath. “You carrying me like a bride?”

A choked laugh. Or a snort. “Maybe like a groom.”

“It’s like a bride.”

“How about like a Bucky?” Steve’s voice was so kind. He should tell Steve how kind he was.

“I’m tired, Steve.”

And the last thought that registered with him was that he never wanted to leave Steve’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

A massive thank you goes to fancyh (my hero!!!) because her job as a beta reader was all the more made difficult by the fact that English is my second language. But she was kind and patient and I owe her a lot. Please know that all the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. :)


Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was the sense of safety that washed over him, that sense of contentment that sometimes permeated between fantasy and reality, blurring the border, that first pierced through his consciousness. There was always a hollow quality to it, the sweet impossibility of that blurry line between dream and reality wrapping gently with its bitter-sweet taste at the edge of Bucky’s consciousness. Well, that and the fact that the rain knocked at the double windows with fierce insistence, demanding to be let in or at least admired in the grey light of the morning.

Bucky scrunched up his nose in distaste and sniffled, then burrowed himself deeper into the warm duvet that covered him, gravitating even more towards the wonderful heat on his left side. It helped that he couldn’t move much, one of his arms prisoner to some invisible cuff while his waist was secured by a heavy but comfortable weight. Perplexing as it was, he couldn’t make himself care. In the cold light of the morning, he drifted away, secure and safe.

He was almost asleep when a sudden thought hit him.

The impossibility of that thought was utterly ridiculous and it was its precise ludicrous quality that made Bucky open his eyes hesitantly. The reality of sleeping alongside someone, especially when that someone was Steve Rogers was equally perplexing and unreal, yet it wrapped around him like a comfortable blanket during a cold and rainy day. He swallowed hard, something sticky and bitter sitting at the back of his throat. In the fuzzy light, Steve Rogers was like a tiny sun ray during a hard and bitter storm. He was sleeping on his side, mouth slightly open, one hand bent under his pillow and the other resting warm and all-encompassing on Bucky’s forearm.

He looked peaceful in a way he rarely seemed to be. Bucky had caught him looking like this just once or twice, in the moments when he quietly woke up during the night and Steve sat next to him, lost in thought, staring out the dark window. It was this precise memory that triggered a sharp intake of breath.

The events of the previous night rolled into Bucky’s mind like a roller-coaster out of control and he scrunched his eyes closed in a feeble attempt to calm his heart down, which just then had decided that suddenly gallivanting through his chest was a wonderful idea. He bit his bottom lip hard and opened his eyes again. The warm solidness of Steve’s body was real.

He had forgotten.

Bucky had forgotten the wonderful feeling of waking up next to someone. Making abstraction of the fact that that someone was Steve Rogers, the warmth of another body next to his, the tender warmth between their bodies, the comfort and the sheer allure of sharing space with someone was intoxicating. And Bucky hadn’t done that in the last two years. The physicality of it was overwhelming.

Bucky’s fingers flexed on the sheets but he didn’t dare to move them. To wrap them softly over Steve’s. To pass them through his short blonde hair. To see whether it was just as soft as it looked. Steve sniffled a little, moving a little closer towards Bucky, his hand never leaving his arm.

Bucky swallowed hard again. He was reminded of other grey mornings, ages ago, when he and Arthur had burrowed themselves under the sheets and talked about everything and nothing. When
they stayed in bed and ate breakfast and watched TV. Napping on Sunday afternoons, hands brushing against each other's, cuddling, nuzzling, pressing gentle kisses. Arthur's lips would twitch in an all too familiar smile, his fingers would pass through Bucky's hair and he'd whisper sweet nothings into his ear. And Bucky would hold on to his shoulders or arms and kiss his lips and silently pray that those moments would never end.

But they did... Bucky sighed. They grew out of their love. And it had hurt them both, all the more because there was nothing to blame other than life, growing up and apart, their lives slowly diverging on other paths.

Standing outside their apartment building after Arthur moved out, shoving the last of his things into his brother's pick-up truck. Saying goodbye in hushed whispers. Holding on one last time. One last embrace. Whispered sweet nothings one last time. It had hurt so bad Bucky hadn't been able to breathe. Loving someone and yet not being in love with them anymore. Knowing that person inside and out and yet unable to taste the familiarity of him anymore. And seeing the same reality in Arthur's eyes, in the way his fingers dug into Bucky's shoulders and held and held and held. The bittersweet taste of the most significant relationship he had had up to that point had kept him awake for many nights to follow.

And now Steve Rogers was sleeping in the same bed as him, comforting Bucky even in his sleep and something terrible clenched at his chest, exposing the lie that he had been living for the past two years – that he'd lied to himself all this time, because he still wanted the warm comfort of having someone to share the simple pleasures in his life. Not that Bucky was so arrogant to presume that a man like Steve Rogers was ever going to look at him. Steve Rogers that looked so soft right now, so far removed from his image as an unconquerable hero.

"Bucky, are you watching me sleep?" And yes, most definitely, Bucky had not been prepared in any way for how sexy Cap's gruff morning voice sounded. He was embarrassingly grateful that the man didn't open his eyes.

"I can neither confirm nor deny this," he replied with the tone of a man that was perfectly aware of the truth but had decided to utterly ignore it.

"I've been told that this is creepy."

"Hey, I'm not watching you like a creep." Steve opened his eyes at last and Bucky thanked God that he was lying down because he went a little weak in the knees, having found himself as the focus of those rapturous blue eyes. One of Steve's eyebrows went up and Bucky blushed to his eternal discontent. "I'm watching you like a Bucky?" The words made Steve snort.

"I see you remember last night."

"To my eternal embarrassment."

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Says you," Bucky groaned as he pulled the sheet over his head. "I remember ambushing you in your own apartment, demanding that you visit me and also, falling asleep on you and making you carry me."

Steve pulled away the sheet gently and smiled softly. "What are friends for?"

"I think that even more surreal than the fact that I woke up in your bed is the fact that I'm friends with you."
“That sounds a bit rude.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.” Bucky bit his bottom lip in a poor attempt to control his nerves. “It’s just that I grew up with stories about you and we learned about your strategies at school. Finding myself in a position to suddenly being able to have discussions with you and calling you a friend is a privilege that I’ve never thought I would have.”

“I’m just a common man, Buck.” There was a wistful tinge to Steve’s words that Bucky didn’t like.

“Steve, you were never a common man, even before the serum. I did read about your exploits, you know? When you used to defend the ladies’ honor and be kind to those less fortunate than you. There are a lot of stories about you from before.”

“Before?”

“Before you received the serum.” Bucky smiled hesitantly. “You were helping people long before you had the actual resources to do it.” He ignored the terrible blush that must have spread all over his cheeks because dear lord, but it was way too early for such discussions. And he might have berated himself further if it weren’t for the warm way in which Steve’s blue eyes melted, thick with an inscrutable feeling that Bucky couldn’t put a name to it.

“Tone down those baby blues, pal! Seriously, it’s too early in the morning for your gorgeous eyes,” Bucky blurted and scowled for good measure at Steve, whose smile only grew larger.

“Aw, Bucky, you think I have gorgeous eyes.”

“Don’t be a punk!” Bucky scowled harder, ignoring the pang in his chest that had no medical explanation whatsoever. “I’m not a morning person and I haven’t had a coffee in God knows how long. I’m not exactly responsible for what I’m saying right now.”

“So you’re saying that you don’t actually think that my eyes are gorgeous?” There was a trace of hurt in the crumpled corner of Steve’s lips and shit, but Bucky wasn’t going to be the one to hurt Steve in any shape or form.

“They really are, pal. But some of us are simple mortals, you know.”

“There’s nothing simple about you, Buck,” Steve said softly, his eyes warm and heavy with that unknown feeling that pressed against Bucky’s brain as if he’d understand it better if only he’d look deeper. Steve’s fingers tightened their grip on Bucky’s forearm, the possessiveness of the gesture, unintended as it might have been, coursing thick like molasses through Bucky’s veins. Jesus Christ, he needed to get a grip of himself but it was so hard.

He cleared his voice again, then looked down and away. “Steve, in all seriousness now, I have taken a lot of liberties with you in the last few days. This,” and he waved with his free hand at the bed or the room, he couldn’t be too sure, “only proves it. So please feel free to tell me to fuck off in case I’m overstepping. Which I know I did but just because I got shot doesn’t mean that you have to put up with everything from me. I mean I know that –”

“Bucky, breathe.” Steve’s commanding voice pierced through Bucky’s blurring, though it took him several seconds to obey the friendly order and take in a shuddering breath. Steve took his hand away and the lack of its warmth speared through Bucky. He took in another unsteady breath. What was wrong with him this morning? But then Steve stood up next to him and carefully took Bucky by the chin, forcing him to stare back into those baby blues. Steve Rogers was the epitome of a good man and no one was going to convince Bucky otherwise.
“First of all,” Steve spoke firmly, “you didn't take any liberties that I didn't allow. Also, you kind of forgot that I was the one that carried and brought you here. I could have taken you back to your room.” He blushed slightly – yeah, Steve wasn’t an attractive blusher either. Must have been all that Irish complexion. “But I didn’t. I felt better knowing you were closer, knowing that you wouldn’t run away again or hurt yourself.”

“You do realize that I’m always running towards you though, right?” The enormity of his words hit them both at the same time because Steve blushed harder, his eyes slightly widening in awe or concern (both seemed valid reactions to Bucky), while Bucky groaned in utter embarrassment. “I should never be allowed to have human interactions in the morning.”

He tried to avert his eyes but Steve wouldn’t let him. On the contrary, he leaned further in Bucky’s space and said in a rather ridiculous tone, “And you know I’ll always be there for you, right?”

“Steve.”

“Right, Buck?” Wasn’t it a bit too much to be asking this from a virtual stranger though? In spite of the fact that they’d spent quite a lot of time together, it wasn’t much about getting to know each other or anything.

“Yes.” He swallowed hard. “But I hope you’re not doing this because you think you have a duty of honor or some other bullshit like that.”

“Well, you did save my life. But no, I’m not doing that just because I have a duty towards you.”

“Good, because I’d rather you think that me getting shot was just an occasion to meet each other rather than think that you owe me.”

“An occasion to meet?” Steve smiled tenderly, his face going all soft and sweet. “Only you, Buck. Only you.”

“Good. Now enough with the mushy stuff. What does a man have to do around here to get some breakfast?”

Steve chuckled and let him go. If Bucky missed his presence immediately, well, no one would know but himself. “I think we should check in with Latisha first, let her know that you’re awake.”

“Aww, shit!” Bucky groaned and wiped at his face. “She’s going to kill me. Slowly and painfully. I can tell you right now. And Nora will help her too.”

“Who will hide the body?”

“Pete. He knows way too much about solvents and disinfectants than I’m comfortable with.” Steve laughed, which only made Bucky scowl harder at him. “This is no laughing matter, Steve. I promised her that I didn’t plan anything other than seeing a movie with Jarvis.”

“Yeah, well, she didn’t sound upset last night when I informed her about your whereabouts. Not even surprised for that matter.”

“That woman knows me too well.” The horror of that thought left Bucky speechless several seconds.

“Jarvis,” Steve said, an amused glint in his eyes, “has Latisha left any instructions for Bucky?”

“Yes, Captain Rogers,” Jarvis answered promptly. “Mr. Barnes is to have breakfast with you if he
so wishes. No coffee or anything fried though.” Jarvis ignored Bucky’s outraged *Come on!* and continued speaking, “And then he is to present himself back to the medical wing.”

“I’m sure that the no coffee thing was more of a guideline than an actual rule,” Bucky tried his luck.

“Yeah, let’s not further invoke the medical staff’s wrath by not respecting the rules.”

“The guidelines.”

“The *rules*.”

“They’re rules only because *I* have to obey them. If the situation was reversed, I’m sure you’d say the same.” And no, Bucky didn’t pout like a five-year-old.

“I have no clue what you’re talking about,” Steve said with the tone of a man that had so gotten used to breaking the rules that he wouldn’t follow them to save his life. He got out of the bed and Bucky had to avert his eyes because Steve was just too much this morning.

“Of course you don’t,” Bucky mumbled and occupied himself with disconnecting the drip line from his arm. There wasn’t much point in being attached to an empty drip bag.

“I’ll quickly go to the bathroom and then make you breakfast.” Bucky was starting to get annoyed by Steve’s chipper tone. “*Toast with butter?*”

“*Extra* butter.”

“Some oatmeal too?”

“I’ll kill you if I see any oatmeal in sight, Steve. I swear to God!”

“Fine, Grumpy Pants. Oat cookies it is!”

Bucky threw one of the pillows at Steve. They both watched it flop just a few inches away from Steve, not even close to his vicinity. Steve snorted, which only made Bucky glare at him harder. “I swear, Rogers, if you don’t move your perky ass in the bathroom in the next few seconds, I’ll show you where to shove those oat cookies.”

“Is that a promise, Barnes?” And Steve closed the door with a wink, leaving Bucky sputtering and more than one part of him wide awake. Jesus Christ, no one had mentioned in any history book what a sarcastic little shit Steve Rogers was! Though there was nothing little about him. Bucky groaned and leaned back against the pillow, trying to will his hard on away. He could be friends with Steve. He took several deep breaths, ignoring the slight pinch of his surgery. *He could.*

By the time Steve came out of the bathroom and helped Bucky go in before moving to the kitchen, Bucky had drowned himself in a sea of denial, because denial wasn’t just a river in the fucked up world of Bucky Barnes. No, sir. He was also good at lying to himself. When he wanted to. And he desperately wanted to right now.

When he came out of the bathroom and slowly made his way to the kitchen, Steve had prepared a deliciously smelling breakfast. There was buttered toast, herbal tea into mismatched cups, some sliced bananas, some peach marmalade, some boiled eggs, and even some oat cookies, which Bucky pushed away with a scowl directed at Steve, who put his best innocent face. What a brat!

“You’re pushing it, pal,” Bucky grumbled as he took a bite of his extra buttery toast.
“You make no sense this morning, Buck. I'm innocent as the day I was born.”

“Innocent, my ass!” He took a sip from his hot tea. Of course, this only made Steve grin wider.

“You should be grateful that I delayed my daily intake of coffee to soothe your delicate sensibilities.”

“Is this what being your friend means? Early exchanges of jabs where you make fun of my lack of coffee and I scowl at you, plotting how to get my revenge?”

“Pretty much, Buck.” Steve’s warm eyes shined spectacularly, even in the artificial light of the kitchen. It did funny things to Bucky’s stomach, things that he decided to completely ignore in favor of scowling some more.

“Don’t think I won’t avenge myself, Steve Rogers. Hehe, see what I did there?”

“Yes, Buck,” and Steve rolled his eyes at him (totally unbecoming of a national icon), “you’re the king of puns. I bow at your word prowess.”

“Thank you. I’m glad that you admit my awesomeness.”

“Eat your toast and shut up, jerk.”

“Whatever you say, punk.” And Bucky took a bite of his toast with much gusto.

In all honesty, Bucky didn’t know what time it was and he still missed his coffee, damn it, but sitting here, in this relatively small kitchen, with Steve munching on his toast at the other side of the table, the silent companionship between them, Bucky thought he wouldn’t like to be anywhere else in the world right now.

In fact, this companionable breakfast seemed to seal the deal between the two of them. Afterwards, when Nora came after Bucky with a wheelchair and a few choice words, Steve just smiled and let Bucky know that he'd see him soon. So when Steve showed up later on in the afternoon, as he and Michael were discussing cousin Richard and his impending visit, Bucky didn't comment on it. But he did tell Steve to grab a seat and be prepared to be instructed on the Barnes family tree. Bucky was going to treasure Steve's answering smile for the rest of his life.

The following days blurred all into nothingness as it was more of the same: his family visiting, blood tests, medication, exercises to strengthen the muscles again, Steve, occasionally Sam. Steve, Steve, Steve. Who kept the end of his bargain and now was visiting throughout the day as well, when he had the time. Who made jokes about Bucky's pout when he didn't get what he wanted and laughed out loud when Becca made fun of him. The punk!

So he should have realized that something was wrong when it was actually Uncle Ben that came to visit him just as Bucky finished his novel. He had taken a shower earlier that day, after PT, and after a short nap, he felt oddly refreshed. Taking into consideration that just a few days ago, he had almost keeled over on his way to Steve, it was a good sign of recovery. Or at least that was what he thought. He was off the IV line, his blood pressure was good. The last blood test results seemed promising and all in all, Bucky hoped that soon enough they'd tell him to go home. Or kick him out, whichever came first.

“Uncle Ben, how's tricks?” Bucky greeted him with a wide grin.

“Tricks are for kids,” Uncle Ben replied with a wide smile. “For a guy that has been eating bland food for weeks now, you're awfully chipper.” He grabbed the wheelchair and motioned for Bucky
to sit in it. “Come on, kid, we're going places today.”

“Places? Why? What's going on?”

“Don't worry! Nothing serious, just an informal meeting related to your medical care.”

“Do we have to use the wheelchair?” And yes, ladies and gentlemen and non-binary people, Bucky had reverted back to his five-year-old self. Luckily, Uncle Ben affectionately patted him on the shoulder as Bucky stood up from the bed and then carefully sat down in the chair, ignoring the jab.

“I'm not Captain America, kid. I can't carry you in my arms everywhere.”

“I can walk perfectly, thank you very much.”

“Sure thing.” Uncle Ben nodded for good measure, even as he skeptically watched Bucky holding on his left side (mostly the instinct of making sure that nothing spilled out of him) and carefully leaning back in the chair.

“Are you just humoring me?”

“Of course.” Uncle Ben smiled down at him and then began pushing him towards the door. They got out of the room without further incident and they chatted about other members of their family (Uncle Jacob had to postpone his visit to New York since Grandpa Joe wasn't feeling well) and talked about ways to sneak some contraband food inside his room. Well, Bucky talked about it and Uncle Ben rolled his eyes at him several times, before telling him in no uncertain terms that there was never going to be any contraband food coming from him. Which deeply hurt Bucky. It seemed he couldn't corrupt anyone, goddamn it.

When Bucky entered the office where the meeting was taking place, everyone was already present and they all stared at him as soon as Uncle Ben pushed the wheelchair inside. Yeah, this wasn’t ominous at all. Bucky straightened himself as his uncle settled him next to Ma and then sat in the empty chair on Bucky’s right side.

Steve was leaning against his chair, toying with the paper clip in his hands but gave Bucky a small smile when he entered. For his own sanity, Bucky refused to register the green Henley that Steve was wearing – if he did, the doctors might think that there was something wrong with his heart or something. Dr. Rahman and Dr. Connolly whispered amongst themselves, probably complaining about Bucky’s poor attempts of escaping and making a general nuisance for himself. Sam sat next to Steve, watching him like a hawk or a falcon – hehe, that was a bit funny in Bucky’s mind anyway – but kept a friendly demeanor all in all.

It took Bucky less than he might have expected in the current situation to realize that it was his parents who were actually not quite comfortable being inside the room. And while Dad was really good at hiding his discontent by keeping a bland smile on his lips, the kind that never reached his eyes and made him look like the smarmy cliché lawyers that everyone warned him about, Ma looked even less pleased – there was a tightness around her eyes, a slightly bitter twist of her thin lips that put Bucky on the defense.

“Did I do something wrong?” Bucky asked, watching the people around him, his fingers twining in his lap.

“No, Buck.” Steve smiled reassuringly at him, which took released a little the tight clench of Bucky’s chest. “We’re not here because you did something wrong.”

“Then please don’t mind when I say this, but you guys could use some work on your bedside
manners because the way you all gathered, it feels like I’ve been called into the principal’s office and he’s about to rip me a new one.”

“Bucky, please, mind your language.” Ma rolled her eyes in fondness but Bucky wasn’t impressed. He shrugged and watched them all.

“But it’s the truth.”

“We aren’t here to complain about anything you did, James,” Dr. Rahman intervened, keeping his tone level. “Though we could talk about your latest escapade if you want to.”

“No, thank you, Doc. I’m fine.” Bucky raised his hands in mock defeat and everyone around the table chuckled.

“That’s what I thought.” Dr. Rahman smiled indulgently at him. He pushed his eyeglasses further up the bridge of his nose before continuing. “The reason why we gathered here is that the latest tests suggest that you recovered as much as we expected you to during this time frame and you’re ready to be discharged.”

“Yes!” Bucky threw his right arm up in a universal cheering gesture, which was met with chuckles or rolls of eyes across the room.

“As such,” Dr. Rahman spoke, ignoring Bucky’s reaction, “we need to make a care plan for when you leave the hospital and the follow-ups that you will have to attend.”

“Doc, no offense, I’ll do anything you require if this means that I might take my first sip of coffee.”

“I’m glad to see that you have your priorities set, James.” Dr. Connolly’s lips twitched pleasantly. The bastard! Bucky grimaced at him. Dr. Connolly loved to toy with Bucky’s emotions and talk about the different blends he’d been drinking this past week, torturing Bucky with words like pure black coffee and the tallest Americano I’ve ever had.

“Well, no offense, Doc, but I’m disappointed to say that it’s official: the hospital food is bad, irrespective of where one is admitted.” Bucky smiled then cleared his voice, his tone turning more serious. “While the prospect of having freshly brewed coffee does make me a happy man, I don’t understand why it was important for all of us to gather here.”

Oh yeah, something was definitely going on here. And not in a good way. The doctors looked at each other, then across the table at his parents. In the end, it was up to Dr. Rahman as his primary care coordinator to grab the metaphorical bull by the horns and speak softly to Bucky:

“Look, James, as we previously discussed with your parents, we are really happy with your progress. We would like the discharge you and make sure you go home with the current medication you are on, though we might decide on a different dosage, depending on how your blood work looks. But all in all, I would feel much better – well, actually we would feel much better if we'd continue monitoring you for the next couple of weeks.”

“You mean more blood tests?” Buck asked, confused by the doctor's cautious tone.

“Amongst other things.”

“But I’m fine. You guys said I'm fine and that I'm ready to be discharged.” Bucky narrowed his eyes at them. “Unless there was something that you didn't mention.”
“No, of course not,” Dr. Connolly was the one to answer this time and leaned forwards towards him. “Look, what you need to understand is that despite the fact that you are feeling better now and you are on your way to full recovery, you need to make serious adjustments to your life, Bucky. Any infection might turn lethal to you. And we won't discharge you from our care until we're absolutely sure that those adjustments are met. So, for the time being, we thought that it was better for you to stay at the Tower. Just for a couple of weeks.”

“Stay at the Tower?” Bucky looked confused at his parents and then at Steve. “Stay where?”

“Tony had a small apartment prepared for you,” Sam answered mildly. “He was more than happy to ensure that all your needs are met and that you'd be comfortable. It would also be easier for you to attend all your appointments and get all the tests done will little fuss.”

“No!” Ma replied immediately, curt and precise, leaving Bucky gaping like a fish.

“No?” he repeated dumbly because his brain didn't seem to register the meaning of that word.

“No, that won't be necessary. As we mentioned before, we are more than capable of taking care of our son.”

“No one here is implying in any way that you are incapable of taking care of your son, Mrs. Barnes,” Dr. Rahman was quick to point out. “In fact, we wouldn't have any qualms in discharging Bucky in your care. But don't you think it would ease the situation for both you and your son?”

“As my wife said, I don't think this is a good idea.” Dad crossed his arms and stared down both doctors.

“Mr. Barnes,” Dr. Connolly replied with a slight tone of exasperation, “Bucky's stay here would save you from having to make the trip to Manhattan several times a week. It would also be more comfortable for Bucky himself – he still gets tired very easily and he needs all the energy for getting strong again. For the situation that he's been in, he's nothing short of a miracle.”

It felt like someone snuffed out the noise from the room. His parents had more counter-arguments, Bucky could see that, and he didn't understand their reluctance at letting him stay here for another couple of weeks. How Uncle Ben could sit so calmly next to him Bucky had no clue. He opened his mouth about to say something when Steve let the paper clip fall on the table and leaned forward. His chin jutted a little.

“Would it help if I promise you that I will take care of him?” Both doctors startled and looked in tandem at him while Sam threw Bucky a commiserating look – he's Steve, what can you do?

“Steve, I –”

“I understand your concern, Mr. and Mrs. Barnes. You almost lost Bucky because of me.” Bucky's made a sound of protest but no one appeared to pay any attention to him. “I can't begin to comprehend what this situation meant for you and for your family.” Steve exuded honesty and determination. “I'm sure none of us at this table could. But I can promise you this: we will take care of Bucky as we have done up to this point. I will personally make sure that he follows all the necessary steps in his recovery.”

“Those are beautiful words, Captain Rogers,” Dad said, at last, his voice a touch warmer than it was at the beginning of this conversation, “and I'm sure you meant every word. But like you said, we almost lost Bucky so you can imagine how long we prayed for this moment when he'd be released back to our care.”
“Of course.” Steve nodded short. “Our offer wasn't made light-heartedly, Mr. Barnes. We want what's best for Bucky. I want what's best for him. He saved my life and now that I began to know him, I understand your reluctance in letting anyone else take care of him. But I promise you that this arrangement would benefit both you and your son.”

While it was clear that Steve's words had the necessary impact on his parents, Bucky could see that they were far from being convinced. It was rather ironic that Bucky himself had been the most distrustful about the whole situation when he had woken up only for him now to almost plead with his parents to let him stay here. And although he was an adult, and thus in full custody of his choices, he still wanted to have his parents on his side.

“Could you guys please give us a couple of minutes?” Bucky asked pleasantly enough, though a wave of annoyance washed over him, making him chew his bottom lip like it was a buffet.

“Of course,” Steve answered in their name and they all stood up and quietly left the room. As soon as the door closed, Bucky swirled around with as much force as he could in his current situation and scowled at his parents. Uncle Ben rested a hand on his shoulder to prevent any further injury and a silent plea for calm.

“Okay, what the hell is going on here?” he seethed. “And you can’t tell me that there’s nothing because there’s definitely something. They’re offering two weeks of paid medical bills and free PT and you guys are acting like they want to cut me in two. Why the hell are we saying no?”

“Ma, they’re not saying that!” Bucky exclaimed incredulously, briefly considering the idea that maybe his parents attended an entirely different meeting.

“Yes, they do with their we can concentrate better on him and have him on medical supervision 24/7.” She crossed her arms and jutted her chin in the stubborn way that Bucky hated since he was little. “Like I can’t be responsible for my own child.”

“Ma, they really didn’t say that.”

“Yes, they do with their we can concentrate better on him and have him on medical supervision 24/7.” She crossed her arms and jutted her chin in the stubborn way that Bucky hated since he was little. “Like I can’t be responsible for my own child.”

“No one dares to tell me that I can’t take care of my son,” Ma snapped right back.

“Ma, they’re not saying that!” Bucky exclaimed incredulously, briefly considering the idea that maybe his parents attended an entirely different meeting.

“I don’t know what you have against them,” and Bucky’s voice came out as a harsh whisper, “but you need to stop. They paid for all the medical care that I needed, even when they didn’t have to, and they’ve been continuously polite and solicitous. Plus, you know that you have to return to work. Seriously, how much unpaid leave can you guys get before it all comes crashing down around you?”

“No one said anything about unpaid leave, son.” Dad stared him down. “Who the hell told you that?”

“Dad, please, I'm not stupid.” Bucky rolled his eyes. “You guys went for ten days in Hawaii for your anniversary, you took a week off to see Grandpa Joe when we had that scare back in April, and another week when you helped Aunt Julia move to Chicago. Like, it's not hard to do the math.” Bucky sighed and slouched back in his wheelchair. “Look, I know that you'd like me to come back with you guys, but the truth of the matter is that this would actually help us all. You guys can go back to work, make sure not everything else in your life imploded. You know, plot with Uncle Jacob how else you're going to hide my shooting away from Grandpa Joe. Because I'll need all the support I can get when I'm back.”
“We're just worried about you, Bucky.” Ma leaned in and grabbed his hand, squeezing it lightly. “We're concerned that the more time you spend here, the more difficult it's going to be for you to leave this place.” She nodded towards the door. “I saw the way you look at him when he should be the one to do so. Glad as I am that he didn't disappoint us and that he is truly a kind man, I'd still not entrust him with your care. I'd doubt even Dad for that matter.”

“Hey!” the man in question exclaimed and crossed his arms. “I'd be a good nurse. Who gave our son the sponge baths?”

“Dad, please, stop talking!” Bucky blushed heavily, the residual embarrassment still lingering in his blood. But he brought Ma's hands to his lips and kissed them softly. “I'll be fine, Ma. I'd very much like to return home with you guys, but we both know that financially, it isn't advisable. Or time-wise. Driving me back and forth, making sure that my prescriptions are filled in, worrying about me alone at home – you'd both go insane.” The sloop in her shoulders confirmed his suspicions.

“It's better if Bucky remains here for the time being,” Uncle Ben added his five cents to the matter in a surprising twist. “It's not like they keep him prisoner here. If he gets fed up with their rules or just doesn't feel comfortable anymore, I'm sure that he's more than capable of grabbing his things and coming home.” His hand on Bucky's shoulder tightened in a quiet show of support.

Ma threw a look over her shoulder at Dad, who in turn seemed to deflate as well.


“Cross my heart and hope to die.” He smirked for about half a second before the hard stares of both his parents made him cower. “Come on, guys, it was a little bit funny.”

“Not at all,” Ma hissed. “Not even a little bit.” She looked back at Dad. “This is all your fault, you know that right? He got this sense of humor from your side of the family.”

“Of course, dear.” Dad accepted the accusation with a wink.

“Well, let me go and get them,” Uncle Ben said, standing up with the air of a man that had heard this conversation far too many times. Bucky let go of Ma's hands and tried to regain his composure, but it took one look from Steve to beam back at him, throwing the universal okay sign as well, to the embarrassment of all people present, including his.

Living with Steve was surprisingly easy. In the first few days, Steve kept pretty much to his schedule and Bucky made sure that he wouldn’t interfere too much in the routine that his friend had set up for himself. Not that he could if he thought of certain things like waking up at five o’clock in the morning for a run – seriously, if this didn’t prove that Steve Rogers was a glutton for punishment, he didn’t know what did. Bucky would wake up roughly around the time when Steve, having had a shower, would putter in the kitchen. And Bucky would slowly get up and take care of his own ablutions before making his way to the kitchen.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve would say, a soft smile on his lips, ever so slightly surprised that Bucky was still there and that he chose to spend time with him. And Bucky would smile helplessly back because it would still be too early in the morning to be properly communicative in any human language. Not that Bucky knew many foreign languages – apart from a bit of conversational Spanish that he had picked up from the people in the neighborhood, he pretty much sucked at grasping the meaning of foreign languages. It had helped that he did a bit of Spanish in high school, but not too much. On the other hand, there were books in German and French on Steve’s
bookshelves and the guy seemed to know just about everything that was going on in the world at any given moment.

Bucky would watch Steve adding the finishing touches to their breakfast while making small talk. The doctors still didn’t allow any coffee in Bucky’s diet, so he made do with tea. Steve would always smile as he set up everything on the table like a giant housewife from the fifties. And Bucky would smile back, defenseless against Steve’s charm, his blonde hair messy and curling slightly around his ears and nape, one t-shirt or another, always tight, always leaving little to the imagination – and boy, did Bucky have an imagination or what! Not that he’d insist on using it because it wasn’t nice. Even though Steve was a walking daydream, all gentle smiles and sweet gestures.

They’d share food and smiles and the sports page from *The New York Times* - and wasn’t that a nice surprise? – and they’d grumble about the state of the world affairs like two old men. For the state of the world was always lousy and terrible and maybe they should stop reading those news first thing in the morning. Then they’d do the crossword together and laugh at their mistakes, pushing against each other’s shoulders – always so light and careful – and Bucky would feel amazing and fuzzy and warm, though he’d hide it under his grousing about manners and what happened to looking after injured people and all that.

There was a sort of peacefulness in Steve’s kitchen during those first few days, the likes of which kept Bucky content and less anxious about what awaited him when he’d finally return home and be able to live his own measly life again, far removed from Jarvis and the wonders of the Tower. Worst of all, far removed from Steve and his warm touches.

Anyway, then their day would be spent mostly in companionable silence or friendly conversations about books and movies when they didn’t read said books or watch movies. Bucky couldn’t remember the last time he’d been able to relax and enjoy reading or listening to his favorite albums, which he would then insist they listen to together. Discovering similarities in their tastes was all the more thrilling.

But on a Wednesday morning (hehe, Bucky was finally up to date with the day of the week), Steve didn’t seem as relaxed as he should, even as they bickered over what was a better synonym for hugs in the three across on the crossword.

“I have to go on a mission,” Steve confessed into his own cup of coffee, which Bucky had allowed, though now he kind of hated the thought of it. He sat up a little straighter in the chair then leaned back and watched Steve.

“You mean you leave after breakfast?” Bucky asked quietly, unsure of whether he would be allowed to ask this.

“Yes.”

“Will you be gone long?”

“I don’t know, Buck. Half a day. More, depending on the situation. It might take more than twenty-four hours.” Steve looked up and finally met Bucky’s eyes. “I’m not sure yet and I’m not at liberty to share more details with you.”

“No, Steve, of course not. I wouldn’t dare ask for details anyway. What do I know about tactical missions and whatnot?” This was a poor attempt at humor and God was punishing him when Steve decided to give him the puppy eyes. For all things holy, Steve was really good at giving those puppy dog eyes. “Steve, I’ll be fine. I’m not some two-year-old in need of supervision.”
“Well, the fridge is stocked and you have Jarvis in case you need anything else like ordering food and whatnot.” Steve twined his fingers on the table and leaned forward a little as if preparing to discuss world peace with Bucky. “I don’t want to leave you alone and I know I took the responsibility of taking care of you in front of your parents but this is a critical mission and I have to go. I wouldn’t –”

“Steve, pal, please breathe because you’re giving me a headache.” Bucky leaned forward as well and covered Steve’s hands with his own, making sure to look him in the eyes. “First of all, please don’t make it sound like you’ve been drafted, about to leave for the front for years to come. Secondly, stop sounding so guilty – you’re Captain America, I really didn’t expect you to sit around and watch movies all day with me.” Though he did. Jesus, Bucky really needed to get a grip on himself. “And finally, I’ll be fine. I’m not an invalid. I can move around and even cook. Better than you anyway.”

“You’re never going to let me forget about that, are you?” Steve gave him a rueful smile but it was better than nothing and Bucky would take it.

“Captain America himself almost burning down the kitchen in a poor attempt at making a chicken frittata? Pal, even if I were to live to a hundred, I’d still tell this tale to all my nieces and nephews.”

“I thought we promised never to speak of it again and never to mention it to anyone. Ever.”

“No, you promised. I pretended to do so, while keeping crossed fingers behind my back.”

“Very cunning of you.”

“I know, right?” Bucky preened a little and Steve’s smile became a little closer to the real thing.

“You sure you’ll be fine?” he asked hesitantly and Bucky didn’t have it in him to snap at him.

“I’m thirty-two, pal. Technically, I’m one year older than you. I think I’ll be fine on my own.”

“Buck, I was born in 1918.”

“Yeah, and spent seventy-years in ice. That don’t matter. I’m still older than you.” Bucky’s hand squeezed Steve’s hands before letting him go. “Also, I made mac and cheese without burning down the kitchen. That should say everything about our ages and all.”

Steve’s smile turned wistful again, though his eyes were molten. “If you insist on being the older guy, then by all means, Buck.”

“Thank you. Please respect my seniority and defer to me with the much-needed respect.”

“I really didn’t know what I was getting myself into when I offered to be your host, did I?”

“You’re living the dream, pal. Admit it! Your life was empty and dreary without me in it to drive you insane or something.”

“Or something,” Steve mumbled. He looked down at his hands as if he could grasp the meaning of a question that hadn’t been asked before.

“Are you going to be all right?” Bucky asked, keeping his voice soft and low.

“Yes, Buck.”

“And will you come back to me?” The question came out naturally and Bucky refused to take it
back. He swallowed other words instead. This was neither the place nor did he have the right to say
Don't leave. Stay with me. Don't go. Steve looked up and his eyes suddenly widened, a slight
amazed twitch around the left corner of his lips.

“Yes, Buck.” And if those words came out softer than they were intended to, no one would know
but them. And Bucky wouldn’t brag to anyone about the tenderness that passed between them right
then, the way they smiled and looked at each other. Somehow his hands had snaked in on Steve’s
hands again and their fingers intertwined and by all things holy, Bucky felt like falling and falling
and falling. And he welcomed the feeling because there was nowhere else he’d rather be than in
that ultra-modern kitchen, holding hands with Steve Rogers.

It took them a long time to untangle themselves and even longer for Bucky to start washing the
dishes while Steve went back to his bedroom and changed. He was washing away the soapy suds
when Steve returned to the kitchen.

“Remember, if you need anything, just let Jarvis know.” Bucky raised his eyes and froze in place,
even as Steve continued to speak. “Sam is going to come later on and check up on you.” Bucky
nodded stupidly as he continued to stare at Steve incomprehensibly. “Buck, are you listening to
me?”

“What are you wearing?” Bucky blurted about as subtle as a bull in a china shop, tongue thick and
clumsy.

“You mean my stealth suit?” Steve frowned at him, but Bucky couldn’t concentrate for the life of
him. Sweet Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and just about every saint in the Catholic canon, but Steve
Rogers was one piece of work! That stealth suit made the breadth of his shoulders all-
comprising, the waist-to-shoulder ratio incomprehensible, an Atlas onto his own. Why didn’t I
know about stealth suits and the likes? Bucky thought hysterically even as Steve waved in front of
his eyes.

“Bucky, you’re still with me?”

“Yeah, I think I am.”
“You think you are?”

“I am, I am.” Bucky batted his hands away. “Go away with your ridiculous suit,” he grouched, looking at a point past Steve’s right shoulder. Nope, he wasn’t going to be that guy – the guy with a crush on an impossible person. Nope, he refused.

“Are you sure you’re going to be fine, Buck?”

“I’m sure, Steve. Stop worrying.” He tried to smile but he was sure that came out more like a grimace than anything else. He cleared his voice and made himself look into Steve’s eyes. “I have medical check-ups once a day, physio and there’s also Jarvis to give me a hand. You just focus on your mission and make sure that you come back safe and sound.”

“I’ll do my best.” Chin jutted out, jaw hard and clenched. There was still a faint trace of Steve Rogers in there, but now it was Captain America standing before him. Bucky couldn’t have explained the feeling of watching that hardening, the way Steve seemed to wall himself behind that Captain America persona, but he was doing it right in front of him and it was kind of breaking his heart.

“Go, pal,” his voice was hoarse and slightly hollow. “Before I decide that I’m going to worry too much about you and keep you right here. Screw the Avengers team and everything.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible, but you can always try.” Steve smiled and stepped back. “Don’t forget Sam’s going to keep an eye on you.”

“Why isn’t Sam going on the mission with you?” As soon as he saw Steve’s grimace, Bucky raised a hand. “Got it, you can’t say. Don’t worry, pal. Just be safe!”

“I will.” And suddenly, in two steps, Steve came right next to him and his arms wrapped around Bucky like he was about to embrace something made of the most fragile glass. Bucky’s heart went into overdrive in a heartbeat, his hands clammy as he pressed them against Steve’s back, holding on just as tight. Goddamn it, he wasn’t a small guy by any means, though he had lost a little bit of weight during his stay in the medical wing. Still, he was tall and pretty broad and yet he couldn’t compare with Steve. There was that familiar sense of safety wrapping around him like a comforting blanket on a cold and rainy day. Bucky hoped that he was giving the same kind of comfort Steve was offering him at the moment with that heartfelt embrace.

“Be safe, Steve,” he murmured into Steve’s neck, hoping that he would be heard. The arms slightly tightened around him, making him dizzy.

“I will, Buck.” Steve’s breath caressed his cheek.

In the warm light of late morning, they stood embraced for what felt like ages. Bucky’s thoughts had quieted down, everything in him focusing on the present, on Steve’s arms wrapped around him. Odd how the man who would be able to rip the door of a tank on any giving day was holding on to Bucky with light gentleness.

“If you can,” Bucky said when they released each other at last, but still keeping close, “just give me a message to know that you’re all right.”

“I will, Buck.”

The tightness around his chest only increased as he watched Steve go and he tried to distract himself quickly to make sure that he wouldn’t think too much about everything. He didn’t think about Steve as he talked with Dr. Rahman about the new medication he was on; he didn’t think as
he did the easy exercises as Jordan, his physio, supervised him. He didn’t think, even when Sam dropped by for a few minutes in the late afternoon to make sure Bucky hadn’t gone insane with missing Steve and worrying about him so much.

Why Bucky thought that he would be able to sleep he had no clue. However, when he woke up around two in the morning, drenched in sweat and terror still pooling viscously at the edge of his consciousness, Bucky wasn’t too surprised. He wiped at his face and tried to ignore the hammering in his chest by swallowing hard a few times and blinking rapidly in the semi-darkness of the room. He imagined that he tore to pieces each horrifying scene from his nightmare, hoping to give him a resemblance of control. He checked his phone but the screen stared back at him, blank and unresponsive.

He leaned back in his bed and pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes, attempting to obliterate those bloody visions of Steve from his mind. But all he could see was that stealth suit drenched in blood and torn to pieces and Bucky not being there to do anything.

Goddamn it but this was useless. And he did need a break.

“Jarvis,” his gravelly voice sounded dissonant in the dark room, “has Steve returned?”

“No, sir. Captain Rogers is still away on mission.”

“I see.” He slowly stood up, unable to find rest between the covers of his bed. “Is anyone – I mean, uhm, is anyone awake?”

“Mr. Stark is awake.”

Bucky winced. “Uhm, no, don’t worry about it. I wouldn’t want to –”

“Come on up, Buttercup!” Tony’s voice rang in the quiet room and damn, it would be annoying if it weren’t for the rush of relief that it gave him. “Jarvis, please guide my new friend upstairs.”

“Of course, Mr. Stark. When you’re ready, Mr. Barnes.”

Bucky didn’t want to spend another minute on his own, thinking and worrying about Steve. So he changed his t-shirt, grabbed his trainers, and followed Jarvis’ instructions only to realize that he had been granted access to Iron Man’s workshop. Bucky’s inner self must have swooned a little because he remained stunned to his place, at the entrance, taking everything in.

“Buckeye, still with me?” Stark waved in front of him. Bucky blinked as it took him several seconds to understand that Tony was talking to him. Stark's hair was in disarray, a clear sign that he'd repeatedly ran his fingers through it, a gesture that Bucky had been doing as well, mostly when he was nervous. Like now. But unlike him, Tony didn't look like he went to sleep at all. Probably in more than twenty-four hours.

“Yes, sir. A little bit overwhelmed by the awesomeness of this place.” The understatement of the year.

“I thought I told you to call me Tony. We shook hands on it and everything.” The words grabbed Bucky’s attention and directed it towards the man in question, who had a slight manic rictus on his face. Bucky narrowed his eyes.

“How many cups of coffee did you have?”

“More than you’ll ever drink, kid.”
“Don’t pull that shit with age. Steve tried it too, and it didn’t work for him either.”

“Oh, someone is feisty this evening.” Tony’s grin only widened. “How come Steve’s age card didn’t work?”

“I discounted the seventy years spent in ice.”

“Bold of you to assume that you could do that.”

“Bold of you to assume that it didn’t work.”

“Oh, I like you, kid! I really do!” Tony clapped his hands in delight as he studied Bucky. Whatever he saw made him not ask further questions, a simple fact for which Bucky was unbelievably grateful. Tony gestured towards his workbench, where various pieces sat, meaningless and disparaged. But Bucky knew that once they were assembled, they'd make sense. “Want to help?” And Bucky nodded gratefully and patiently waited for Tony to bring him a chair, all his nightmares melting away. And as he sat down and Tony began explaining the purpose of each metal piece and what they were going to do with them, Bucky let Tony's words wash over him, soothing his worries and making him focus on the task at hand.

Chapter End Notes

The awesome art for this chapter can be found here. It's absolutely amazing and incredible and em-dibujosb should be showered with praise and love. Seriously, I'll never waste an opportunity to praise her art. <3

A massive thank you goes to fancyh (my hero!!!) as well because her job as a beta reader was all the more made difficult by the fact that English is my second language. But she was kind and patient and I owe her a lot. Please know that all the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. :)


“So if the injector is built up here,” and Tony pointed out where the injector should be on the hologram, “then the pressure valve would be located here. This design would improve the propulsion system, which would be alimedmented better and thus last for longer. Does it make sense?”

Bucky frowned at the holographic design spinning in green circles in front of him. “Yeah, I think so.” He narrowed his eyes further and when the hologram turned again, he pointed to a lower part, an intricate maze of valves and pegs. “But then wouldn’t the same problem appear there?”

Tony squinted at it, then took another sip of his coffee. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“Not that I know anything related to propulsion systems and renewable energy.” Bucky shrugged his stiff shoulders and carefully took a sip of his own coffee.

They’ve been at it for the past two hours and the discussion didn’t appear to die down, which made Bucky happy. It was actually extraordinary and intellectually stimulating to have a mechanical engineering discussion with a bona fide genius. Not only it had made him completely forget about his nightmares and the fact that Steve still hadn’t returned from his mission, but it had also opened Bucky’s eyes to the multitude of mechanical engineering classes that he could take at the community college if he applied himself. At the end of the day, no one said that just because he’d open his own shop, he’d have to restrict his interests. And the voice that whispered that a business needed to be looked after had been promptly ignored. It was too early in the morning to think about how such choices could complicate his life. His need to learn new things had always been there – he just had to find a way to feed it.

In fact, this discussion with Tony reminded Bucky that he had always possessed a thirst for knowledge. It had been inherent to who he was, but it had also been ignored for a while when it couldn’t be focused on a specific topic, when nothing had kept his interest for long.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Buckeye.” Tony gulped half of his coffee, the light of his chest reactor catching briefly in the black porcelain. He looked exhausted and haunted. Bucky couldn’t help but stare at him disbelieving.

“Aren’t you too old to pull all-nighters like this one? Drinking gallons of coffee?”

“You do realize that by calling me kid, you actually managed to contradict yourself, right?”

Tony scowled at him. “You do realize that you are incredibly annoying, right? This is the thanks I get for letting you drink coffee against the doctor’s wishes?”

Bucky blushed slightly and looked down forlornly at his half-empty cup. Dr. Rahman was going to have words with Bucky, he was sure of that. \textit{Strong words}. “I’m sorry, but you’re an easy person to banter with.”

“And now he calls me easy.” The mock exasperation didn’t escape to Bucky, who looked up again. Tony clapped him on the shoulder twice. “Don’t worry about it, kid. It’s actually good to have someone to banter with. Cap always takes everything way too seriously, and I get the feeling
that Widow is one step away from murdering me in my sleep.”

“What about Sam?”

“He’s disgustingly well-adjusted and has already threatened me several times with disembowelment.”

Bucky chuckled. “Not one to mince words, I gather?”

“You have no clue, kid. It’s really difficult being me these days around here.” Tony dramatically flopped on his chair and leaned backwards, the cushy back rest straining a little. He appeared to be melting into the thick leather material – in the stark light of the laboratory. Tony’s dark circles were even more obtrusive, the sunken quality of his cheeks making Bucky realize that Tony was pretty much one step away from joining him in the medical wing. Though it wasn’t his business to pry, Bucky did wonder what kept this Avenger awake – the worries of the world or what it meant to go and confront the said worries?

“I forgot,” Bucky mumbled. He immediately wanted to slap himself, when Tony’s sharp gaze rested on him.

“You forgot what, kid?”

Bucky bit his bottom lip and thought of maybe coming up with a lie, any lie. But Tony had been talking with him about mechanical engineering and not even for a moment did he make Bucky feel guilty for keeping him awake.

“That you guys are human after all.”

“That’s not your fault.” Tony finished his cup of coffee and set it down by his chair. “Sometimes, we forget that too. Though technically, you didn’t forget. You jumped in front of a bullet for Cap and all that.”

“Yeah, though technically, I didn’t think about that.” Bucky shrugged, a little uncomfortable with the reminder of his deed. “But it’s a bit difficult not to be overwhelmed with the technology that you have here and Jarvis and all the other things available in the Tower and then think that you guys are normal human beings too.”

“We’re made of flesh and bones, Bucky.” Tony released a world-weary sigh that tugged at Bucky’s heart. “Some of us more than others, but we still pretty much bleed all over the place and get lost in our own personal brand of nightmares.” Tony wiped at his face, a rictus of tiredness resting at the corner on his mouth.

“Sirs,” Jarvis’ voice sounded jarring in the stuffy silence of the room, “I am sorry to interrupt you.” He didn’t sound truly sorry. “However, Captain Rogers is on his way to the lab.”

“Steve?” Bucky literally perked up, to the eternal amusement of Tony Stark. If his mischievous grin wasn’t eloquent enough, then his lascivious wink certainly was.

“Yes, Mr. Barnes. He was rather – disquieted,” and no one could blame Jarvis for the nice euphemism he had managed to just use, “by your absence from the apartment. I would suggest hiding the coffee first, sir, before he sees it.”

“Thanks, Jarvis. You’re a pal.”

“I sure am, sir.”
“Yeah, Jarvis,” Tony snickered, “you’re a real pal.”

“May I remind you, sir, that you have not slept in thirty-eight hours and twenty-seven minutes?” The actual sarcasm in Jarvis’ voice made Tony wince. “Ms. Potts is due to return in five hours and forty-five minutes so maybe a little shut-eye would not hurt.”

“Fine, I’m going.” Tony scrambled up the chair. “I don’t need a babysitter, Jarvis.”

“Then I am sure sir will be the happiest to hear my truthful answer when Ms. Potts asks me whether you rested in her absence.”

“Jarvis, you’re a traitor,” Tony snapped back without much malice, even as the painful pop in his neck drew Bucky’s attention from trying to find a place for the cup. “Just give it to me, kid.” Tony took pity on him when Bucky kept fumbling with the cup and grabbed it. “He won’t say anything if he sees it in my hand. Maybe just frown at me a little, give me the patented disappointed dad look and wonder for the billionth time why he is friends with me.”

“Thank you, Tony.” The man in question had just finished waving dismissively at him when there was a sound of someone stomping his feet in the corridor (like an elephant that was about to join a stampede). Captain America himself walked into the lab, and Bucky’s heart froze in his chest.

There were only so many times his heart could stop working properly at the sight of this man before Bucky was going to develop some serious cardiac issues. Steve was covered in soot and blood and hell, Bucky hoped it wasn’t his because he couldn’t deal with that right now. Steve had lost his cowl somewhere along the way to Tony’s lab – his hair was sweaty and sticking up in various directions like an adorable and angry hedgehog. But his eyes were blazing as they set on Bucky, ravenous and molten.

Before Bucky could react and maybe wave like a dork (and seriously, for all things holy, why did he have to be so damn pathetic?), Steve took three steps and literally let his arms enclose around Bucky like a human octopus landing on a host.
Bucky had the absurd thought of *He’s Steve again* going through his mind, even as his own arms wrapped around Steve’s waist and he buried his head in the small crook between Steve’s shoulder and neck, inhaling the bitter scent of tar, sweat, and blood. His hands tightened on the rough material of Steve’s uniform as he pushed his body closer to the wall of Steve’s body, soothed by its scorching presence.

“You weren’t in your room,” Steve’s gruff voice spoke of dreadful things and Bucky just burrowed further. “I went to see whether you were sleeping and you weren’t there.”

“I had a nightmare,” Bucky admitted, his lips ghosting on Steve’s skin. “I couldn’t go back to sleep so Tony invited me up here and kept me company.”

“But you’re all right?”

“I am now, Steve. I was worried about you.”
“I promised that I’d come back though.”

“That you did.” Bucky took a shuddering breath. “Welcome back, Steve.”

“It’s good to be home, Buck.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt this wonderful reunion, because you sound like long-lost lovers or something,” and Bucky could hear Tony’s smug smirk, “but I really need to go and sleep before Pepper finds me dead in a ditch due to sheer exhaustion.”

“Do you even know what ditches look like, Tony?”

“I’m familiar with their design, yes.” Tony’s voice deepened though when he added, “It’s good to have you home though, Cap. Is the mission accomplished?”

“Yes.” There it was that dark tone of Steve’s voice again, unflinching and unyielding. Cap’s voice. “Widow will have the full report later on today.”

“Any casualties?”

“Nat has a minor concussion and a few bruises, Clint managed to break his left wrist again, and we lost two Strike men.”

“Enemy?”

“Secured.”

“Hmmmm.” Bucky managed to pry away from Steve and looked at both men standing in the middle of the room, still and larger than life. They looked like they were having a conversation in a language of their own and a pang of jealousy hit Bucky in the gut, though he had no right to feel this way. Tony and Steve had been friends long before Steve was even aware that there was a Bucky Barnes in the world. So Bucky let the relief of seeing the depth of their friendship wash over him, especially when Tony approached them and carefully clapped Steve on the shoulder. He then squeezed it lightly and let go.

“I’ll see what I can do for their families,” Tony said, at last, his voice hoarse and tight. “Not that it will help much.”

“I’ll personally contact their families and speak to them.” Steve’s jaw clenched so hard Bucky could hear his teeth grinding. “Not that it will help much either. But it’s the best we can do.”

“It’s the best we can do,” Tony echoed, a forlorn look on his face, weary and worn that made Bucky’s heart ache all the more.

It slowly dawned on him that the reality of being an Avenger meant more than private parties and acquiring the title of mankind’s heroes. There was a sort of responsibility to it that made Bucky nauseous, its weight almost unbearable just by thinking about it. From afar, from the day to day point of view, it looked glamorous and dangerous, yet rewarding. Bucky couldn’t help but wonder how much more rewarding it could get when they had to do that every so often: talk to grieving families, pay for destruction, field questions left and right about accountability and the needs of the many and whatnot. The heavy burden of being an Avenger – Bucky found himself counting his blessings for never being powered up, a superhuman or whatever they wanted to call it these days.

“Get some rest, Cap.” Tony took his hand away from Steve and stifled a yawn with the back of his hand. “And I think I’ll do the same.” He smiled towards Bucky. “Thanks for keeping me
company, Buckeye.”

“I think it was more of the other way around.” Bucky didn’t even blink when he heard his nickname. Instead, he smiled gratefully at Tony. “When I’m going home, I’m going to brag about having discussed engineering stuff with Iron Man himself.”

“See that you do, kid. It definitely beats being hugged by three hundred pounds of sweaty and stinky American muscle.”

“Hey, that was uncalled for.” Steve let go of Bucky, finally aware that he had been holding on to him a little more than it was strictly necessary. Bucky wiped at his face in an ineffective attempt to mask his blush.

“You call it uncalled for, I call it truthful, Cap. Now get the hell out of my lab. Not all of us are super-powered soldiers.”

“And not all of us have a Pepper that is going to hand your ass when she finds out you skipped on sleep hours. Again.”

Tony scowled at Steve. “I have no clue why I’m friends with you.” He looked up as well. “Why the hell am I friends with this guy, Jarvis?”

“You made a list, sir. And a graphic too, if my files serve me right. Would you like me to share them with you?”

“No, thank you.” Tony pretended to be rather busy with the cups of coffee, putting them aside. “Go on, young grasshoppers! Daddy is in need of sleep.”

“Eww, Tony, don’t be disgusting!” Steve scrunched his face and shot Tony a look that Bucky quickly recognized as his parental disapproval look. In spite of his own disgust at hearing Tony call himself a ‘daddy’, Bucky couldn’t help but commiserate and share a secret smile with Tony.

They didn’t leave the lab holding hands, but it was a close call. The silence had wrapped around them like a shroud, stifling and somehow tainted by whatever passed between Steve and Tony. With each step taken towards their quarters (he really shouldn’t be saying theirs, but then again when had Bucky ever been cautious?), Steve appeared to be shedding his Captain America persona. His shoulders hunched into themselves, the weariness of the world catching up with him in the tight pinch of his lips, in the jaw that kept clenching and unclenching, in the tightness around his eyes. It didn’t help that he was still covered in soot and blood, which only enhanced the terribly unreal quality of it all.

When the door of Steve’s apartment closed after them, Steve sighed and passed his fingers through his hair several times. Bucky knew that he wouldn’t be able to let him go through this alone; he couldn’t just go back to sleep and pretend that everything was fine now that Steve had returned to him. He needed to ensure that Steve was going to be all right.

“Go and have a shower, Steve,” Bucky broke the unnatural quietness between them. “I’ll make some sandwiches and wait for you.”

“Buck, no, I’m fine. Don’t worry. You should go to bed.” Steve’s rueful smile was like a punch in the gut for Bucky. He’d never thought he’d see the day when Steve Rogers would attempt to put a brave face for him.

“You’re so far from fine, pal, it’s not even a little bit funny.” Bucky chewed at his lip when Steve’s furrowed brows added additional tension to his already weary look. They stared at each other,
Steve’s blue eyes for once vacuous and unyielding. Bucky missed their warmth so much that his voice sounded almost strangled when he said, “Steve, please.”

It was the please that did it, Bucky was sure of it. The way Steve deflated altogether and nodded before he mutedly made his way back to his room hit Bucky hard. He took an unsteady breath and made himself head to the kitchen, heart unexpectedly heavy. As he pulled stuff out from the fridge, Bucky chewed his lip like there was no tomorrow. His hands trembled on the knife as he cut the tomatoes and arranged the slices of ham and cheese. These moments – who had been taking care of Steve in these moments? Bucky slammed his palms on the counter when he almost couldn’t breathe at the realization that this was definitely not his responsibility and yet he craved for it so badly he almost hurt with the need of it.

He wanted to be Steve’s friend, he thought as he grabbed the plates with the sandwiches and set them in the living-room on the small coffee table. He dimmed the lights and returned to the kitchen. The sky outside was gradually catching fire in toned bursts of golden and pink hues. He wanted to be Steve Rogers’ friend, be present in moments like this, be there for him when he needed him to be. Shit! Returning to his sorely mundane life was going to be a pain after this.

He grabbed the steaming cups of tea and returned in the living room. He checked out Netflix and chose the next episode of one of the shows that they had started to watch together. Then he made himself comfortable on the couch as he heard Steve coming out of the en suite bathroom and changing. His door had been left a little open so Bucky could catch glimpses of golden skin and a white towel before he blushed heavily and stubbornly looked at the frozen image on the screen. The morning was catching up with him too, despite the fact that he had had a few sips of coffee earlier.

Bucky refused to blush when Steve came out of his bedroom and joined him on the couch, sporting a black t-shirt that did nothing to hide the hellish bruises on his left arm and a pair of grey shorts, feet naked. There were probably more lacerations and bruises under that t-shirt and Bucky’s heart sunk, thinking that maybe Steve should be checked out by the medical staff, that maybe he should be seen by someone. Steve made himself comfortable on the couch with a weary sigh and his lips twitched knowingly when he saw the spread in front of him.

“Thank you, Buck,” he mumbled as he picked up a sandwich.

“Shut up and eat your sandwich,” Bucky grouched and unpaused the screen, ignoring Steve’s warm smile and grabbing his own sandwich.

They ate the sandwiches in silence then drank their tea as they mindlessly watched another episode. All the while, Bucky was aware of Steve’s body next to his, a warm line of inviting muscles. Seriously, no one could blame him when at some point he became too tired to keep his head upright and gradually, he rested it on Steve’s shoulder. Immediately, Steve shuffled on the couch, making himself more comfortable and pressing his cheek against Bucky’s head.

Bucky fought to stay awake as much as he could, ignoring the stiffness of his shoulders, having spent a little too much time awake. But he was soaking in Steve’s warmth. Steve who was like a furnace made of flesh and bones and sinews that could burn their mark into Bucky’s skin. That didn’t make sense, he thought as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He couldn’t tell when he had fallen asleep, only that he did with Steve’s cheek resting on his head, his breath tickling and comforting. And he couldn’t make himself regret it when hours later, he woke up, skin prickling with heat and the awareness that he was engulfed by another body altogether.
Bucky was facing the back of the couch and, he realized hysterically, he was being aggressively spooned by Steve. His back was flush against Steve’s chest, his cold nose brushing against Bucky’s nape; one of Steve’s arms was acting like a pillow for Bucky, while the other laid warm and secure over half his torso, his broad hand splayed across Bucky’s chest as if to make sure that, even in his sleep, Steve could feel him alive and breathing. And the cherry on top, one of Steve’s half-naked legs had wormed its way in between Bucky’s legs. A plush grey blanket covered them to their waists, enhancing the hot feeling that Bucky had.

He had to swallow several times to calm himself down because the feeling of being wrapped in six feet and two hundred and fifty lbs of Steve Rogers was overwhelming. The thought of attempting an extrication from such a position briefly crossed his mind, but Bucky was selfish and thoughtless and he dismissed it soon after. An eternity in such a position would never be enough. He closed his eyes, basking in the warmth and safety of this day. He didn’t deserve this but he sure as hell was going to enjoy it.

*I wish I could have this again,* he thought before slipping back into unconsciousness.

Steve spared them the awkwardness of waking up together and negotiating the moment by waking up before Bucky. By the time Bucky emerged from his deep slumber, it was late afternoon and Steve was in the kitchen, preparing an early dinner or a late lunch, depending on how he wanted to call it. Bucky woke up lying on his back, propped up by a cushy pillow and the blanket covering him all the way to his chest. It didn’t take a genius to realize that it was Steve who had ensured that he was comfortable. The thought of those broad hands on him, if only for a second, made Bucky blush heavily and groan in his pillow.

“Are you alive out there, Buck?” And damn Steve’s superhero hearing or whatever the hell it was called. Bucky needed a coffee, some food and maybe a shower to scrub away the phantom imprint of Steve’s warm hand on his chest, all of this not even in that particular order.

“Shut up, Steve! It’s too early for such sass.” He groaned some more as he got his hands out of the little cocoon made of the blanket and rubbed at his eyes.

“You mean it’s too late?” The voice came much closer this time and Bucky tilted his head as Steve finally came into view. He looked much more rested and there was a shy smile painted on his inviting lips.

“What did I just say about sass, pal?” he growled even as he kept his scowl firmly in place. Bucky wanted to sound intimidating, maybe enough to convince Steve that another couple of sips of coffee wouldn’t harm Bucky in any way.

“Well, if you’re done moaning and complaining –”

“Who was moaning and complaining?” Bucky asked incredulously but Steve just pushed ahead and continued as if he didn’t even hear him, the damn punk.

“– then there’s freshly made lasagne and non-alcoholic beer for you, courtesy of Dr. Rahman’s goodwill. Apparently, for good behavior.” Steve rested his hands on the back of the couch and leaned forward a little. “Though I have to say there was no explanation whatsoever about Tony’s two different cups of coffee.”

“No one likes a snitch, pal.” Bucky pouted, even more, when he felt his cheeks catching fire. Goddamn Barnes genes! In turn, Steve’s grin only widened.

“So you admit to the crime of having a coffee and corrupting Tony into covering for you?”
“I plead the fifth.”

“How convenient!” Bucky’s stomach growled in grumpy acknowledgment and Steve chuckled. “All right. Up and at them, Buck.” He came around the couch and offered him a helping hand. Bucky reluctantly accepted it.

“You’re awfully cheery for a guy that slept in late and didn’t have his morning run.”

“What can I say? I slept well.” Steve winked at him – winked at him, Bucky thought hysterically again – and then stepped aside. “Now go and wash your face, then let’s have some food.”

“As long as you promise not to say anything to Dr. Rahman.” Bucky arranged the blanket and made his way to his bedroom, scratching at his stomach. “I honestly can’t stand when he gives me that disappointed look as if I’m more difficult to treat than ten of you guys.”

“That’s because you are more difficult to treat than ten of us.”

“No one likes a smartass, Steve!” he yelled from his bedroom and he heard Steve’s answering chuckles. He went inside the en suite bathroom and took care of his ablutions then returned to the kitchen where Steve was already waiting for him at the table. They ate as Bucky kept a flawless stream of conversation, mostly complete geeking out over what Tony showed him in his lab and the conversation that they had. Steve listened to him with a faint smile on his lips and a focused furrow of his brows and asked the appropriate questions and nodded when necessary. Goddamn it, Bucky still couldn’t think of anything other than the fact that just a few hours ago, those broad hands were on him and he’d been aggressively spooned by this guy and their bodies seemed to be built to perfectly fit.

This was what it meant to lose his own mind. Bucky was sure of it, more so because it was something that he couldn’t discuss with Steve. What was he going to say anyway? Hey, remember that time when you spooned me on the couch and I had the best sleep in weeks? Do you think we could do that again, please and thank you? Yeah, that was going to work for him so well. Unless – well, Steve did mention that he’d slept well too. Bucky almost choked on a piece of lasagne. Yeah, right, like Steve Rogers actually needed Bucky Barnes to sleep well.

The futility of it all grated on Bucky’s nerves but he was determined to push forward, and maybe not think about it obsessively the way he was quite tempted to do.

But it was difficult to do so when he was sharing so much space with Steve. And apart from Bucky’s medical appointments throughout the day and Steve’s runs or various tactical meetings, they spent most of their days together as if that was natural for them. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that he was trying his best not to get used to Steve’s presence so much, Bucky forgot at times that this was just a temporary adjustment in his life, and so the first week was gone before Bucky could even say what the hell was going on.

However, it didn't mean in the least that his life was easier because of that. Case in point: on Monday morning, on his second week of living with Steve, he had just come out of the bathroom when Steve knocked on his door and cheerfully shouted:

“Come have breakfast with us, Buck!”

“Steve, I swear to God I am –” He opened the door, took one look at Steve and then immediately slammed the door in his face. “No!”

“What do you mean no?”
Steve in a tank top. Steve in a fucking tank top was too much even for Bucky. And he had jumped in front of a bullet for the guy but this was too much.

“Put a damn decent t-shirt on you first, **Steven**, and then talk to me about breakfast,” Bucky groused as he leaned his hot forehead against the hardwood of the door. He could hear another set of chuckles and he groaned, even as desire rippled through his body, raw and molten. Jesus Christ, a bullet hadn’t killed him but Steve in a tank top might have just done the job. “Hey, Sam,” he greeted when he was sure he could keep his voice steady.

“Hey, Bucky.”

“Come on, Buck. We've even got you a cup of coffee,” Steve said sweetly, trying to lure him out. Bucky needed a new life or ten. He adjusted his sweats and ran his fingers through his hair nervously before opening the door again, his clammy hand almost slipping on the doorknob. Yeah, Steve was still ridiculously glorious, in his black and *revealing* tank top and a pair of basketball shorts.

“You look like you already had breakfast, pal,” he grumbled as he got out of his room and waved like a dork in Sam’s direction. “You look like you ate a linebacker or something.”

“Oh, Bucky, is this your way of telling me that I'm ripped?” Now Bucky was sure that this guy was taking the piss. He looked at Sam in the general *can you believe this guy?* And Sam, kind and gracious Sam, just rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

“Don’t look at me, man. I’m just an innocent bystander.”

“Right.” Bucky turned his attention to Steve, who also crossed his arms, his biceps bulging and goddamn it, Bucky might need a new heart or a new face. He swallowed convulsively several times and seriously, if he didn’t know any better, he’d think that Steve was doing this on purpose. “I think I need to explain this again.” He passed his fingers through his hair, probably looking like a crazed person at this point, but he didn’t care. “Some of us are simple human beings, in need of normalcy, living by complete and normal standards. You know, lack of abs, morning hair, weak arms, and the likes. This,” and he waved his hands like a manic doll, “isn’t normal, Steve. I think even your biceps have biceps. And why do you need muscles in your shoulders? Like, no.” He heard Sam snicker as Steve was getting more and more amused with every fumbling word from Bucky. “Just no. I need to savor my first coffee, Steve, and the perfection that is you is going to ruin it.”

“Did you just call him perfect?” Sam asked out loud.

“Your *first* coffee?” Steve chipped in, even as he blushed slightly.

“Shut up, punk.” Bucky crossed his arms too. You know, his arms that didn’t look like tree trunks over a chest that hadn’t seen the light of a gym in a very long time. He hoped that his little rant hadn't made him come out like a guy with self-esteem issues because while Bucky wasn’t of the opinion that he was the most attractive guy ever, he thought he looked pretty decent. Decent enough to sometimes make people offer to buy him a coffee at the local Starbucks or ask for his phone number when he had drinks with his friends at their local bar.

But Steve was handsome effortlessly and it made him all the more attractive because of his seeming unawareness of it, the charm that exuded. Even now, as he blushed lightly, he still managed to look sweet and innocent and in no way smug, which only tugged all the more at Bucky’s heart.
“Come on, grumpy pants.” Steve wrapped one of his arms over Bucky’s skinny shoulders – he had lost some weight during his stay in the hospital, so sue him. “Let’s get some coffee and food in you.”

“Will I get another cup of coffee if I behave?” he asked as he let himself be steered towards the kitchen, ignoring the warmth that pooled low into his belly like kindling fire.

“Don’t push it, Buck.”

“Stop snickering, Sam. You’re supposed to be on my side on this one.”

“Hey, what did I do?” Sam grinned wide as he sat down at the table opposite Bucky. He looked like the cat that got the canary and Bucky didn’t like that one bit. Not to mention that the asshole was way more attractive than was legal too. All Avengers possessed good genes, the bastards. “Try and run with this guy,” Sam said, slightly pained. “See how you feel after that.”

“Yeah, no thanks. I like where my lungs are.”

“Where’s that?”

“Inside my body.”

“Har har, let’s all laugh at Steve.” He rolled his eyes at them but Bucky could still catch a glimpse of the amused shine in his eyes. Steve sat down next to Bucky and pushed a paper cup in front of him. “You know, I deserve more for having convinced Dr. Rahman to allow you coffee.”

“That’s true.” Bucky grabbed the paper cup and took the plastic lid off. “Ah, my long lost love! At long last, together again!”

“This is disturbing,” Sam mumbled around a generous bite of his bagel drenched in butter.

“Should we leave you alone with your coffee, Buck? Do you have like a food fetish?”

“Ha, Captain America knows about fetishes.”

“Well, apparently, I need to learn more now that I’ve seen you with your coffee.”

“Don’t listen to them, baby!” Bucky crooned at the dark liquid and took a generous gulp, burning the inside of his mouth but still well worth it. He hadn’t even realized that he had closed his eyes in pleasure and he might or might have not moaned. But when he opened his eyes, smacking his lips with much gusto, Sam was staring at him with mouth half open, a bit of butter stuck to the corner of his lips and Steve was laser-focused on him with an unreadable look on his face. “Shut up,” Bucky mumbled as he sat his cup down and took his own bagel.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“But you were planning on it, punk. I could see it.” In fact, he couldn’t. He couldn’t comprehend that look on Steve’s face and it drove him insane with the need to decipher the mystery of it because Steve was most of the times such an open book.

“Honestly, you two are two peas in the same pod,” Sam admitted dejectedly. “I think I’m cursed to deal only with smartasses.”

“Shut up, Sam,” both said at the same time and laughed out loud when Sam groaned and hid his face in his hands. Bucky ignored the churning in his stomach as he munched on his bagel with
much gusto and listened to the banter between Sam and Steve.

There was an internal clock ticking away the days spent in Steve’s company – it measured each hour by how many minutes he spent in Steve’s company, by how many more things he found out about Steve: that he liked to sketch but didn’t have much time for it; that he was so smart and sympathetic; that it was difficult to follow orders and he struggled with his role in the new modern world. His tongue would peek between his lips if he was concentrating on something; he’d furrow his brows if he didn’t like something, the deeper the frown the more serious the issue.

And Bucky couldn’t help but cherish every moment with him, ignoring the countdown. But the anxiety of leaving Steve was always there, at the back of his mind, tainting every moment spent together, making him store each image of Steve like a bear going in hibernation. Therefore, when Dr. Rahman advised him that he would like to see him the following afternoon to discuss his discharge, Bucky had gone to bed riding high on anxiety and stress.

“You don’t look happy to be released from our care.” Dr. Rahman’s words brought him back to reality and Bucky made a conscious effort to concentrate and comprehend their meaning. His doctor leaned backward in his chair and looked at Bucky with kind eyes. “Are you stressed about the way this will have an impact on your life?”

“Among other things.” Though, admittedly, it was pretty scary to think about the amount of medication that he was still on, the fact that he’d have to make adjustments in his lifestyle, not to mention that he’d have to pay really close attention to his health and all those small details that he tended to ignore before. There was an apartment to look after, his parents to visit and spend time with, and his return to work. All of this while the memory of what he’d been gone through following him everywhere and the sweet memory of Steve lingering in his very bones.

“You can do it,” Dr. Rahman said, smiling softly, misinterpreting his words. “The care plan is solid. I have already written to your family doctor, ensuring that your medication will be dispensed to you in the correct dosage and you have all your team’s phone numbers in case you experience any issues. Plus you're all set to see Dr. Norton. She's a highly experienced psychologist in post-traumatic stress and you will benefit from her experience.”

“Thank you, Dr. Rahman. I’m grateful to you and your team for all the care and attention you’ve given me.”

“But?”

“But what?” Bucky looked up from his hands, only to see the doctor smiling understandingly at him.

“You sounded so gloomy I thought that there was going to be a 'but' coming. Is it something related to your family?”

“No, no, nothing of the sort. Why do you ask?”

“Because I don’t see them here and they’ve been very supportive of you.”

“Oh, yeah, well, Ma wasn’t very happy that I chose to remain here. But they don’t know about this meeting. I didn’t want to give them false hope.”

“Understandable. I guess though that they’ll be very happy to have you back.”

“Yeah.” Bucky nodded for good measure and then stood up. “Thank you very much for everything, Dr. Rahman. Without your and Dr. Connolly's care, I would most likely be dead.”
“Well, you put up a hell of a fight to stay awake, son. So don't squander your second chance.”

“I won't, sir.”

“Well, this isn't goodbye anyway. I still want to see you every six months for the first two years. But will talk more about this later on.”

“Yes, doctor. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” They shook hands and Bucky left his office feeling elated but dreading tomorrow.

In spite of all the pain that he had been in the past month, he thought as he returned to Steve's quarters, and through his recovery hadn't always been the easy and straight forward road that everyone had expected, his life had taken a sort of unreal quality. It was as if he had taken a long holiday to an all-inclusive resort and now he was forced to return to his routine and daily chores. It was daunting, to say the least.

Steve was waiting for him in the living room, a clear sign that he had already been informed of the decision. Bucky let relief washed over him because he was in no mood to discuss his imminent departure with Steve. He simply nodded and went to his room, closing the door with a soft click and leaning hard against it. This reaction wasn't normal – the pain that speared through his chest wasn't the typical reaction that one would get from being told that he was fit and well enough to return home. This more than anything was telling enough to rip the band-aid as soon as possible.

He called Becca as soon as he stopped his hands from shaking too much and let her know that he wanted her to come and pick him up from the Tower as they decided to discharge him completely. If his sister detected the unsteadiness of his voice, the slight catch, she was kind enough not to mention anything to him. She simply told him that she was glad to hear about it and she'd be at the Tower tomorrow accompanied by Michael. After hanging up, he called his parents as well and they cheered upon hearing the good news. Although Ma was still upset about him choosing the Tower for his recovery, she'd been kind enough to keep that conversation away from their daily check-ins.

“I can't wait for you to get home,” she said as they said goodbye. “Love you. See you tomorrow.”

“Love you too, Ma,” he mumbled. “Dad as well.”

But after he hung up, the last thing on his mind was to start packing. So he crashed on the bed and covered his eyes with his arm, deciding right then and there that he needed to get a grip with the whole situation.

“Buck, are you there?” Steve spoke softly as he knocked on the door lightly, almost afraid to intrude in his own apartment.

“Yeah,” he groaned and took his arm away to watch Steve enter the room, shuffling slightly on his feet. He was dressed in a dark green shirt and slacks, a clear sign that he had had a public function to attend. It was quite annoying to realize that he was so attuned to Cap. “Hey,” he said at last for lack of a better word when the oppressive awkwardness between them became too much.

“Hey. I guess they told you the good news.”

“Yeah.” Bucky shuffled a little on the bed and propped himself against the pillows. He gestured for Steve to take a seat at the edge of the bed, which Steve did albeit with a frown ever-present on his face. “I'm leaving tomorrow. I just finished speaking with Becca. She and Michael are coming to pick me up tomorrow morning.”
“So soon?” The word sounded bitter even to Bucky's untrained ears. Steve sighed and rested his forearms on his thighs. “You know, there was no hurry. You could have stayed here as long as you needed to.”

“I know, but the sooner the better, right?” The words sounded so false, Bucky wanted to smack himself. “I mean, I've put you out long enough. Plus, I need to catch up with so many things in my life, I wouldn't know where to begin.”

“You didn't put me out. It was actually nice to come home to someone.”

“Even if that someone had complained about the lack of his coffee over and over again?”

“Even if.” Steve peered through his thick eyelashes at Bucky and Bucky's stomach did a weird somersault when finding himself the focus of such a gaze. “It was good to have you around here, Buck. Although, it was my fault that you got hurt in the first place.”

“Really? Were you the one who shot me?” Bucky rolled his eyes so hard he thought he was in actual danger of spraining them.

“Buck, seriously, of course not. But –”

“But nothing. It was that other guy's fault. Also, I thought we were going to consider the shooting just an occasion to meet each other.”

“I'm sorry, I can't always make light of what you've been through,” Steve said, his voice hard and unrelenting. They stared at each other again – Bucky's stomach churned again, something terribly hard clenching at his chest. He raised his hand and gently covered Steve's forearm.

“For what it is worth, Steve, thank you for everything.”

“How come you have the right to thank me for basically doing the least I could do for you, while I'm not allowed to say thank you for saving my life?”

“Because them are the rules.”

“The rules are stupid.” Steve's other hand came to rest on top of Bucky's.

“Don't argue with me, pal. I didn't make them.”

“Sure you didn't.”

Silence again. Then.

“Stay with me,” Bucky said softly in the light darkness of the late afternoon. He swallowed hard, his tongue heavy and clumsy. “Stay with me tonight.”

The tenderness in Steve's eyes could have melted the heart of an acerbic misanthrope. “I got you, Buck. Of course, I will.”

Best of all? Bucky didn't have to explain to Steve what he had meant when he uttered those words. He didn't have to explain that all he wanted was for them to watch movies on Netflix and fall asleep on the couch, their bodies burrowed against each other so hard that they wouldn't know where one ended and the other one began. He didn't have to explain that they could make a cocoon of blankets to cover them and keep them safe but they did it anyway. And he didn't have to explain that he was going to miss Steve as hard and as much as he hadn't missed anyone in a very long time.
Steve's hands had curled around him tightly and possessive, even in his sleep incapable of letting Bucky go.

It was their own way of saying goodbye and even in the stark daylight of the following morning, it had made sense. So by the time Becca and Michael had come to pick him up, he had been able to prepare himself. At least, that was what he thought.

They left Steve and Michael in the living-room as Becca followed him in his room and Bucky couldn’t even think. There was a buzz in his ears that hadn’t been there before and his clammy hands slipped every now and then on the things that he grabbed. He couldn’t think, although he had had all night and most of the morning to think about this moment. Jesus, he was becoming really dramatic lately. Something had to be done about that.

Becca watched him with keen eyes as she helped him pack up his things. “You’d think you’d be more happy to return home,” she made the observation, her voice slightly annoyed.

Bucky gritted his teeth. “Becca, let’s not do this here.”

“Let’s not do what here?” She was purposely obtuse. From the corner of his eyes, Bucky noticed that the door to the room was closed, so he returned his attention to his sister and stared her down as much as he could in the current situation, tongue thick and dry.

“I know what you’re trying to say but I’m really in no mood to listen to it. So whatever speech you’ve got prepared, save it.”

“Really, that’s all you got?” She slammed the pile of t-shirts in his bag a little harder than necessary. “You look like you’re about the keel over rather than be happy that you’re recovered enough to return to your life.”

“I am happy that I’m returning to my life.” And damn it to hell, Bucky was, he just couldn’t deal with the fact that Steve was going to remain here. All alone. Here. Bucky wouldn’t be there to watch movies with him or eat together or talk about everything and nothing. Goddamn it! Maybe it was better that he was recovered enough to return to his life. He was starting to believe in this fantasy world that he and Steve had built for themselves in the past couple of weeks, but it wasn’t real.

“Say that three times. Maybe you’ll start believing it at some point.”

“What the fuck is your problem?” Bucky seethed, keeping his voice as low as possible. From the living room, he could hear Michael and Steve conversing amicably, oblivious to the little drama in the adjacent room. His sister studied him critically, her nose upturned and fuck, but Bucky had always hated that look on her.

“Tell me you didn’t,” she said at long last when apparently, she saw something that Bucky wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Tell you I didn’t what?”

“Tell me you didn’t sleep with Captain America.”

“Jesus Christ, Becca, keep your voice down. Steve doesn’t need your bullshit.”

“Oh, so it’s bullshit now?”

“Shut up!” He hissed venomously when Becca refused to tone it down. “I didn’t sleep with Steve
Rogers.” They had just held each other like something precious, their silent agreement of not talking about it hurting no one. Steve's unnatural warmth still had seemed to sip in every cell of Bucky's body, with every small touch between their bodies, every shuffle. “Nothing’s going on between me and Steve, so you can relax.” He had tried for angry and righteous, but it came out gutted and pained. Bucky pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Bucky.”

“Don’t, Becca.” He took a deep breath and resumed packing his things. How come he had amassed so much shit here?

“Bucky, look at me.” He blinked several times before he managed to look back up to his sister. Becca sat down at the edge of the bed and watched him carefully. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make this more painful for you than it already seems to be. But you have to understand my concern.”

“Becca, why do you always insist on having difficult conversations when shit is hard enough as it is?” Bucky sighed and zipped his bag. “What do you want me to tell you? Huh? That I like Steve?” He threw his arms up, mindful of the pinched sensation on his left side. “Yes, I fucking like him, all right? I like him but I’m not fucking blind. I know the reality of my situation, okay? And I seriously don’t need you or Ma for that matter on my fucking case. So can you please stop talking about this?”

“Bucky –”

“Don’t.” He blinked again and the world seemed to narrow down to the painful shuddering breaths that he kept pushing inside his chest. This was ridiculous. He was ridiculous. Bucky pressed the heel of his palm in the middle of his chest. He needed to stop being absurd about this situation – he had known that this was going to end, that they couldn’t be roommates forever, that eventually, Bucky would have to return to his mundane life. So then why the hell did it hurt so bad?

Because he couldn’t believe that Steve would keep in touch. His whole body went rigid at the realization, heart numb. Because they exchanged phone numbers and email addresses and Bucky gave him even his home address, but there was that niggling doubt that Steve wasn’t going to follow through. Worst of all, Bucky knew, he just knew, that he was going to wait like a moron for a text or a phone call that was never going to come and just about everyone in his life and their mother were going to tell him I told you so.

“Breathe, Bucky. Breathe.” When had his sister moved in on him and cupped his cheeks? He startled and almost knocked her hands away from him but she stood her ground and didn’t misinterpret his intention. Her warm hands on his stubbled cheeks anchored him, her thumbs pressing slightly into his sharp cheekbones.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, licking his lips, swallowing convulsively like this was going to help.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m pushing you and I don’t know why I’m doing that.” Becca's hands curled around his shoulders this time, pulling him closer to her in a familiar embrace. “You’re right. We don’t have to discuss this here. But you know I’m here if you need me.”

“Yeah, I know. Thank you.” He took another shuddering breath and then gently pried her hands away from him. “Let’s finish this and go home.”

They finished packing and Bucky took one last look at the room before he followed Becca into the living room, where both Michael and Steve stood up when they saw them.
“All right, old man, all done,” Bucky said, forcing his smile to widen. “You’re finally rid of me.”

“How come all of a sudden I’m the old man?” Steve’s smile was even less convincing than Bucky’s. “I thought that we agreed you’re older than me by a year.”

“You’re the old man when it’s convenient for me.”

“Of course it is. What was I thinking?”

The forced cheer of their banter was painful to hear so, as if reading each other’s thoughts, they both fell silent and stared at each other. Bucky thought that the whole situation was turning ridiculous. It shouldn’t be so hard to go back home, especially since he’d only known Steve Rogers for a little over a month. Yet he found himself at a loss as he gazed into those blue eyes, kind and warm.

“Well, I think we should hit the road before traffic turns horrific on the bridge,” Becca was the one to finally speak and break the spell between them. They both startled but no one added anything. Bucky smiled gratefully at Michael as his brother-in-law took his bag from his hand and patted him on the shoulder, giving him additional strength.

Steve took a few steps to invade Bucky’s personal space so naturally that it took a little longer for Bucky to register his wistful smile, the corner of his lips threatening to fall down. His arms wrapped around his arms and torso and Bucky burrowed into his chest, his own arms wrapping gently around Steve’s waist, his hands fisting the material of his shirt.

“I’ll see you soon, Buck,” Steve whispered into Bucky’s ear. Bucky held tight – it shouldn’t be so hard to let go.

“See you soon, punk,” Bucky chose to say, his voice gruff, the rumble of Steve’s chuckle warm against his own chest. It took a few tries to pry himself from Steve and even longer to make his throat work again.

“Talk to you soon, Jarvis.”

“Of course, Mr. Barnes,” Jarvis answered, making both Michael and Becca flinch, who then glared at Bucky. He just shrugged and winked at Steve before he grabbed his bag again.

At the doorway, he waved one more time like the dork that he was and then closed the door, aware that this was probably the last time he was going to see Steve Rogers.

Chapter End Notes

The awesome art for this chapter can be found here. It is my favorite from my favorites (if that makes sense :))))) Seriously, I'll never waste an opportunity to praise em's art, which is absolutely amazing and lovely.

A massive thank you goes to fancyh (my hero!!!) <3 because her job as a beta reader was all the more made difficult by the fact that English is my second language. But she was kind and patient and made me look really good. Please know that all the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. :)
Steve Rogers

The new century had broken Steve Rogers’ heart more times than he could count. Yet, nothing and no one had broken his heart as much as Bucky Barnes did.

And he did it in the most unexpected way.

Steve ignored the bell above the door he’d just opened and went straight to their usual table when he noticed it was free. It was tucked away in a sunny corner of the coffee shop, hidden by a potted plant from the other tables, but close to the flowery window. The sun spilled messily all over the table and Steve fell in love with the idea of seeing Bucky drenched in sunlight.

It’d been three weeks since Bucky left home and Steve still couldn’t quite get back into the routine of his life before he had Bucky in it. It’d been three weeks of late lunches on the weekends and long phone conversations during the weekdays. Bucky was still trying to get the hang of things again in spite of the fact that he was still on medication and prolonged effort made him more tired than usual. He was annoyed that people still treated him with gloves, that his parents visited him almost daily, assessing the contents of his fridge with a skeptical eye and filling it with casseroles that Bucky never had time to eat before others would appear. He’d fended off phone calls from every cousin and second cousin and just about any cousin twice removed from either side, who wanted to assure themselves that he was alive and well. He’d had Becca and Michael coming with him to their family doctor to ensure that he’d have no problems filling in his prescriptions and he had to listen to them about healthy lifestyle and whatnot.

Secretly, Steve had envied Bucky a little – not for the love with which Bucky had been surrounded because he deserved it but for the number of people that cared about him, sent care packages and just about annoyed the daylights out of him. Steve would watch the way Bucky frowned when his phone would ring while together – his frown would only deepen the more his phone would ring, but there would also be an amused twitch of his lips, a warmth that surged into his eyes and that couldn’t hide the fact that Bucky was basking as much as he could in the love of his family as much as he was annoyed by their suffocating care sometimes.

Steve studied the menu that a nice waitress left for him. Yeah, being Bucky’s friend wasn’t always easy, especially when Steve and Tony would step over boundaries that they would forget that other people wanted to keep as intact as possible. Bucky had been absolutely furious when he had found out about Steve and Tony paying the rent for his apartment for three months to help him settle back in.

After a shouting match with Tony and another with Steve, in which words like traitor and I don’t need your pity and For fuck’s sake, Rogers, I’d throttle you if I could. Both of you, Bucky didn’t speak with him for three days. The fourth, he called him late in the evening and as soon as Steve answered, Bucky grumbled, “You’re an asshole and if you ever do something like this again behind my back, I’ll never forgive you.” Apparently, his similar conversation with Tony involved kind of the same things, but less venom because there was nothing that Tony couldn’t turn into a joke, including his own generosity and kindness.
One night though, when Bucky had video-called him because the nightmares had been so bad he needed to convince himself that Steve was all right – he’d never say this out loud, but Steve could see this in the tight line of his mouth and haunted eyes – Bucky had also confessed that he felt like a hypocrite. When Steve prodded him for a more forward answer, Bucky admitted that it’d been a relief to not worry about rent when he’d just returned to work. It would have been overwhelming to live with his parents until he’d sorted himself out and he hadn’t wanted to be a further burden to his family.

They had a lot of heart to heart conversations late in the evening, when Steve listened to Bucky mumble about rude customers and men that thought they were better at his job than him, though they couldn’t tell the difference between the cooler and the injector. He’d listen to Bucky putter around the kitchen while preparing dinner or cleaning around the house and he’d almost double over in desire to be part of that life.

“Can I get you anything, sir?” The waitress interrupted his daydreaming and Steve blushed in embarrassment.

“Yes, please.” He swallowed hard before saying, “I’ll have a black coffee for now. Cream, no sugar. Thank you.”

“Sure.” She smiled politely and went away, letting Steve look out the window, searching for Bucky’s familiar figure. The waitress arrived ten minutes later with his coffee and in between one second and the next, Bucky flopped on the empty chair, startling both Steve and the waitress.

“Hey, Steve. Sorry I’m late.” He smiled sheepishly at Steve, his gorgeous eyes crinkling adorably. “I swear the F train is sentient and feeding off my stress of not making it on time.”

“Hey, Buck.” Steve found himself smiling. From the corner of his eyes, he could see the waitress’s lips twitch in response as well. It was difficult to resist the Bucky Barnes charm.

“Could I please have what he’s having?” Bucky said politely, already skimming the menu. “Have you ordered food yet?”

“No, I was waiting for you.”

“In that case let’s order now before the lunch crowd shows up and then we have to wait forever.”

It didn’t take long for Steve to decide what he wanted to eat, so he watched serenely as Bucky chewed on his bottom lip and read the menu as if it was an instruction manual on the latest Ford car. From an artistic point of view, Bucky Barnes was absolutely gorgeous, from his full lips that he’d always bite or lick or chew on to his sharp jaw and high cheekbones. He’d cut his hair a little shorter since he’d left the Tower but it would still curl around his ears and the back of his neck, a wild brown mane. Steve’s right hand twitched with the need to sketch him as it was now: wearing that blue knitted sweater that burnt all the light around him and made his eyes stand out even more.

To think that Bucky Barnes might have never had this moment. Deciding what to have for lunch while their waitress served him the coffee, smiling politely and making small talk with her. Full of life and simmering energy.

Once they ordered, Bucky’s whole attention focused on Steve.

“How many coffees have you had already?” Steve heard himself asking. Bucky chuckled in response and leaned back against his chair, phone on the table but facing down.

“I’ll have you know this would only be my second. I’m trying not to drink as much as I used to.”
“Really?”

“Yeah, well, every time I’m even remotely tempted to try out something that I’m not allowed to, I can almost hear Dr. Rahman’s voice in my head, prohibiting everything. And you know what? That man can be quite scary when he wants to be and I don’t want to have him on my case when I see him in a few months’ time.”

“What about the hamburger and the fries that you just ordered?”

“Shut up, Steve. A man can splurge every once in a while.” Bucky scowled playfully at him. But then his whole face changed, his eyes turning warmer still and a shy smile blooming on his lips. “I’m happy to see you.” He blushed and Steve watched, stunned, as the color traveled down his neck.

“I’m happy to see you too, Buck.”

They looked at each other in silence, warm and soft, sun spilling softly over them. The ice under which Steve had been buried for seventy years would have melted in an instant if exposed to the solar flare that wrapped around his heart.

Bucky’s smile widened. He leaned in and asked in a hushed voice, “So tell me, how badly did those frog aliens smell?”

Steve laughed and threw himself into the story, knowing full well how much Bucky relished hearing all about his misadventures at work. The frog aliens that Bucky referred to were actually a not so wonderful present from Namor – Steve swore that the guy just really loved to mess with the Avengers. Sometimes he’d send these beings that smelled foul and did so much damage that Sam once flat out refused to go after them. There was a lot of scowling and complaining whenever Namor was involved. Bucky knew about that and chuckled each time he heard how Tony bitched about the creatures and how Steve took five showers before he smelled even remotely human again. San Francisco was going to be a horribly stinky place for a while.

“God, I can’t believe you did that,” Bucky said in between bursts of laughter, wiping at the corner of his left eye. “Damn, I wish I could have seen it.”

“Trust me, Buck, you didn’t want to be anywhere near that place,” replied Steve in between mouthfuls of his spaghetti and meatballs. “If I never have to see a frog again, it will be too soon.”

“I believe you.”

“What about you? Called anyone a raving lunatic this week?”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about, Steve. I’ll let you know I’m a paragon of professionalism and customer care.”

“You’re a paragon of something, all right.”

Bucky laughed out loud again, his head slightly tilted backwards. He grabbed his glass of water and took a sip. “Well, let us presume there might have been a customer, who tried to teach me about the electrical machine and its position within the automatic transmission housing, and I might have started ranting about inverters and converters and just about anything related to synchronous machines, but that’s neither here nor there.”

“How long did the rant last?”
“Let’s just say the guy fucked off within ten minutes, mumbling something about needing to do something or other.” Bucky sighed as he pushed his half-eaten hamburger away. “I promise you all the customers that drive a hybrid think they know better than me what the deal is all about. They should start fixing their own goddamn cars and stop harassing us with their stupid fountain of knowledge that seems to dry up as soon as I go more in-depth about the components.”

“What did Paul say?” Steve took the last bite and pushed the empty plate away as well.

“That I should just let Jerry or Tyrone deal with the customers and as soon as I hear something stupid to just ignore it.” Bucky gave him a sheepish smile. “Which isn’t as easy as people seem to think it is.”

“You’ve just got to let it go sometimes, Buck.”

“Yeah, like you’re so good at that.”

“To quote you, Buck, I’ve got no clue what you’re talking about.” Steve batted his eyelashes at his friend for good measure, knowing full well that it would make Bucky smile again. He’d always had this problem of keeping his temper in check when he dealt with idiot people that had nothing better to do than not let other people live in peace and tranquility.

“Convenient, isn’t it?” Bucky polished off all his fries and then leaned back in his chair, his hands resting softly on his abdomen. “I think I might have eaten too much.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that.” Steve eyed the half eaten hamburger.

“It’s so difficult being me.”

“Now you sound like Tony. Stop that! It’s actually frightening.” Bucky rolled his eyes affectionately but then smiled. “And you should stop rolling your eyes as well. You roll them so much that I worry one of these days they will actually fall off.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

No, Steve most definitely wasn’t going to examine the sudden spike of want pooling inside his belly like thick molasses. “You’re such a jerk.”

“And you’re a punk but I’m not saying it, am I?”

“I think you just did.”

“Someone has to keep you on your toes, Steve. Might as well be me.”

“Of course, Buck. I have no clue what I’ve done without you so far.”

“I know, right?” Bucky smiled again, wide and bright, and Steve was left helpless against it. “Speaking of what you’d do without me, I actually have two things that I want to talk to you about.”

“Sure, Buck.” Steve leaned forward, his forearms resting on the table.

Bucky bashfully ducked his head a little as he picked at a loose thread in the table cloth. “I bought you something.” Confusion made Steve frown as Bucky picked up a brown paper bag from next to his chair and gave it to Steve. It looked heavy and seriously, was this the reason why Bucky had flopped like a puppet without its strings on the chair? To hide that he had bought Steve a gift?
“I kept the receipt if you don’t like them.” Bucky made a poor attempt at smiling but he bit his lip nervously and ran his fingers through his hair several times. “I wasn’t sure whether this gift would be welcome and I didn’t want to step over some boundaries.”

“I’m sure that whatever you bought me it’s fine, Buck.” Steve didn’t like the nervous undercurrent of Bucky’s words. It made him feel like an ogre.

“That’s what you say now, but once you take a look, you might think otherwise.”

Steve decided right then and there that he’d put Bucky out of his misery so he opened the bag only for his heart to do a triple somersault as he pulled out a medium-sized sketchbook. There were also all sorts of carbon pencils, a few colored pencils, another sketchbook, and at least three different erasers as if Bucky hadn’t known which ones were the best and had decided to avoid making a personal selection by picking up all three.

“There is a reason why I don’t sketch or paint anymore, Buck.” Steve could hear himself speak as if from a great distance. He put the sketchbook back and returned the bag on the floor. Suddenly, there was ice floating through his blood, thick and syrupy and suffocating. He couldn’t look at Bucky, couldn’t stand the sight of him in that moment. How dare he think that he knew Steve Rogers and what he liked? Because he had read it once in a book about him? Because he had enjoyed painting and art in all its manifestations once? Once, a long time ago, in another life.

His fingers turned white-knuckled in their own grip as he looked out the window at the blue and flawless sky. He’d hoped that at least Bucky would avoid falling into this trap: trying to tell him what he was like, forcing him to like things he no longer saw as meaningful and full of beauty. His attempts at settling back into his likes and hobbies when he’d been awoken had been destined to failure time and time again.

Going to war one too many times had done that to him.

“I’ve never presumed to know you, Steve,” Bucky mumbled, at last, but Steve refused to look at him. He was so furious, so goddamn furious at Bucky he was afraid that he’d say something stupid. Or simply walk out of there.

“You kind of just did,” Steve couldn’t hold in the hiss any more than he could control his anger. It burnt with righteous fury.

“Yes, you’re right. Maybe I did.” The hesitation in Bucky’s voice was familiar. “But I see the way your fingers twitch sometimes as if you seek for a pencil to draw something that caught your attention. Or the way sometimes you doodle on the corner of the newspaper or on its margins. Small fantastical scenes. I kept them all.”

“There’s a reason why I don’t sketch or draw anything anymore.” Steve could hear the walls that he erected around himself after he had been found under the ice turning darker and taller, made of granite and stone. He turned and Bucky almost flinched at the sight of him but his chin jutted stubbornly and his jaw clenched, determined.

“Then tell me that reason because I don’t believe even for a second that you don’t want to draw anymore. Or sketch or paint. Or whatever it was that you liked.”

“When you see as much war and fighting and violence as I did – when you see the horrible things that we do to each other over and over again –” The words almost choked him in their rush to come out, his anger tasting like bile and puss. “The beauty of the world pales in comparison to the ugliness, the violence. The hate. There’s no way I can see that beauty anymore.”
“You wouldn’t fight for the world if you couldn’t see its beauty.” Bucky’s hands covered his, long cold fingers curling over his hands in a silent plea. “You say you’ve seen too much and I’m sure you did, Steve. I can’t even begin to imagine how these years have been for you, running from one mission to another, always helping, always trying to comfort and support. I can’t say I know what it feels like going through such a terrible experience over and over again, the weight of it all… the responsibility. It must press against you. I’m sure.”

“You have no right,” Steve sneered, choked up, the air suddenly snuffed out from their little corner. “You have no right to talk about this and presume that just because you thought about it, you know the reality of it.”

“Yes, it’s true.” Bucky’s wintry eyes, bright and suddenly liquid, looked softly at him. “I’m just a mechanic after all. You know, I’m me. Not so very bright, kind of jumping in front of bullets without meaning to. I’ll probably never earn more than I do now, I’ll always hate broccoli, and my life will probably amount to an array of small but inconsequential things to others. But they’ll be precious and mine. And I want you to have that. I want you to have something that belongs entirely to Steve Rogers and not Captain America. And if it’s not art, we’ll find something else. But don’t you want to try at least?”

Steve took Bucky hands in his and held on tight. Something horribly painful clenched at his chest because it’d been so long since he thought of what he might like. Going through the motions had been the easiest. Because if he started to think about the things that he had liked in another life then he’d also think about the other things that he’d lost. And the enormity of such a loss might crush him under its weight.

“You were never inconsequential, Buck.” Steve hung on by a thread, terrified of taking the plunge. It was easier to think about Bucky and his importance than his own. “And what you are suggesting – it’s not like I haven’t tried before. But it’s difficult to think about what makes Steve Rogers these days when Captain America busies himself all the time with the affairs of the world.”

“But when Captain America comes home, then he is Steve Rogers and he’s well worth the care as much as the good captain is.”

“It’s not that simple, Buck.” There was that familiar weight again, pressing against his shoulders and chest like the mythical anvil of Thor’s lands.

“Maybe not at the beginning, but it can become in time. And besides, I’m not suggesting that art is the only thing that we can try. I just wanted – uhm, you offered me so much. I just wanted to offer you a little something back.” There was a sort of defeated air in the way Bucky crumpled back in his chair, disappointed mostly in himself, it seemed.

“You gave me so much already, Bucky.” The warmth surged like a tidal wave smashing against the wall of his words.

“God, don’t you get it, Steve?” Bucky blushed furiously. “I want to give you everything because you never take. You just give and give and give. And here I am, wanting to give you something back. So just take it, goddamn it!”

The shock of the statement made Steve gape at Bucky like an unattractive fish. If this was what it meant to drown in the naked affection of someone else, then Steve didn’t want to resurface. It took several moments for Bucky to realize probably the magnitude of such a statement, the unusualness of it, and by then the blush had almost doubled to the point that Bucky appeared to be barely breathing. Yet he stubbornly refused to take his eyes away from Steve, to retract the sheer honesty that had permeated his declaration.
There was something new in the way Bucky looked at him all of a sudden, as if he had just
discovered something precious, something that he didn't know he could see before. It crawled
under Steve’s skin, scraped raw of any defenses, just itching to grab Bucky and kiss the hell out of
him.

“Should I bring you something else, gentlemen?” The question came like water over a fire,
drenching them in the reality of their situation. Bucky took his hands away and Steve tried to smile
at the waitress but didn’t think he was doing a good job. Her eyes darted, concerned, from one to
the other. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, we’re fine, thank you,” Bucky answered politely, his voice steadier than Steve’s could have
been. “Could you bring me an orange juice? And maybe the dessert menu?”

“Sure thing.”

“Or wait, do you have any pie?” Bucky turned to Steve, still blushing, a little unsteady this time.
“Do you want pie?”

“Sure, Buck.”

“Two apple pies and an orange juice, please.”

“Make that two.”

“All right. Pies and juice coming right up.” She stared at them for a few more seconds before
grabbing the plates and the empty cups and leaving them alone.

Steve immediately looked away and out on the window. Suddenly, his skin felt too tight, as if
someone had scraped him raw and left him for hanging. The phantom warmth of Bucky’s hands in
his was bittersweet and only left him craving more. Bucky’s generosity was overwhelming all the
more because Steve didn’t think he was worthy of it, the honesty and affection pouring through
every gesture that Bucky made.

“I crossed the line, didn’t I?” The hesitant question brought Steve’s attention back to Bucky and
his wintry eyes, burning like ice. “I’m sorry, Steve. But I feel like sometimes –”

“There was no line crossed.” Steve took a deep breath. The shakiness of his smile was almost
palpable. “Thank you for caring, Buck. I don’t know if I deserve your generosity and friendship,
but I do wish to try. So thank you for the gift. I will gladly accept it.”

“Sure, pal. Though you have nothing to thank me for.” Bucky’s grin was well worth the tremor
building inside of Steve.

“There you go.” The waitress set the tray down and arranged the plates and glasses on the table. “If
there’s anything else, let me know.”

“No, thank you.” Both of them smiled politely. But Steve added for good measure, “We’re good,
thank you.”

“All right. Then enjoy your pies.”

“Thank you.”

“So what was the other thing?” Steve asked when they dug into their pies with much gusto. Bucky
looked up and licked the cream at the corner of his lips.
“Huh?”

“You said that you needed to talk to me about two things. I believe that the gift was the first. What was the other one?”

“Oh yeah.” Bucky’s whole face lit up in enthusiasm. “Want to see Rose Centre for Earth and Space with me? We can also check the Hayden Planetarium. If you haven’t been there already, that is.”

“No, I haven’t. When would we go?”

“Next Sunday if you don’t have any plans for the day.”

“Sounds good to me, Buck.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Steve smiled and swallowed the piece of the pie, then went on, “I’ve always been curious about it but never had the time to visit it. We should make it a day there.”

“We totally should.” Bucky grinned wide. “This is going to be awesome.”

They began discussing the details of when and where and how they should meet, and all the while the only question that pressed against Steve’s lips but never managed to escape was Is this a date? It wouldn’t be his first date with a man this century but it would be the one that he’d desire the most. Steve had never made a secret of his sexuality, especially after coming back and seeing how some media outlets had used his image against sexual minorities. The infamous news article that had broken the proverbial camel’s back had caused a media storm at the time, and only another alien invasion had taken the focus from it.

Steve washed away the taste of cream on his tongue with a huge gulp of his orange juice. He’d never been good at lying to himself and he wasn’t going to start now. He wanted Bucky. The sweet taste of his lips. His hands in his, the scent of him all over his own skin. There were times when Steve would look at him and he’d drown in desire. But hadn’t he asked so much of Bucky already? His friendship, his affection, and attention. And inadvertently, his own life? How could he now ask him to go on a date? It would be too much.

So Steve joked and laughed and made all the appropriate comments, all the while thinking it was selfish to ask for more. Still, when they settled the bill and were about to say goodbye, Steve couldn’t help himself. He hugged Bucky, pulling him closer than was technically necessary, breathing him in, filling his lungs with the smell of Bucky’s body, basking in its warmth. It was intoxicating and wild, and Steve could only let himself fall prisoner to it.

“So see you next week?” Bucky mumbled, flushed and adorable when Steve finally let him go.

“Yes.” His gruff voice made Bucky shiver. Another twinge of heat pierced through Steve’s chest. “But I’ll speak to you tomorrow, yeah?”

“Sure thing, pal. Let Sam know I said hi and that I haven’t forgotten about his promise of going for lunch one of these days.”

“I’m sure he’d tell you that he’ll hold you to it.” Steve grabbed his bag and waved again to Bucky who was taking off in the opposite direction towards the subway. “I’ll see you soon.”
“See ya.” Bucky waved too and then he lost himself to the sea of people. Steve looked down at the bag in his hand and then up again, though Bucky was no longer there. He slowly walked towards the place where he had parked his bike. Bucky kept all his small sketches. Bucky wanted to see him happy again, enjoying himself. His hands tightened on the paper handles.

_Bucky_

_Bucky_

_Bucky._

He thought of Bucky as he started with the rough lines of what would become the skyline of Manhattan as seen from his living room. The carbon pencils were really good, a clear sign that Bucky must have asked for help in buying them. The lines turned steadier with each stroke of pencil, with each time Steve’s hand would press against them a little more decisive, a little less embittered.

He thought of Bucky when halfway down into the following week, he had filled in half of the sketchbook with little drawings of still life, the Manhattan skyline from different angles, small portraits of his friends. More than one of Bucky. He thought of him as he captured the sweet bow of his lips, the small crinkles around his mouth, the cut of his cheekbones. It had been a while since he drowned in the beauty of the world.

It seemed the beauty of the world reduced to Bucky.

“I didn’t know you liked to draw,” Sam said as he made himself comfortable on the couch, eyeing the sketchbook and the uncanny pencils

Steve shrugged and set the three hot pizzas on the coffee table. “It’s something I wasn’t sure I liked anymore. But Bucky bought me these so I thought I’d give it a shot.”

“Ah, Bucky.” There was a mischievous undercurrent to Sam’s words, one that made Steve frown a little even as he went back in the kitchen for the six-pack that Sam had brought over. “So how many times have you drawn me?”

“Shut up, Sam.” Steve shouted back good-naturedly. (Four times, but he wasn’t going to mention that; it was difficult to catch Sam’s mischievous smile). He grabbed some tissues as well and returned to the living room. Sam smirked at him. Why was he friends with this guy again? “He just thought I might want to get back to it,” Steve mumbled, a little defensive, “since apparently, I kept on doodling on the margins of the newspaper.”

“Did he keep them? You know, like a proud mama of her cub?”

“That’s disturbing. Cut that out!” Steve scowled at him and sat down. He pretended to be very busy with his own pizza, but Sam had the unique ability to read Steve like an open book. He rubbed his hands in delight as he eyed the pepperoni and mushroom pizza and grabbed himself a slice, but he stared at it several moments before finally taking a bite. His hesitance alarmed Steve – Sam had once kept him prisoner for an hour as he described the wonderful cheesiness (literally) of the maxi four-cheese pizza. It wasn’t the proudest moment in their friendship. However, if they survived that, they'd survive anything thrown their way.

“So did he keep them?” Sam asked. Steve mumbled something unintelligible around his mouthful of pizza, hoping against hope that he wouldn’t have to repeat himself. By the way Sam’s eyes lit up, he hadn’t done a good job of it. “Uh-oh, he did keep them.” Sam’s glee was dim, but it was
“Shut up, Sam.”

“No, no, this is good, man. This is really good.” Sam swallowed his mouthful and then added, “I’m kind of waiting to see whether a scrapbook will appear with all your drawings. Steve Mementos or something like that. Everything wrapped in a bright red heart. Awww.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous,” Steve mumbled even as he blushed. “It’s not like that.”

“Oh, puh-lease, it’s exactly like that.” Sam’s eyes were sharp and warm when he went on, “But it’s not a bad thing, Steve. It’s not a bad thing at all.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Steve shrugged and watched as Sam reached for another slice of pizza. “Bucky is – well, he’s Bucky.”

“That’s eloquent.”

“Well, I have no idea how else to put the problem.”

“That’s true. The guy is a bit unusual.” Sam shrugged. “Again, not a bad thing at all. I like him and I can finally say that I’ve met someone who is more stubborn than you.”

“I’ll remember this the next time you accuse me of being too stubborn for my own good.” Steve took a bite from his third slice of pizza and watched as Sam left his one down and dabbed the tissue around his mouth. The dark circles around his eyes, the small crumpled corner of his lips alerted Steve that something about him wasn’t all right. “Is this about Washington?” he asked softly as he set his own slice down when it was clear that Sam wouldn’t say anything. “Do you miss DC?”

“What’re you talking about, big guy?” The brave face that Sam attempted made Steve hurt for his friend. Kind Sam, who always had humor or sarcasm to spare in order to encourage them, but when it came to his own person, was not so good at taking care of himself. Maybe because he’s too busy taking care of you, a treacherous voice replied quietly and Steve couldn’t refute the truth in it.

“Sam.” Apparently, it was enough to deflate Sam. He sunk further into the couch and sighed, wiping at his face as if trying to erase bad thoughts. Steve wiped his fingers and leaned back on the couch as well. “Is this about a case at work?”

“No, Steve, nothing like that.”

“Sam, what is this about?” Steve watched his friend in earnest. “If you’re not ready to talk about it, that’s fine. But please, don’t hold back on my account. I know you always listen to me but that doesn’t mean that I can’t return the favor.”

“Do you have any bourbon to go with this heart to heart talk?” Sam’s smile was a brittle and jagged thing, small and inconsequential. Steve simply nodded and went to dig out the bottle of bourbon that for some reason Tony gave it to him on Christmas last year and two glasses.

Sam drank the first glass in one go and only on the second did he settle more comfortably on the couch cushions and look down in the amber liquid. His fingers tightened on the fragile glass and there was a tic in his clenched jaw.

“It’s the anniversary of Riley’s death. Eight years today.”

“Oh, Sam.” Something terrible churned in Steve’s stomach at seeing his friend in such pain.
“The horrible thing about it though is that I’ve almost forgotten,” Sam admitted in such a small voice that it broke Steve’s heart. His hand immediately went to Sam’s shoulder, squeezing it lightly. Sam looked up at him, his eyes suspiciously wet. “I mean, what kind of shitty friend does that? I mean, yeah, it was a tough day today. I have a guy in my group that just can’t get over the horrible things he’d seen in Afghanistan and I’m trying to help him but it’s been so goddamn hard. On top of that, Christine made some blunders that I needed to sort out and it took longer than anticipated. But still, that’s no excuse. I have no excuse.” Sam’s voice broke when he added, “He was my friend. My best friend.”

It was like someone had snuffed out all the joy and energy out of Sam, leaving him slumped and utterly defeated. Steve hated to see him like that, especially because the bitterness of this experience was a taste that Steve had familiarized himself to since he’d woken up. Saying sorry wouldn’t cut it. Steve bit the inside of his cheek. But he had to do his best to find the necessary words because Sam deserved all the support in the world right now.

“There are days when I can live my life just fine,” Steve said softly. “I can speak with you and meet with Bucky and argue with Tony. I can even join missions or see a documentary about the war. But then I’d remember Gabe loved that song or Dum Dum loved that brand of cigars and all of a sudden, it’s like I’m losing my friends all over again. It’s been six years for me, it’s been a lifetime for them.”

“I’m sorry, buddy.” Sam patted Steve’s hand still resting on his shoulder.

“No, sorry. God, I’m telling you this not because I want to compare our pain and hurting.” Steve frowned so hard he could almost feel himself break. “That would be stupid actually and pointless. Anyway, I’m telling you all of this because Sam, this is life. We tend to forget about their deaths because they live in our hearts forever. And maybe it’s terrible and maybe it should be easier, but this is how things are. And I think as long as we get to remember them as they were, as long as we can still say Hey, remember that time when he did that?, I think we’re good.”

“It just feels disloyal,” Sam admitted, his head bowed, shoulders hunched. “He saved my life so many times and I forgot about him.” He put the glass down on the coffee table. His hands curled into tight fists as they rested on his thighs. “There are things I don’t remember anymore. His voice, the sound of his laughter when he used to tell bad jokes. Even his face isn’t as clear as it used to be.”

“But you remember the way he’d lecture you about safety up in the sky,” Steve replied, keeping his voice mild. “You remember what his favorite food was and how that one time he’d managed to steal Frank’s boots and hide them under the Captain’s bunk.”

“Man, I told you about that?” Sam chuckled lightly, shaking his head.

“Yes, you did. So, see, technically, now Riley lives in my memory as well.”

“You’re turning wiser in your old age, Rogers,” Sam joked and though his smile was pale and brittle and it still took a lot of effort, Steve could see his hands unclenching, the bow of his back less rigid. Steve huffed in amusement.

“Hahaha, laugh it up all you want, Sam, but according to Bucky, I’m not actually allowed to use the age card because, and I quote, that don’t matter.”

“According to Bucky, huh?”

“Shut up, Sam.” Steve chose to clap him on the shoulder and let him go. He grabbed his glass and
raised it slightly as if to make a toast. “To Riley. He was brave and kind.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you wouldn’t have been friends with him otherwise.”

Sam blinked several times before he took in a shuddering breath and added, “To Riley. He liked white chocolate, bourbon, and New Orleans, not necessarily in that order.”

“Hear hear.” They both took a sip, this time a little lighter in heart and soul. “Tell me about the first time he got you in trouble.”

“How do you know he was the one that got us in trouble?”

“Sam Wilson, what have you been hiding from me?” Steve took another sip of bourbon though it did nothing to him. But the moment infused him with enough warmth to keep him for a long time drinking there on the couch with Sam. His friend’s eye lit with a mischievous glint and Steve could see the gap between his teeth again.

“Well, the first time we got ourselves into trouble, let’s just say local police was involved.” And Sam launched himself into a story about chickens, honey, and a sore loser, and Steve laughed harder than he did in a long while. This story turned into another and another until half the bottle of bourbon was gone, mostly drunk by Sam, who by that point, had decided that it was a better idea to fall asleep on Steve’s couch rather than take the guest bed.

Steve shook his head at the loud snore that echoed around the living room and grabbed the half-eaten pizzas. He put the six-pack and the leftovers into the fridge then went back to the living room.

Sam was sleeping on his belly, snoring softly now. Steve shook his head slightly then removed his shoes and covered him with a soft blanket. He set a glass of water on the table and some Advil that Steve mostly kept for his team rather than himself and turned the lights off.

The rest of the week was spent in a blur of breakfasts with Sam – who moaned about the hangover from hell for two days straight and swore that Steve was the most heartless bastard that walked the earth for letting him drink so much – more debriefs, sketching, and conversations with Bucky. By the time Sunday rolled in, Steve was already vibrating with nerves.

They had decided to meet at ten thirty since everything opened around ten o’clock. They were going to check the planetarium and then see the other expositions and grab something to eat. There was much to explore within the American Museum of Natural History and they had a whole day at their disposal.

When Steve arrived, Bucky was already waiting for him, staring down at something on his phone. For a brief moment, Steve stood apart and watched him. Bucky was dressed in dark jeans, a grey Henley and a soft-looking leather jacket. His sunglasses rested on his fluffy hair and there was stubble over his gorgeous cheeks. There was an adorable scrunch between his eyebrows as if frozen in between two reactions, as if he didn’t know whether to be amused or appalled by what he was reading.

There were other people waiting or milling around, some throwing curious glances at Bucky. There were a few that actually openly appraised him or appreciated the view, but Bucky appeared utterly oblivious and aloof. The impossibility of Bucky Barnes made something scorching spread through Steve’s veins like thick molasses, syrupy sweet.
In the end, the corner of his lips twitched softly, he typed something quickly and then tucked his phone away in the back pocket. He checked his watch and then looked up.

Their eyes met across the sea of people and a warm smile bloomed on Bucky’s lips. It left Steve breathless with its beauty. He waved like a tool and then took the last few steps to the gorgeous man that was waiting for him.

“Hey, Buck.”

“Hey, Steve.” A brief hug involving soft claps on the back, then a cheeky smile. “Are you ready for your space adventure?”

“Ready.”

“I see you have the proper attire at least.” Bucky smiled again as he touched the brim of Steve’s NASA cap with a fingertip. He couldn’t help but smile back.

“Of course. How else would I honor our adventure today?”

“You’re such a punk.” Bucky chuckled as they made their way to the main entrance. Always aware of his surroundings, Steve tried his best to concentrate as much as he could on Bucky while always keeping an eye out for possible threats. He’d never again let Bucky sacrifice himself. But his high sense of vigilance made him almost miss Bucky’s next words.

“I’m sorry, Buck. I missed that. What did you say?”

“I said, let’s go this way because I’ve already purchased the tickets.” Bucky grabbed Steve’s arm in a loose hold and pulled him away from the long queue.

“Buck, you shouldn’t have done that.”

“I said it’s my treat, remember?” Bucky shrugged and reluctantly let Steve’s arm go when he saw that he now followed him. “I just want you to have a fun day.”

“It already is because I get it to spend it with you,” Steve blurted like the moron that he was. Apparently, there was no filter when it came to Bucky – Steve could feel the surging heat in his cheeks, even the tips of his ears falling prey to the inevitable blush. He expected Bucky to brush it aside, pretend that Steve didn’t just make the cheesiest comment ever, but Bucky just smiled even more tenderly and his eyes were filled with sheer warmth.

“Same here, pal.” His voice sounded a little gruff, touched a little by Steve’s honesty. Almost like he hadn’t been sure whether his invitation to the Planetarium had been truly welcomed. Steve’s heart gave a painful lurch at the mere thought of it and immediately decided that assuaging Bucky was the best way to proceed.

“I’m glad that you invited me here, Buck.” He watched as a pleased light shone in Bucky’s eyes. “This is definitely something I wouldn’t have thought of otherwise.”

“Were you passionate as a child about astronomy?”

“Not much time for stargazing in my time.” Steve shrugged. “But mom said that my father had been passionate about it. When they lived in Ireland, they used to sneak out of their respective houses and go stargazing. My father would show mom the constellations and whatnot. She said they even saw falling stars on occasion.” Steve looked around and then back at Bucky. “It brought them a lot of comfort on the ship that brought them to New York. That no matter how far they’d
travel, the sky would still look familiar.”

“Have you ever thought of going back there?” Bucky asked as they took in the enormous sphere that appeared to be floating into a glass cube. It was an impressive sight indeed and excitement coursed through Steve’s veins.

“Back where?” asked Steve when his brain had finally registered the question.

“Back to Ireland. To see where your parents came from.”

Steve shook his head. “No. Uhm, I mean, I don’t know. Most of their extended families had been wiped out during the Great Famine. Whatever family survived back then after that had emigrated.” Steve made sure to avoid a running teenager from crashing into him, then brushed closer to Bucky. “By the time they met, mom’s family had succumbed to poverty and disease and only she had survived in the care of a lonely aunt. Two of my father’s brothers had managed to emigrate. One of them died shortly after, while the other survived for some time. Well, long enough to help my parents come here anyway.”

“That’s actually terrible.” Bucky squeezed his arm lightly.

“It is if you think about how much history we lost. There are no crazy uncle stories or stories about that time when great-grandfather did something or other. Even the few precious mementos that Mom had managed to bring with her across the ocean were sold to in order to survive the winter.”

Steve looked at Bucky. “Are you sure you want to hear about all of this? I’m pretty certain that you must have read all of this in a book.”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Bucky nudged him with his shoulder. “Unless it upsets you. In which case we can forget about it. But I want to know your story as you tell it, not as I read it in a book.” The softness of Bucky’s smile melted like chocolate on Steve’s tongue. The sudden desire to taste that smile was overwhelming.

“No,” Steve answered softly. “I don’t mind talking to you about this, Buck. I’m just glad that you didn’t start quoting facts about my own personal life.”

Bucky winced. “Has that actually happened?”

“More times than I’m comfortable with.” Steve looked at the entrance of the giant sphere and nodded slightly towards it. “Shall we?”

“Yeah, we should.”

Once the show started, the sensation was overwhelming. It was indeed an awe-inspiring experience, not just because Bucky had caught up his hand in his, warm and grounding, but also because indeed the wonders of the universe never ceased to amaze Steve. In between fighting for humanity and trying to create his own personal corner in this world, so foreign and abstract at the beginning, Steve had forgotten how many miracles the universe hid away.

And now there he was, experiencing for the first time The Dark Universe and feeling as small as one human being could possibly feel when suddenly overwhelmingly faced with their insignificance in the grand scheme of things. He could barely breathe, so caught up was he within it, Bucky’s hand in his warm and reassuring. His wintry eyes rivaled the starry sky above them. The immensity of the universe reduced to that small point of contact, to a slight hitch in Bucky’s breath, the brush of his eyelashes, his inviting lips opened into a small oh.

The certainty that Steve would draw Bucky as he was right then over and over again washed over
him in sudden excitement.

“Thank you,” Steve whispered at Bucky’s ear, allowing his lips to brush the fragile skin. He enjoyed the slight shiver that traveled all over Bucky’s body even more. And in response, Bucky tilted his head, brushing his cheek over Steve’s and smiling softly.

The rest of the day was filled with such small gestures between them – the brush of their hands as they walked around after, the shy smiles that lit up their faces, the nudges of shoulders and the tight embrace at the end.

Steve wouldn’t be able to tell Sam later what he’d been eating or drinking, what they managed to see or didn’t see. What he confessed about his side of his family, though Bucky had some pretty funny stories about his great-grandfather on his mom’s side. No word had seemed to register. But he’d be able to tell the way Bucky’s hand felt in his, the way they nuzzled at each other without kissing. The way Bucky’s body had felt close to his, always so close, burning like a furnace and evaporating everything else from Steve’s surrounding world. The intimacy between them had been scorching and raw.

He’d analyze each smile and each twitch and each brush of hands, knowing all along that he should have kissed Bucky. When they stared at the end on the subway platform, Steve having insisted on accompanying Bucky to the subway station; or even before, as they emerged from the Planetarium and all Steve had wanted was to never let go of Bucky’s hand.

Stay with me. Don’t leave me. Stay with me.

The memory of that day carried him for most of the next week. But he should have known better. He really should have known better.

“Hey, Buck,” he answered his phone when Bucky rang him on Thursday morning. He must have arrived earlier to work and was getting bored waiting for Jerry to open up or something.

“Is this Steve?” A gruff voice asked, so far removed from Bucky’s, Steve felt his whole blood freeze all over again. “Bucky’s Steve?”

“Yes.” His clipped tone must have alerted the stranger because there was a rush of breath and then words poured out like a torrent.

“I’m Paul. Paul Walsh, Bucky’s boss. I think you should come here. I think you should come here as soon as you can.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, I am greatly indebted to fancyh because her job as a beta reader was all the more made difficult by the fact that English is my second language. She was kind and patient and made me look really good. Please know that all the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. :)
Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was safe, he was safe, he was safe.

Bucky’s lungs hurt with each painful shuddering breath, air piercing through them like tiny icicles. He was safe here. The table was made of metal and long, the cold wall sturdy against his back. His clammy hands grabbed fistfuls of hair and pulled hard, another cold shiver wracking through his body. He pressed his forehead against his knees, forcing his lungs to take another deep breath.

“All that is gold does not glitter,/ Not all those who wander are lost;/ The old that is strong does not wither,/ Deep roots are not reached by the frost,” he muttered, tongue thick and clumsy inside his dry mouth. “All that is gold does not glitter,/ Not all those who wander are lost;/ The old that is strong does not wither,/ Deep roots are not reached by the frost.” The words sounded hollow and devoid of any meaning at this point, but the very sound of them comforted him. Another painful breath, a scream lodged at the back of his throat, never to come out but always there. Always there. He’d been so good. He’d been so good. But he was safe here.

“All that is gold does not glitter,/ Not all those who wander are lost;/ The old that is strong does not wither,/ Deep roots are not reached by the frost. All that is gold does not glitter,/ Not all those who wander are lost;/ The old that is strong does not wither,/ Deep roots are not reached by the frost.”

His throat hurt like someone had shoved sandpaper down his windpipe. His nose was stinging and his entire body was a mass of pins and needles from having shoved himself under the table and stayed there. But he was safe here. He was safe. As long as he continued to breathe like this, harsh, but less painful, less erratic now, as long as he could keep his head in between his knees and his back against the cold and slightly damp wall, everything was going to be all right. Blood would stop pounding loudly against his eardrums and his heart would cease to attempt to carve itself out of his chest.

“All that is gold does not glitter,/ Not all those who wander are lost;/ The old that is strong does not wither,/ Deep roots are not reached by the frost.”

There was a shadow now blocking the little light that came inside his little corner of safety. Bucky retreated further into the wall. The shadow didn’t make any attempt to dig him out of his den. Bucky took another shaky breath and pulled his knees to his chest tighter.

“All that is gold does not glitter,/ Not all those who wander are lost;/ The old that is strong does not wither,/ Deep roots are not reached by the frost,” he rasped, the words suddenly infused with new meaning.

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“All that is gold does not glitter,/ Not all those who wander are lost;/ The old that is strong does not wither,/ Deep roots are not reached by the frost,” he rasped, the words suddenly infused with new meaning.

“From the ashes a fire shall be woken, a light from the shadows shall spring; renewed shall be blade that was broken, the crownless again shall be king,” the shadow said softly, the words almost dissolving before reaching Bucky. There was a familiar cadence to the voice, warm and kind, and Bucky instinctively raised his head a little and peeked with one eye above his left knee. He could see only a long-sleeved shirt, grey mixing with green, and a thick hand reluctantly falling back before touching Bucky. Good, Bucky thought viciously. He didn’t think he could handle the touch at the moment.

“All that is gold does not glitter,/ Not all those who wander are lost;/ The old that is strong does not
wither, Deep roots are not reached by the frost,” he said, his voice hoarse and painfully louder in the small corner that he’d claimed for his own. His breath slightly hitched, waiting for the other to complete it because he needed the symmetry right now.

“From the ashes a fire shall be woken, a light from the shadows shall spring; renewed shall be blade that was broken, the crownless again shall be king,” echoed the friendly voice again, just as soft as before. Bucky watched the shadow for a while but when it didn’t make any moves, he closed his eyes again and turned his head towards the wall. “Hey, Buck.” The words were spoken in such a hushed tone that Bucky could barely hear them.

He opened his eyes again, ignoring the tiny cold shivers that wrecked over his body. There was only one person who called him that. But it couldn’t be, could it?

“Steve?” The name sounded even to his own ears like a prayer in the middle of the night when one couldn’t be sure whether there was anyone listening at all.

“Yeah, it’s me, Buck.” There was a certain jagged quality to the sound of Steve’s voice. “Can I please come closer to you?”

“Yeah,” he almost sighed the word.

The shadow – Steve, Steve, Steve – crawled inside the tight space, beside Bucky, but making sure that he wasn’t touching him anywhere. Bucky began to tremble harder, even as his mind cleared further, making him realize all at once that he was still at work and that Steve had just crawled under a workbench. It was ridiculous and absolutely insane to have two large men – well, one definitely larger than the other – in such a tiny space, but Steve’s hulking presence gave Bucky a further sense of relief and safety.

“How are you holding up, Buck?” Steve kept his voice low and level.

“I’ve been better.” Bucky’s answer sounded scratched out of his throat.

“Is there anything you need me to do right now?”

“No. Can we – can we just sit like this a little while longer?” Bucky swallowed hard. “I don’t think – I don’t think I can get out of here right now.”

“Sure, Buck. Whatever you need.”

His entire world shrunk itself to this tiny place under his workbench where the normal noises of a workday trickled back into his consciousness like small tears into a fabric. The world was growing in small increments and Bucky was grateful for that for once. Because while the world was gradually expanding, the sense of security that Steve’s presence brought was enlarged and all-encompassing.

“I feel so stupid,” Bucky mumbled, ashamed and bitter, something awful churning deep inside of him. God, he was so fucking stupid and lame!

“Buck, no!”

“It was just a car! Just the goddamn exhaust tub of a goddamn car and I acted like the whole world was crashing around me.”

“Buck, your reaction is normal. Look – can I touch you?” At Bucky’s shaky nod, Steve shuffled a little closer and wrapped his arm around his shoulders, squeezing lightly. Bucky’s reaction was
instantaneous – his shoulders stiffened even more before all at once, they slumped as he pressed closer to Steve’s side. The man was like a furnace, one that could melt the terrible icicles that broke inside of Bucky. “You can’t expect things to go back to normal so easily, Buck,” Steve whispered softly in the small space between them. “You went through a traumatic experience and it was made worse by the fact that your family was caught up in it. Your reaction is normal.”

“I just – I thought I was fine. I thought that going to therapy and talking about it – I don’t know, I thought that it was helping.” Bucky shrugged despondently. “I just thought I was fine.”

“You might not be fine for a while, Buck.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be more encouraging, Steve?” His chuckle was a wet and terrible jagged thing.

“Yeah, it’s not my area of expertise.” Steve pressed his cheek against Bucky’s head. “But I promise you this time I’ll protect you, I’ll keep you safe.” He sounded like he was taking a vow, the seriousness of his voice coming out gravely and unbroken.

“Stay with me?” The plea came out broken and insecure.

“Always,” Steve swore and Bucky hid his face in the small crook between Steve’s neck and shoulder, breathing him deeply, filling his lungs with his scent and wishing he could stay like this forever. “I’ve got you, Buck. I’m not going anywhere.”

Bucky had never quite grasped the meaning of someone being able to make the world disappear with an embrace or a kiss or any other tender gesture. Until now. Exhaustion darkened the edges of his consciousness and the bitter taste of bile lingered in his mouth. His eyes were sore from being rubbed over and over again. His back was stiff and pins and needles crossed his legs like he was a pin cushion. And yet, the world had faded away. The entire universe seemed wrapped up in Steve’s arms, in his calm breath, in his scent and the way he pressed against Bucky’s body, a warm shield made of bones and flesh, strong sinews keeping them together. He was safe.

Bucky scrunched his eyes tighter and sucked in another deep breath. He never wanted to leave this place again, drowning in Steve’s affection and protectiveness.

It took a while longer though to finally gather up enough courage and strength to move from under the table. It was Steve that moved out first and then helped Bucky uncoil himself from under the table, his limbs numb and hurting. He was utterly exhausted and the only thing that kept him upright was Steve’s arm around his waist.

Immediately, Paul approached them, ensuring that the others would mind their own business and give him enough space not to feel even more like a moron than he was already feeling.

“I’m going to take him home now,” Steve said in his best Captain America voice as if Paul would dare to argue with him.

“Sure.” Paul nodded for good measure. His hazel eyes glanced at Bucky. “Is there anyone else you’d like me to call, Bucky?”

“No, thank you, boss.” Bucky could feel his tongue clumsy and thick. “If I call Ma now, she’ll throw a fit and make me move in with them until I’m sixty.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad right now.”

“I thought you were on my side,” Bucky all but whined.
“I am, I am. Jesus, kid, stop with the pouting!” Paul scratched at the white stubble adorning his cheeks and glanced at Steve. “This kid’s eyes are a lethal weapon.”

“Tell me about it,” Steve mumbled in approval.

But the light tone of the conversation couldn’t appease the guilt that gnawed at Bucky. “I’m sorry, Paul, for all of this. I’m really sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I know these things can happen. You do remember that Dan is a vet, right?” Dan, Paul’s older brother, had served three tours in Afghanistan before being honorably discharged – he had almost lost his leg in an ambush and the subsequent surgeries, while they helped him walk, they didn’t help him to return to active duty. Since then, things had been tough on him; the consequences of the trauma he’d experienced and the terrible things he’d witnessed were overwhelming at times.

“Thanks, Paul.”

“Nothing to thank me for. Now go home and get some rest. Take tomorrow off as well if you think you need it.” Paul shifted his weight on his feet, not sure what more he could do. Bucky hated that he put him in such a position but he’d have to apologize later. Right now, he was coming off a panic attack and the only thing he wanted was to go home and get some sleep. The exhaustion slipped through his veins thicker than any drug.

“Thank you,” the mumbled words came out all wrong, but Bucky hoped that it would be enough to express his gratefulness.

“Captain Rogers, sir,” Paul said in a polite tone, a mild deference in his demeanor, “please take care of him.”

“I’ll do my best.” Steve’s arm tightened around Bucky.

“And thank you for coming, sir.”

“Thank you for letting me know.”

Bucky blushed and groaned. “Damn it, why does it feel that you guys are ready to gang up on me?”

“Oh, don’t worry, kid, we’ll be having words about the fact that you forgot to mention that your Steve is Steve Steve,” Paul added his two cents in, waving at the wholesomeness that Steve Rogers was. “Strong words. Very strong words! Now, go on! Get out of here before I decide that calling your Ma is the best course of action after all.”

“Jeez, I’m going, I’m going.” Had he not been so worn out, Bucky would have rolled his eyes and maybe scowled a little. Instead, he looked at Steve and mumbled, “Please, tell me you came by car.”

“I did, though it wasn’t the best idea when facing the New York traffic.” Steve smiled softly at him. “Come on, Buck, let’s go home.”

The warmth that spread through Bucky at hearing those words gave him strength as they crossed the shop and said goodbye to his colleagues and friends, still mildly embarrassed by the scene he had caused. For their part, the guys tried to say goodbye as usual, keeping their voices as normal as possible as if he had just finished his shift and not lost it because of a stupid exhaust tub.
Steve’s car was a black SUV with the rear windows tinted dark, looking so out of place in the tiny parking lot at the back of the shop that Bucky almost burst into laughter. He chose instead to climb up in the passenger seat, pull on the seat belt, and immediately close his eyes.

“Do you want some water?” Steve asked as soon as he closed the door. Bucky nodded but didn’t open his eyes until he could feel the cold press of a water bottle in his hand. He drank with small sips until he was satiated. He gave Steve his home address and then promptly closed his eyes again, leaning against the cold window and falling into a light slumber.

By the time they reached Bucky’s apartment building, he was too out of it to think about how his one-bedroom flat was so tiny it could actually fit in Steve’s bedroom at the Tower. But his living room was welcoming, drowning in books and photographs, a blue afghan (the same one he had in hospital) now covering his couch again. Instead, he let himself be helped to bed.

“Thank you for coming for me.” Steve took his shoes off and helped him burrow himself deeper under the covers, his gestures efficient and tender. “Stay with me until I fall asleep?”

“Of course, Buck.” His large hand came to rest on Bucky’s uncovered cheek.

“Your hand on me.” The words came out like a revelation. He could feel Steve leaning and kissing his brow. Just a soft press of lips that obliterated the rest of his thoughts and helped him slip into obliviousness.

When he woke up he was groggy and exhausted, his face smudged to the pillow. He blinked several times, trying to get his bearings. His room was plunged in semi-darkness, the only source of light was the lamp on his nightstand that spilled a diffuse light across the room. He could spy with the only eye that he was currently willing to open that the curtains had been drawn, effectively cutting off the world outside, the traffic noises and the occasional voice far away, smudged and diffuse.

He turned on his back and rubbed his eyes, shaking off the numbness of sleep, a much more complicated affair than he thought it would be. His right arm was sore, the sensation of pins and needles alerting him that he’d slept in the same position a little too long. A quick check of his phone showed that it was a little after eight o’clock, which meant he hadn’t completely wasted his day away. There were a bunch of texts from his sister and a missed call from Ma but nothing else, a clear sign that Paul kept his word and didn’t rat on Bucky.

The glimpse of a brown leather jacket on the armchair tucked away in the corner of the room had Bucky swallow hard, a funny thing happening to his stomach. He set his phone back and stared at the leather jacket as if it were an alien object transported from another dimension inside his very own bedroom.

He sighed and wiped at his face, his cheeks suddenly aflame when he realized he had completely forgotten for a moment that Steve had been the one to bring him back to his apartment and by all the signs that surrounded him, he hadn’t left. The memories of the day rushed back at the fore of his mind with the power of a torrent. Steve’s gentle hands on him, his kind words, his sweet smile.

Bucky grabbed a pillow and smothered himself with it, groaning into the plush material. Sweet baby Jesus and just about everything holy under the goddamn sun! Why couldn’t he be a goddamn normal person and not have Steve pick up the pieces every goddamn time? Bucky took the pillow away from his face and stared up at the ceiling. Let it not be said that Bucky wasn’t a goddamn drama queen when he wanted to be.

Bucky’s apartment was too small to hide away the presence of someone else inside of it. By the
sound of it, Steve was puttering in the kitchen, the tunes of the radio carrying over to Bucky, though the volume was low and comforting. He sighed and rubbed at his face before standing up and making his way to the bathroom to splash some water over his face and take care of his business. He decided to have a quick shower and changed afterwards into a pair of grey sweats and a worn baseball shirt.

But as he opened the door, he was immediately welcomed by the swift scent of delicious food. The curtains in his living room were pulled over as well and only the lamps were switched on. Bucky shook his head and stepped towards the kitchen, wanting to see what Steve had been up to.

The door to the kitchen was open, a delectable scent wafting throughout the whole apartment, but as soon as he stepped in the doorway, Bucky froze in the spot. Throughout his life, there had been a few occasions in which his entire focus had been arrested by the splendor or the hurt that had been contained by certain moments, but none held a candle to watching Steve Rogers in his own kitchen, doing the most mundane task of washing a pot while two simmering plates of pasta were cooling down on the countertop.

Steve was fully focused on his task, half-way turned from the entrance. He was dressed in a long-sleeved blue t-shirt and a pair of proper flannel pyjama bottoms that Bucky didn’t remember owning, so Steve must have brought his own clothes even though he couldn’t remember any sort of bag. The material, worn and soft-looking bunched and stretched over the wide expanse of Steve’s shoulders, the rolled-up sleeves showcasing his strong forearms. His feet were naked and he was humming to an old song playing on the radio.

Bucky blinked several times. He was tempted to take a step back, rub his eyes and then return to the kitchen, almost sure that the mundane and utter domestic image was going to disappear.

“Are you going to keep on staring at me or are you going to come in and take a load off?” Steve put the pot in the dish rack and looked up at Bucky, smirking when Bucky blushed, caught in the act.

“I’m sorry if I’m amazed that you managed to cook something without burning down the kitchen.” Bucky rolled his eyes and finally walked into the kitchen, sitting down at the table, too in awe for any other witty comeback.

“It was just one time, Buck.” And really Captain America should not be allowed to roll his eyes right back at him. “You need to let it go.”

“One’s too many times as it is, Steve. Excuse me if I don’t trust you with my kitchen.”

“Well, too late, buddy. I’m afraid that your kitchen survived me making pasta for you. For which I slaved, you know, a lot, and which you might not end up enjoying after all if you continue being a jerk.”

“Oh, no, no! Please, by all means, dazzle me with your culinary skills.” Bucky smiled wide at Steve when he set the steaming plate in front of him. “It does smell delicious. Did you add basil to the sauce?”

“Not that a cook should share his secrets, but yes, I did add a bit of basil.” Steve returned with a small plate full of grated parmesan, from which Bucky grabbed a generous portion and sprinkled it over his pasta.

“I didn’t know I had basil in the house. Or parmesan for that matter.” He brought the fork to his mouth and immediately moaned when he tasted the rich tomato sauce drenching the pasta. “Sweet
baby Jesus, what is this? This is delicious.”

“You like it?” Steve’s slightly flushed cheeks were utterly adorable.

“Do I like it? This is delicious, Steve. Seriously.” Bucky moaned around another mouthful. “I shouldn’t have let you make that chicken frittata. Instead everyday should be pasta day. And basil over everything. Or whatever you used to make this sauce so delicious. Seriously, I need to tell Ma about this.”

“I asked Happy to bring me a bag and a few things to make this.”

“What’s a happy?”

“Happy is a person.” Steve chuckled in delight when Bucky made another face at the pasta. “He’s Tony’s right hand. Or Pepper’s? Half the time, I don’t even know who he belongs to anymore. Anyway, he was kind enough to help me out.”

“Well, I’m, for one, grateful for his help.” Bucky looked at Steve and smiled gently. There was no way to thank Steve for staying and cooking for him and basically just being the nicest person ever. It was tempting to let himself drown in the naked affection that washed over him in that moment. He slowly grabbed Steve’s hand and squeezed it lightly. “Thank you, Steve.” His own voice sounded gruff and pleased. “Thank you for coming for me and for staying with me.”

“You have nothing to thank me for, Buck.” Steve intertwined their fingers, his blue eyes blazing with affection and warmth. “I’m happy that I can do this for you.”

Bucky blushed slightly, cursing inwardly at his treacherous cheeks. But the genuine kindness in Steve’s voice, his honesty put Bucky at ease. Perhaps it was this very sense of safety with Steve or the way they held on to each other that made Bucky bolder than he thought he could be.

“Will you stay tonight?” The question encompassed so much more, its echo filling the entire kitchen with the possibilities of what might occur between them. But the certainty that Steve wasn’t going to misunderstand the situation gave Bucky strength to ask it. The way Steve’s mouth twitched at the corner, the way his eyes lit up even more was enough of an answer to Bucky. But it still came as a mild relief when Steve said, “Of course I will.”

Bucky grabbed the fork with the other hand because he couldn’t make himself let go of Steve. “It feels like I’m always asking you to stay. Sorry about that.”

“In case it wasn’t glaringly obvious, I’m always more than happy to comply with your request.” Steve leaned a little closer to him. “You’re not the only one that feels like this, Buck. In case you haven’t realized already, I want to stay. Always.”

Bucky starred back at Steve with eyes wide, his eyebrows most likely making a valiant attempt at touching his hairline. Then when the words finally registered, a wide and easy grin spread over his lips. “You do?”

“Now you’re just fishing.” Steve said in mock irritation, but whatever he had wanted to accomplish was ruined when he brought Bucky’s hand to his mouth and kissed it, his gesture anchoring Bucky in the present moment. “Now eat your dinner because it’s getting cold.”

A groan of utter disbelief left Bucky’s lips. “You punk.”

“Takes one to know one.”
“Steve, I swear to God!” The blush that spread through his body reached the climax all over his face, ears burning and everything. But a delicious sort of pleasure uncoiled inside of him.

“Yeah, what, Buck?”

“Nothing, pal.” Bucky decided that eating with his left hand wasn’t exactly the easiest thing ever, but he couldn’t find it in him to let Steve’s hand out of his. “Is this okay?” he mumbled, nodding towards their twined hands when Steve glanced at him confused.

“It’s more than okay, Buck.”

They made small talk as they ate their pasta, the radio and the noises of a well-lived-in building surrounding them like a protective blanket. The perfection of a small and happy moment suspended in time and Bucky craved to drown in it forever.

They cleaned up together and Steve washed the dishes as Bucky dried them. Steve was telling a wild story from work about when they once fought against a guy that was a bona fide magician when Bucky’s phone rang. He excused himself and went to the living-room before he picked up, knowing fully well who was on the other end of the line.

“Hey, Ma! Called the NSA yet or just about?”

“I was going to start with the FBI first and build up from there,” Ma’s retort came swift and amused. “Now what did I say about answering your phone?”

“Always answer. And if I can’t, then at least send a text,” he recited, the discussion still fresh in his mind. “I do appreciate the fact that you called only once though and that you didn’t panic like before.”

“Har har, it must be so difficult for you having some parents that care about your safety.”

“You mean some parents that care so much that they almost called the National Guard on me.”

“It was just your Uncle Ben making you sure you’re not de- hurt.”

“You wanted to say dead in a ditch,” Bucky crowed gleefully.

“No, I wasn’t,” Ma huffed annoyed at Bucky’s antics. “I really just wanted to say, hurt.”

“No, no, no! You said de- as in dead as in dead. in. a. ditch. Because that’s the expression, mother dear, and you wanted to use it. I’m so telling Dad.”

“It’s all your and your dad’s fault with your silly sense of humor.” Bucky chuckled when he heard Ma’s put upon voice. “But whatever, go on, be a traitor and tell your dad. Apparently, carrying you nine months in my womb means nothing to you.”

“Uh oh, you’re getting the big guns out. Emotional blackmail. And you say I have nothing from your side of the family.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ma huffed again, trying to hide her chuckle. “Now tell me how are you? What have you been up to?”

“Oh, Ma, basil!” Bucky answer quickly, without even realizing that he wouldn’t make much sense until there was a hesitant silence at the other end of the line. Luckily, Ma being trained into speaking Bucky since he was apparently inside her womb, asked amusedly, “You mean basil in
“Yeah, sorry, I’m not making much sense, am I? Bucky chuckled. “Steve made me pasta and meatballs and he added basil and it’s delicious.”

“Got it! From now on, more basil in the pasta sauce.”

“Yeah.” His happy sigh made Ma chuckle again.

“So I’m assuming that Steve is at your place right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Is he going to spend his night there then?”

“Ma!”

“What, Bucky? Can’t I ask this sort of thing? It’s not like it’s a surprise. You did go on a date with the man.”

“It wasn’t a date,” he hissed low into the phone, making sure his voice wouldn’t carry all the way to the kitchen. “How many times do I need to tell you and Dad that?”

“My lovely son, do I need to give you a crash course into modern dating? It’s true that I don’t know much about the new social cues and all, but just because you didn’t kiss the man at the end of the day – because you were too much of a chicken shit and all that – it doesn’t mean it wasn’t a date.”

“Since when do you insist on me dating Steve?” Bucky took the phone away and stared at it incredulously, before returning it to his ear. “Last week, it was all maybe you should take it easy and maybe dating Steve isn’t such a great idea with the whole spiel of people forming bonds during traumatic experiences only for them to crush and burn.”

“Well, mostly it was your face when you told us all about it.”

“I should stop being so open with you guys.”

“I think not.” Ma sighed at the other end. Bucky could almost see her pinching her nose. “Look, Bucky, I’m not going to pretend that I’m happy about it and everything. It could be dangerous and heartbreaking for you in the long run. But you are your own person and you always took full responsibility for your actions. So I don’t want to be one of those annoying moms that can’t listen to their children.”

“Oh, you do love me!”

“Now you’re being a little shit!”

“You can’t call your own son a little shit!” Bucky raised his voice, indignant.

“Yes, I can and I just have.”

“You’re a truly evil woman and I’m going to hang up now.”

“No, you won’t, but I’ll be a hip mom and tell you to go back and moon over Steve.”

“I’m not mooning over Steve. Also, no one says hip anymore, Ma.”
“Yeah, yeah. Also, you’re coming to dinner this Saturday. Bring Steve too.”

“No, I won’t!” Bucky replied straight away, slightly horrified by that particular prospect.

“Yes, you will.” Ma’s voice turned more serious. “Unless you want your dad to give him the talk by ambushing him at the Tower.”

“That might not go so well with the Strike guys.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Maybe they’ll actually help him. You know how your dad is – always making friends with everyone.”

Bucky pouted. “Do I have to?”

“Yes, you do.”

Bucky’s eyes darted towards the kitchen. He whispered, “Ma, we’re really not dating.”

“Something tells me that you will after tonight.” Her smirk was almost palpable. “The man cooked for you, Bucky. The least you could do is kiss the daylights out of him. God knows he needs it!”

“Ok, I’m going to hang up now.”

“Don’t forget! Saturday at six.”

“I hate you!”

“No, you don’t.” She positively cackled as she added, “I’m going to go and call your sister now.”

“Don’t you dare!” Bucky exclaimed utterly horrified.

“Love you!” Ma said quickly and then hung up. Bucky looked at the phone in his hand utterly stunned.

“Something wrong?” Steve’s voice came like a soothing balm, but horrifyingly enough, Bucky couldn’t stop the blush again.

“Nope, but I might have to get a new pair of parents.” He ran his fingers through his wild mop of hair. “By the way, you’re invited to my house on Saturday at six.”

“Dinner with your folks?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be there.”

“You don’t have to.” Bucky played with the phone in his hands, all the while praying his blush wouldn’t make him look too much like a crazed person. “It’s just that they’re under the wrong impression – that is, it’s not wrong but uhm, my parents might think … You know, after last week that – uhm, how to say this?”

“That we’re dating?”

“Yes.” The three letters came out in such a rush that Bucky almost doubled over in embarrassment. “God, I’m so sorry. You don’t have to come. Seriously, this is just –”
Bucky had time only to register Steve’s hands on his shoulders because the tender press of lips basically obliterated any logical thought out of his mind. It was short and sweet and nothing to write home about, but somehow the tiny press made want crawl its way inside of every pore of Bucky’s body.

“We’re dating, Buck,” Steve said firmly, staring back into his eyes. “I’m done being stupid about it. Unless you don’t want to?”

“Oh, I want to,” the words came out eager and stuttered and Bucky cleared his voice before trying to say more calmly, “We’re dating.” He bit his bottom lip before smiling softly at Steve. “I’m going to date the hell out of you. You just wait and see.”

“Can’t wait!” Steve pulled him closer and hugged him tightly. “But just so you know, if every date is going to be like the one last week, I’m already in awe, Buck.”

“Was it really a date?”

“Yeah, it really was.” The happy sigh that accompanied Steve’s words made Bucky hide his face in the crook of Steve’s neck and breathe deeply.

“I’m really happy right now, just so you know,” he mumbled into the warm skin, pressing a gentle kiss against it.

“I am happy too, Buck.” Steve’s arms tightened their hold on him.

“This is not how I envisioned my day. Not after the panic attack anyway.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“No, not right now.” Bucky sighed.

“But you’ll mention it to your therapist?”

“Yeah, I will.”

“And you know I’m here for you if you need me, right?”

“Yeah, thank you.” Bucky raised his head and nuzzled at his cheek. “All done in the kitchen?”

“Yeah.” Steve kissed his cheek sweet and tender. “Want to go back to bed?”

“Yeah. I’m not tired or anything. Do you want to talk? Or should I bring my laptop with me? Maybe watch some Netflix?”

“Talking sounds good.” Steve squeezed his shoulders one more time and then let go.

“Okay, you go and make yourself comfortable. I’ll turn off things around here and then come and join you.”

“Sure, Buck.”

Bucky was suddenly nervous. His hands shook slightly as he checked everything in the kitchen, grabbed a glass of water and then turned off the light. He checked the door, even though he knew that Steve would make sure everything was safe for them both. He chewed at his bottom lip when he switched off the light in the living room and finally made his way back in the bedroom, where Steve was already waiting for him under the covers, all soft and pliant and – yeah, Bucky forgot
about all his doubts.

“What’s the silliest thing you miss about the past?” Bucky blurted when they settled comfortably in bed, facing each other, Steve warm and relaxed next to him.

“Bananas.”

Bucky chuckled. “Bananas?”

“You’re laughing now. Buck, but let me tell you, those bananas were really good. These ones taste to me like cardboard.” Steve scrunched his face adorably. “The first time I tasted one I turned around to Tony and asked him what the hell he did to my banana. I thought he pulled a prank on me or something. But nope, it was the cruel reality.”

“Just so you know, I have so many inappropriate jokes right now and the only reason why I’m not telling them is that I respect you.”

“That’s mighty kind of you, Buck.”

“I thought so too.” Bucky grinned so wide he was pretty much showing all his teeth. Steve huffed a laugh. “So what else?”

“Coney Island.”

“Steve, Coney Island is still there.”

“Yeah, but it’s not the same.” Steve shrugged a little, shuffling to get a better position. The faraway look in his eyes clued Bucky in that there was more to the story that Steve was letting him know but, for the life of him, Bucky couldn’t find in him the strength to push Steve on this. How difficult it must have been for him to wake up to this century and discover that nothing was the same.

“What’s different?” His words came out softly like literal phantasms. The silence that fell over them seemed to contain all the weight of those memories seldom spoken of.

“I went there just once after I woke up,” Steve admitted, the heaviness of the words pressing from all sides. “I, uhm, I used to go there with my best friend. Huh, I could almost remember the taste of the hotdogs in summer and the bile that sat at the back of my throat after we went on the Cyclone for the first time and I threw up.”

“What was your friend’s name?”

“Jimmy.” Steve ran his fingers through his hair. “Jimmy Byrne. He was a hell of a guy. We used to hitchhike to Coney Island and spend all our money there. We couldn’t go often but when we did, it was amazing. It was as if we were taking a break from our lives.”

“What happened to him?”

“He died in an accident at the docks in ’39. It was a horrible autumn that year.” Steve turned on his back and stared up at the ceiling, his profile a mix of anger and impotence. Bucky swallowed thickly. This was probably one of the few things that Steve had kept to himself – there were scattered details of who he was before the serum. As if people didn’t pay attention to him before unless he was sick, dying or getting into a fight with someone to defend others. Bucky’s hands tightened on the comforter. It was utterly wrong.

“I’m sorry.” Bucky shuffled a little closer to Steve but didn’t dare to touch him. There was
something utterly remote in Steve’s profile, a sort of otherness that came with years upon years
lived in a different life than the one he must have pictured for himself. “Do you want to talk about
him?” Bucky asked hesitantly, not sure whether he’d be allowed to see more of this Steve, the one
that had been poor and sick and frail to the point that many had dismissed him.

Another wave of heavy silence. Then.

“Jimmy used to live in the same tenancy as us. He had three brothers and two sisters and he used to
smoke all the goddamn time. He was a good dancer but he was shy. He used to blush worse than
me and he wasn’t very good with the ladies.” The warmth in Steve’s voice suffused the memories
with enough reality that Bucky could almost picture that man alive and well, having the time of his
life. There had been a picture of him in one of Steve’s biographies, a shy smile on thin lips,
enquiring eyes staring back at him from across time and space. Bucky remembered thinking the
guy must have been tall and built like a brick house and yet there was something gentle about him.
A gentle giant.

“Were you – I mean, did you ever think of him like you know, uhm, you were attracted to him?”

“It was hard not to,” Steve looked back at Bucky, his eyes suddenly blazing. “At the time, I
thought that there was something wrong with me. But it was hard not to like him. He had hazel
eyes, always a smile for me. It was hard not to be attracted by his kindness.”

“Did you guys go to the same school?”

“For a while. Then he had to abandon it and start working to help his family. Both him and Caleb,
his older brother, started early working at the docks.” Steve sighed heavily. “They helped me a lot
after mom died. He used to take care of me when I was sick.”

“It sounds like he was a good man.”

“He was.”

“Did you ever –?”

“No, no, never.” Steve shook his head. “I would have never jeopardized our friendship like that.
Not to mention that it was so dangerous back then. There was a whole world out there that I
could have been part of, but I had no clue how to do it and I was too afraid to risk it. So I felt like maybe
it wasn’t worth to pursue that.”

“And then you met Ms. Carter.”

“And yes, I met Peggy and she was like a brilliant sun. Apart from Jimmy, she was the only other
person that got to love me for who I was and not for how I looked after the serum or for becoming
Captain America.”

Bucky bit his bottom lip. “Did you ever regret having the serum?”

“No.” The answer came unflinching and unapologetic. “It enabled me to help too many people and
save too many lives to come and regret it. Regretting the serum would mean regretting all those
lives and I definitely don’t regret that part of my life.” Steve opened his mouth to add something
else, but changed his mind and closed it.

Bucky chewed at his bottom lip, afraid that the discussion had turned definitely into the more
serious side of things, but didn’t know how to bring back that light-hearted tone back. There hadn’t
been many light-hearted things in Steve’s life anyway and he was afraid that digging up more
would only make Steve sadder or more upset. Because, at the end of the day, he couldn’t even begin to fathom what it had meant to Steve to wake up in a new world, seventy years later, when nothing and no one even remotely familiar was there to greet him.

“What else?” He kept his voice soft and inviting, unsure of whether the question would be welcomed. “What else do you miss?”

“The smell of the painting oils, the way it made me dizzy in that small and suffocating room that me and a bunch of other people were calling a ‘studio’. It was the one place where I was warm enough.” Steve sighed as if someone had just placed an anvil on his chest and then made him take a deep breath. He wiped at his face, even when a tentative smile bloomed at the corner of his lips. “Sometimes we would fight in the snow, especially if Jimmy waited for me. Then almost any conversation would degenerate into a snowball fight.”

“Sounds beautiful.”

“It was. There weren’t many commodities back then, not like today, but we made do.” Steve turned on his side again, an arm resting under the pillow. Bucky’s eyes flickered to Steve’s mouth, a sudden desire to just press his lips against it. Instead, he bit his lip and looked away. “I miss the taste of my mom’s tomato soup and the garlic smell of Mrs. Wójcik’s food and the way she used to make cheese buns and give us some as well.”

Steve’s eyes were scorching, bluer than a lapis lazuli, and wouldn’t it be lovely if one day Bucky could buy one just so he could compare colors? Yet something told him that he could buy all the blue gemstones in the world and they’d still have nothing on the blue that were Steve Rogers’ eyes. The air swiftly changed between them, somehow heavier with the things that were left unspoken between them and their weight now pressed against Bucky’s bones relentlessly.

He swallowed hard, his throat suddenly tight. There was nothing more than in that moment to gather enough courage and kiss away the wistful smile that had bloomed again on Steve’s lips. “It’s lucky that you can still carry the memory of those times.”

“I guess so,” said Steve with a slight hitch to his words. “I couldn’t keep living with the weight of those seventy years buried in ice, so I tried my best to make peace with it if that’s what you were really asking.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t —”

“No, don’t worry, I know.” Steve’s jaw clenched and unclenched several times, a thoughtful look on his face. “It’s hard to explain to people what it was like. To explain what it means to wake up seventy years later into a future that bears no resemblance to what I knew. But I’ve come to the conclusion that I could never regret the present anyways.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I can still do the right thing. Because I still get to help people and give them hope, for all the controversies that surround some of my decisions.” Steve shuffled a little closer to Bucky, his voice sweet and thick like molasses. “Because that would mean that I regret you.” Steve cupped his cheek and his thumb pressed against Bucky’s lips in shocked revelation. His blue eyes were soft and the bluest they’d ever been. “And I’d never regret you, Bucky. Never.”

They came together like it was inevitable, like they had moved in small increments towards this moment right then and there. Skin prickling with heat, Bucky pulled at Steve’s arm until the other man shifted and moved on top of Bucky’s body, their limbs a graceful combination of made for
each other and awkward clumsiness. Bucky’s hands came under Steve’s t-shirt, on his warm and solid back, pressing the pads of his fingers onto the incredibly hot skin, pulling him closer still. The world fell away at the edges and everything was reduced to the awed expression on Steve’s face, to his hands of Bucky’s cheeks, to his heat and desire surrounding them.

“I’d never regret you either, Steve,” Bucky admitted in a hushed tone, afraid that it might break the spell. Though, by the way Steve’s eyes turned even softer, there was no danger of that. Scorching heat licked at Bucky’s spine as Steve leaned in even further, just a breath away of Bucky’s lips and said, “I’m going to kiss you now, Buck.”

Bucky’s breath hitched as Steve did what he promised. A soft press of loving lips. Another on the corner of his mouth, another on the tip of his nose.

Steve’s thumbs kept drawing amazing caresses onto Bucky’s cheeks as his whole body came down to that point of contact, overwhelmed by the gentleness with which Steve kept pressing his lips against his until Bucky could do nothing but open his mouth a little in silent plea.

The greediness with which Steve delved into his mouth was only matched by the tenderness with which he slid his tongue against Bucky’s, like a caress, like a silent plea of his own. The surge of want pressed against Bucky’s insides with a ferocity that startled him, allowing his surrender to be all the sweeter. Steve was claiming Bucky’s mouth as his own, kissing him long and sweet as if he’d never get to tire of Bucky’s taste on his tongue.

The languid kissing turned hotter still as Steve pressed against him, surrounding him, solid and warm. Bucky could do nothing but relish the fire of want that burned inside of him, clawing and scorching everything. He moved his hands on Steve’s back until he could reach the nape and then pulled them away only for his fingers to find their way into his hair and pull a little.

Steve rumbled in pleasure as he nipped at Bucky’s bottom lip before soothing it with his tongue and lips. It was enough as their languid kissing turned into open-mouthed kisses, intense and all-encompassing, heat and want spiraling down Bucky’s back.

Bucky let himself be pulled closer, rolling his hips forward with abandonment and intent. The need to touch Steve’s skin grew and grew so overwhelming that Bucky whined and pushed at Steve’s shirt, pressing his hands under the fabric again, letting his fingers splay open against the hot skin. Steve let out a small moan of pleasure and Bucky swallowed it, swallowed all the tiny breathy sounds that came out of his sweet mouth, even as he pulled closer the other man, tugging at his shirt.

“Oh! Goddamn it, off, Steve!” he grumbled, pushing insistently at Steve’s shirt, impatient and wild. Steve smiled above him when Bucky rolled his hips again, their mutual desire palpable and real. “Come on, you punk. Off!” Dizzy with the taste of Steve’s lips, Bucky tugged against the offending garment until Steve finally abandoned his mouth and pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it to the side. Then he quickly made off with Bucky’s t-shirt as well, before leaning forward again, the skin to skin contact making both of them groan in pleasure.

“You’re so beautiful, Buck,” Steve murmured in wonder, his lips touching the shell of his ear, even as his hands caressed each patch of newly exposed skin. A shock of pleasure jolted through him as Steve scraped his teeth against his jaw, nipping and licking at his pulse point. Bucky tilted his head, giving Steve more room just as his own hands curled on Steve’s hips, the heat of them searing and tight.

Then those lips moved reverently to the slightly gnarled scar on his left side, kissing it over and over again, his tongue pressing against the sensitive skin. The gesture more than anything made
Bucky release a breathy moan in the quiet room. Steve stared up at him and then pressed his tongue one last time against it in an interminable caress, then returned to Bucky’s mouth, kissing him hot and possessive.

The feeling of Steve's almost naked body against his dragged a whimper out of his throat, leaving him breathless and vulnerable. Their bodies were hot against each other, tiny rolls of hips that made them groan each time their groins touched, hot and heavy. There was no hesitance in the way their bodies moved, in the way they breathed the same air, lost in pleasure.

Bucky wanted more, even as Steve pressed another scorching kiss to his throat, even as his body was a hotline of pure muscles and strength. His fingers curled tighter around Steve’s hips, unable to move more than that, held prisoner by Steve’s bulk and his searing kisses.

“You’re so lovely, sweetheart,” Steve mumbled into Bucky’s chest, his tongue chasing the taste of Bucky’s skin. “You taste so good,” he added, leaving Bucky flushed and breathless, his hips jerking forward on their own accord, seeking relief to his desire.

His hands slid inside of Steve’s pyjama bottoms, grabbing his bottom and pulling him hard against his own body, wanting to curl around him and drown in the heat and strength of him. Steve made tiny delicious sounds, even though he was the one that blanketed Bucky’s entire body and seemed to be in control. Overwhelmed by desire, Bucky pulled out his hands and then shoved at both Steve’s bottoms and underwear in one smooth move.

Luckily, Steve got the message. He rose enough to get them both out of their remaining clothes, and Bucky helped him, desperate and needy. And then they were both gloriously naked, staring at each other in awe. Pure affection surged through Bucky like a tidal wave because maybe Steve had the perfect body and maybe there were no scars or any sort of blemishes, but the way he moved slowly on top of Bucky again, hard and poised, the way he kissed Bucky open-mouthed and deliciously greedy said everything about what was happening between them.

They both moaned in pleasure at the delicious way in which their cocks touched, hard and slick. Pleasure ran thick and sweet like molasses, making Bucky pull Steve into a rough and bruising kiss while he rolled his hips wanton and free, swallowing every delicious sound Steve made.

He let his hands slide down Steve's back to his ass, clutching tightly at it, unashamed, abandoning himself to Stave’s hands and lips, to the tight roll of his hips and the tiny sounds of pleasure that he was making.

And when Steve grabbed the back of his thighs and pulled him harder, ensuring that Bucky’s legs wrapped around his waist unashamedly, Bucky groaned and let Steve take full control. Steve who pressed into him, arching and rolling his hips in a frantic movement, sending pleasure coursing across Bucky’s back, pooling deep into his belly.

Steve seemed everywhere at once and Bucky could do nothing but surrender to him, to his biting kisses against his collarbone, to the wet and desperate kisses against his mouth as his questing hands seemed to be everywhere. Bucky closed his eyes and moaned again at a particular hot slide of their hips, whispering Steve’s name over and over again like a fervent prayer. Steve’s own little noises of pleasure were like music to Bucky’s ears, the soft breathy sounds making him barely register the hot litany of Bucky and sweetheart coming off from Steve.
Bucky simply melted, moaning breathless and loud in the quietness of the room. Steve pushed himself up on one arm, looking for all intents and purposes like he wanted to devour Bucky, and he blushed heavily and whimpered, the sudden absence of Steve around and over him leaving him feeling bereft.

“Shh, sweetheart,” Steve whispered, blue eyes dark and heavy with desire. “I got you, Buck, I got you.” His fingers trailed down Bucky's chest and his stomach, across the scar, scorching hot and possessive, leaving Bucky panting in their wake. When those thick and strong fingers finally wrapped around Bucky’s cock, he immediately thrust into his hand, the instant pleasure short-circuiting his brain. Steve allowed him a few thrusts before wrapping his warm hand over both their cocks and Bucky arched back, closing his eyes in consuming pleasure.

He wrapped his hands around Steve’s shoulders then, pulling him as close as it was possible, abandoning himself to the spellbinding way in which Steve’s hand moved over them both, feeling more than hearing Steve's own moans of pleasure.

Steve worked their cocks, smooth movements going ragged and fast, and he caught Bucky's mouth to kiss him messily as pleasure mounted until at long last, Bucky fell over the edge, Steve following seconds later with a gasp that was lost in Bucky's mouth.

Steve allowed himself to collapse slowly into Bucky’s welcoming arms as they breathed each other in, satiated and sweet.

“You’re heavy,” mumbled Bucky, his brain still trying to kick back online.

“I'll move in a second, Buck.” Steve’s voice sounded rough and fucked out and Bucky’s cock gave
a valiant twitch. By the way Steve kissed him behind the ear, it definitely didn’t escape his notice but Bucky was more than happy to let him use this against him anytime he desired.

“I didn’t say you should move.” He blushed heavily as he admitted in the crook of Steve’s neck, “I like your weight against my body. Always.”

Steve raised his head a little, his sapphire eyes burning with affection and renewed desire. He leaned forward, forehead to forehead, then nose to nose, nuzzling a little at Bucky’s cheek before pressing a languid kiss.

“I like to have you in my arms, sweetheart.” Bucky all but melted at the endearment and held tighter to Steve’s shoulders. After a while, when he truly became too heavy, Steve moved aside and grabbed a few tissues from Bucky’s nightstand and cleaned them up. After he threw the tissues in the general direction of their discarded clothes, they both settled on their sides, forehead to forehead, one of Steve’s legs slung over Bucky’s thigh. One of Bucky’s hands came to rest on Steve’s chest, just above his heart, and he smiled shyly when he noticed that Steve was watching him with gentle eyes.

Bucky pressed closer, hiding his face into the crook of Steve’s neck and inhaled deeply. The world outside rushed away as he finally closed his eyes in peace and let himself fall asleep surrounded by Steve.

Chapter End Notes

The awesome art for this chapter can be found here. It's absolutely amazing and incredible and em-dibujisb should be showered with praise and love. I love the tenderness of this, the warmth. <333 Seriously, I'll never waste an opportunity to praise her art. <33

A massive thank you goes to fancyh (my hero!!!) as well because her job as a beta reader was all the more made difficult by the fact that English is my second language. But she was kind and patient and I owe her a lot. Please know that all the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. :)
These days everything seemed reduced to Steve. Bucky woke up and Steve. Breathed and Steve. Went to work and Steve. It had been just two days since they’ve been together, but Bucky was filled with thoughts of Steve every single moment – what they could do together, where they could go together, how they could spend more time together in between the demands of their lives. Steve’s smile, his voice, his kisses, and his caresses. The way he looked at Bucky. The way Bucky’s heart trembled at the thought of it, at the reality of it.

Not even the ribbing he got from the boys at work could take away the smile off his face, the way he seemed to hold endless supplies of good humor and sunny disposition. More than once, both Tyrone and Jerry rolled their eyes at him or snickered, while Paul kept making jokes about the newlywed period. However, all three of them swore that they wouldn’t mention to anyone who Bucky’s Steve really was.

“We’re family, son, in all the ways that count,” Paul said when Bucky stuttered the request to them during Friday's lunch break. “I think I can speak for all of us when I say that your secret is safe with us.”

“That being said,” Jerry piped out in between mouthfuls of his take out, “please explain to us how in the hell’s name did you manage to grab Captain America as your boyfriend?”

“Are you trying to tell me that I’m not attractive enough, old man?”

“You might be for a guy,” Jerry snarked back, definitely not flustered by the implication. “But that don’t mean you’re **that** attractive.”

Bucky spluttered indignantly as the other guys laughed at him, not with him, the assholes. But his affection for them shined on, his respect for them doubling for their loyalty and their faith in him. Bucky didn’t feel like telling them what happened during the shooting so he gave them a few scant details about the beginning and talked more about their dates with a sappy look on his face that the boys had no qualms making fun of. Thoroughly.

Still, the miracle of it all was that Bucky didn’t think that he could feel like this. There was something overwhelming and sweet about this feeling that poured through every pore of his skin. There were moments when Bucky thought that his affection for Steve was so evident that people could actually see it on him like a walking lit up billboard.

Affection. Such a bland word for what he felt for Steve. Bucky bit his lip with raw efficiency. There would come a time when he would have to use the big word, the one that would best describe what he felt for Steve, but it was too early. Way too early. However, that didn’t stop Bucky from smiling dumbly as he cleaned around the living room on Friday evening, waiting for Steve.

Well, he didn’t know that he had a dumb smile on his face but Becca had no qualms with telling him off when he answered his phone.

“You have a dumb smile on your face,” his sister said as he sputtered indignantly.

“First of all, you can’t see me because you’re on the other side of Brooklyn and the phone isn’t on
video. And second of all, I don’t have a dumb smile.”

“Yes, you do.” Seriously, he could almost hear his sister’s eye-roll.

“No, I don’t. All my smiles are either charming or manly displays of amusement.”

“Manly displays of amusement? Jesus, seriously, how come you don’t have an English degree with
the amount of bullshit you can come up with?”

“Is there a purpose to this phone call or did you just call to mock my smiles?” Bucky scowled at his
couch for good measure, though the poor inanimate object had nothing to do with Becca’s sarcasm.
He puffed up the pillows anyway, huffing like an old maid.

“Yeah, well, I wanted to let you know that we’re not coming tomorrow to dinner. Stephen – you
remember him? You met him and his wife at the New Year’s party.”

“I guess?”

“He’s the dentist that kept on giving out cards throughout the party.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember that guy.” Bucky scrunched up his nose as he looked at the pile of open
bills on his overcrowded coffee table. He knew he paid them but he should file them, for crying out
loud. “What about him?”

“Well, he and his wife invited us for dinner tomorrow evening to this new French restaurant that
they found in Dumbo. So you’re on your own, big brother.”

“This Friday?” Bucky swallowed hard. “Becca, you can’t absolutely not come to tomorrow’s
dinner!” Bucky said, suddenly all panicky and sweaty. His clammy hand squeezed the phone
harder.

“And why is that, dear brother of mine?” she asked, all calm and grandly as if she was presiding
over a meeting.

“Becca, seriously, you need to be there.”

“Why, Bucky? What’s going on?”

“Uhm, I might bring Steve to the dinner and you know how Dad’s going to be. I bet he’ll give him
the speech. To Captain America no less. And –”

Becca cackled. There was no other word for it. She absolutely cackled as she added breathlessly,
“Are you telling me that you’re bringing Steve tomorrow for dinner so he can meet the parents?
This is amazing.”

“I’m glad that this amuses you.”

“You have no idea how much this amuses me, moron.”

“Hey, no name calling!”

“Yeah, yeah! But seriously, this is truly amazing!” She laughed out loud. Bucky took the phone
away from his ear, pressed it against his forehead and sighed heavily. Who needed little sisters? He
put the phone back to his ear just as his sister decided to control her laughter and managed to say
through the remaining giggles, “For a family that worshipped Captain America for so long, I don’t
think you need to worry about it too much.”
“Yeah, well, Captain America didn’t date their son before, did he?”

“Oh, so this is what you’re doing now?” Her voice turned a little more serious. “You’re dating?”

“Yes.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course it’s a good thing!”

“Bucky.”

“Seriously, Becca, spare me the sermon. I just need you there tomorrow.”

“Well, tough luck because I really want to go to that restaurant so Michael and me are bailing out.” He could hear her as she took a deep breath. “Look, did he say this? Did Steve say that you’re dating or was it implied?”

“Becca, he said it. He said it first actually.” Bucky crashed on the couch and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why does this surprise you? You know about our dates.”

“That you refused to call dates in the first place.” She sighed in his ear.

“You could at least pretend that you’re happy for me.”

“Jesus Christ, of course, I’m happy for you, Bucky! Especially if he was the one that said it first and it wasn’t just an implied thing that could turn into a big misunderstanding.”

“Then? What’s the problem?”

“God, only you Bucky! I swear to God, only you could be so damn oblivious to the complicating factors in your life.”

“What the hell? What complicating factors?”

“Well, the first being that your boyfriend is Captain America, don’t you think?”

“I’m not dating Captain America. I’m dating Steve Rogers.”

“Well, that’s all good and nice, but Steve Rogers is Captain America, whether you like it or not. If you think that there’s not going to be a media shit-storm when the newspapers find out about your relationship, you’ve got another thing coming. You can’t ignore this part of his life.”

“I’m not ignoring it,” Bucky tossed back. “I think I can say that I’ve become pretty intimately aware of this part of his life, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, well, definitely, but it wasn’t part of your life before,” Becca said, her tone just as hard. “You will have to confront it again. Daily. You will see him hurt again. You will have people that will take an issue with the fact that you’re dating an Avenger. You do know that not everyone likes them, right? They aren’t exactly a squeaky clean bunch of people.”

“I know that.”

“Do you? Do you really? Because let me tell you this, James Barnes, if someone pulls out a gun again and threatens him, you are absolutely not allowed to jump in front of a fucking bullet for him.”
The deafening silence between them made Bucky’s ears ring with the pressure of it. Becca and him had always had this pact of cutting off the bullshit and tell it straight as it was, but this time it hurt, it really did and Bucky wasn’t sure exactly where all of this came from. His sister’s harsh breathing alerted him to the fact that this conversation was far from over, although he’d love nothing more than hanging up on her right then.

“Becca, it’s not his fault that I got shot,” Bucky said calmly, trying to keep his voice level. Becca had a horror of raised voices or shouting and any serious conversation would end in a heartbeat if he forgot that detail.

“Oh, I’m not blaming him for that, Bucky. I’m blaming you,” Becca replied, her voice steel and granite combined.

“That doesn’t make sense at all! I didn’t want to get shot, thank you very much!”

“You literally jumped in front of a bullet for the guy!”

“I thought that I was just going to push him out of the way. And besides, I’m fine now.”

“You see, that? That right there? That’s the reason why I’m really worried about the whole thing.”

“What?”

“The easiness with which you talk about the whole thing, almost as if nothing major happened. As if you didn’t almost die on that operating table. As if you weren’t in critical condition for days on end with no hope in sight.” The wet lurch in his sister’s voice made Bucky flinch. “Like you’re not now taking medication by the dozen and any infection could literally kill you. You act like it wasn’t a big deal, always with the jokes and the funny comments when we couldn’t breathe. When Dad thought that he made you believe that your life was worth less than Steve’s.”

“What?” Dread pushed the boundaries between keeping calm and losing it the fuck out. “What do you mean?”

“God, this is definitely not something we should be discussing over the phone.” Oh, yeah, Becca was really crying now. “Give me an hour, maybe more, and I’ll be there.”

“Becca, what –” But his sister had already hung up on him, and Bucky remained frozen on the couch, the phone still in his slack hand. He hadn’t thought this through, she said. And maybe it was true. Perhaps his mind had been a little more preoccupied with Steve and the thing that was blooming between them. Bucky ran his fingers through his hair, grabbing fistfuls of it and pulling hard.

Damn it to hell! Did Dad really think that? Did he blame himself? Since he got back to his regular life, he did his damnedest to prove to his parents that he was well, that he didn’t need supervision, that his medical condition didn’t affect his lifestyle. He avoided talking about the shooting with them so as not to further upset them. But what if, inadvertently, by not talking about it, he had made things worse? He knew that his family was receiving the same type of support as he was, but this was definitely something they needed to talk about it as a family, like Becca’s outburst had just shown.

In truth, the awareness that his family was a little more protective than the usual with the phone calls and check-ups had been constantly at the back of his mind. Not only his parents and Becca and Michael, but also his extended family as well. Uncle Ben used to call him once or twice a week before but now it was almost daily. And Uncle Liam started to check-in as well, though they’d
never been so close before. Auntie Julia sent him cookies, Auntie Liv bought him a couple of warm and soft blankets. Hell, cousin Richard (the only other cousin living in New York) invited him twice for lunch.

God, Bucky had been so blind! Their family had been fortunate enough to be spared the violence that affected other communities daily. Since Grandpa Joe’s stint in the army, there had been no Barnes men involved in any shooting or any other violent act. Not to mention the Taylors. Ma’s side of the family was even more bland and normal than Dad’s side. The privilege of his situation escaped him entirely until actually being confronted by it. Thoughts of recrimination swirled in his mind so much that by the time he garnered a modicum of calm, his sister had already pressed the buzzer.

“I need something strong for this discussion,” she said as soon as she barged in his apartment, dropping her bag and coat on the couch. Bucky nodded dumbly at her and let her pick up the only bottle of whiskey that he had inside the apartment and that had been increasingly gathering dust there since Bucky hadn’t been a drinker in the first place. But now with the medication, it was even less likely that he’d touch it.

Becca poured a finger of the ruddy liquid and then drank it in one go. Bucky sat on the couch, wiping his clammy hands on his denim-clad thighs. The anxiety of the moment pressed against his ribs with vice-like strength.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky muttered as she put the glass down on the coffee table with a trembling hand. “I’m sorry,” he repeated as he stared back into the same shade of blue as his own eyes.

“It’s not your fault,” she replied, then smiled wryly. “Not this anyway.” Becca stood there for a moment longer, then finally stepped forward and sat down on the couch on the opposite end, one of her legs underneath the other. The uncertainty of the moment kept the silence a while longer. Then.

“I made jokes not because I didn’t take the whole situation seriously, but because I thought that if you guys saw me better, then you would be relieved and not worry so much.” Bucky pushed his fingers through his hair. “I guess I didn’t think this through.”

“Hello, have you met our parents? They’ve been worrying since 1987.”

“Probably sooner.”

“Probably.”

Bucky looked down at his hands. He swallowed hard and when he asked, “Did Dad really blame himself?”, he almost didn’t recognize his own voice.

“Yeah.” He could feel his entire body tense like a tight coil, something ugly and akin to shame pooling inside of him. “They didn’t want you to know but this took a toll on them, Bucky.” Becca pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and looked longingly at the empty glass. “Yeah, Dad likes Captain America and whatnot, but you’re his son. He’d sacrifice Steve in a heartbeat if it meant saving you. So when you try and make light of your gesture? Yeah, uhm, maybe that’s not one of the best ideas you’ve had.”

“Becca, I would have done it whether it was you or anyone else. I couldn’t let it happen or not do anything about it.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.” Becca came closer and put her hand over his
shoulder, her gesture making him look back at her. “Michael told me once that the Avengers need their own saviors too and that in saving Steve, you also saved the people that will need his help in the future.” Her voice sounded hoarse enough that she had to clear it several times before following with, “But I’m afraid of what might happen if you become seriously involved with Steve. I don’t want you to jump in front of a bullet each time he might be threatened with one.”

“Becca, being in a relationship with him doesn’t mean that I’m suddenly accompanying him on missions.”

“I know. But I’m scared,” she admitted in a tiny voice. Bucky immediately grabbed her hand and squeezed reassuringly. “I’m scared that you might get hurt again. I’m scared that he brings danger in your life. I’m scared that he might break your heart.”

“Oh, Becca.” Bucky wrapped an arm around his sister’s shoulders and pulled her to his chest, holding on to her. She burrowed into him like she was back to being sixteen and having her heartbroken for the first time. “With any relationship, the danger of having a broken heart is there. You know that. And the danger that he brings in my life – yes, I can’t deny it. It’s there.

“So then –”

“But so is his lo- uhm, so are his feelings for me,” Bucky stuttered. “Just because he is Captain America, it doesn’t mean that Steve Rogers has to be alone and unloved.” Bucky sighed. “Yeah, I can’t say that I’m thrilled by what will happen when the world finds out about our relationship. What people might say about us. About me. But I’m willing to try. I’m willing to fight for it. And shouldn’t that be enough?”

It was a question that they couldn’t answer, not in that particular moment. Maybe when Bucky would turn old and grey and the battles of his life would lay spread before him, letting him choose which of them had been worth fighting and which hadn’t been.

“Does he make you happy?” She asked, at last, her fingers tight on his t-shirt.

“He does.”

“And are you sure he didn’t get involved with you just because he’s grateful and all that?”

“That’s really mean.” He sighed heavily and thought hard on it. He would have been lying if he said that he didn’t think about it. But then it crossed his mind that Steve Rogers was one of the most honest men he had the privilege to meet and that he’d never do something like that. So he told that much to Becca as well.

His sister stood up a little straighter so Bucky let her go. She wiped her teary cheeks then stared him down. “Fine. In that case, if you’re sure and you’re happy, then I’m happy too. But I reserve the right to give him the speech.”

“Like there was any chance to stop you in the first place. Fine, fine! Do it! But you do realize that I’ll be threatened by the Avengers no less, right?”

“Yeah, I don’t envy you one bit, dear brother of mine.” Becca shuddered. “I bet you Black Widow knows at least twenty ways of killing you with her pinky finger and no one would know about it.”

“You’re not really helping.”

“Oh, please, I’m merely preparing you.”
“No, you’re not. You’re actually scaring me even more.”

“Don’t be such a baby!” Becca waved her hand dismissively at him. But then her face turned kinder. “Does he treat you well?” Bucky’s blush must have been quite telling because his sister smirked mischievously. “Oh, do tell, dear brother of mine!”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell!”

Becca’s eyes widened in response. “Oh my God! You had sex with him! You had sex with Captain America!”

“Damn it, Becca! Keep your voice down!” His ears were burning though he couldn’t hide his smug grin.

“Oh, you bastard!” Becca rubbed her eyes. “Damn it! I can’t ask you for any details because you’re my brother and that would be too gross!” She slapped him over the shoulder. “I hate you for this. You ruined everything.”

“When have I ever given you details about my sexual exploits anyway?” Bucky rubbed at his shoulder. “I’ve never done that.”

“Yeah?” The challenge in her voice made him immediately wince because yeah, he actually just remembered that indeed there were several times when he’d been quite, uh, descriptive. “Remember Louis?”

“I was only twenty-one! And I wasn’t that explicit.”

“Whatever makes you sleep better at night, dear brother of mine.” Becca was so good at mocking him that had there been a sport, she would have been the crowned champion. Her face turned softer though as she added, “You know this comes from a place of love when I say that while I’m happy for you and Steve and I hope he treats you well, you need to be prepared.”

“Becca, I am.”

“I don’t think you really are.” She set an appeasing hand on his forearm. “I want you to talk about it with him and set some ground rules.” Bucky opened his mouth but she just squeezed harder and barged on, “It’s important, Bucky. He needs to be aware of all of this, the impact that this relationship might have on you and on your life. You need to communicate as much as you can. Stop floating on pink clouds!”

“I’m not floating on pink clouds!”

“Yeah, you are, and I can’t believe I’m the one that has to bring you down to earth.” She smiled wryly at him. “But I need you to speak with Steve about it. Please, promise me you’ll do this.”

“I promise.”

“Also, let Dad give him the speech. It will settle him and also, it will be a pleasure to see Captain America squirm.”

“Dad has that power, doesn’t he?” He smiled too.

“Well, sometimes he’s really a scary good lawyer. I think if he put his mind to it, he’d be able to declare all Avengers illegal.” She gave him a hug. “Just let Mom and Dad do their thing as any normal parents would with the new fling of their child.”
“Steve isn’t a fling.” Bucky pouted but hugged Becca anyway because he was an awesome brother like that.

“No, he isn’t. But unfortunately, that still means that I’m not coming tomorrow.”

“Fine! Abandon me in my hour of need!”

“Oh, such acting chops! Sure you haven’t been an actor in another life?”

“Puh-lease, Hollywood would have been blessed with my presence.”

“Oh, the ego on this one!” Becca rolled her eyes but her ringing phone stopped her from adding another scathing remark, which Bucky was sure it was in the wings. “Hey. I’m at Bucky’s,” she answered as she whispered Michael to Bucky. “No, I’m just averting another crisis in the Barnes clan as usual.” She ignored her brother's scowl to add lovingly into the phone, “Yeah, I’ll be home soon. No, I don’t feel like eating Thai. Let’s order Chinese tonight.”

“So mature!” Bucky mumbled when Becca just smirked at him. “No, no, I'm still paying attention. It’s just Bucky that acts like an overgrown baby. I know he's always acting like one, but apparently, he doesn’t.” She grinned like the Cheshire cat. “Sure, see you at home. Love you too. Bye.”

“You two sicken me.” Bucky crossed his arms and pouted. “I don’t know why I love you both so much.”

“Because your life would be sad and miserable without us. Also, because we give good advice.” She stood up and was about to grab her stuff when Bucky stood up as well and hugged the daylights out of her.

“You know I love you, right?” he mumbled in her ear when his sister hugged just as hard. “Thank you for being the most awesome little sister one could ask for.”

“You won’t make me cry, asshole!” But her voice sounded terribly wet when she hid her face in the crook between his shoulder and neck. “I love you too. God, I’m so glad you’re here.” They stood like that for a long while, just breathing each other in. And if Becca squeezed just a little harder and if Bucky’s long-sleeve t-shirt was just a little wet afterwards, well, no one had to know about it but themselves. It took a while for the sudden lump in his throat to disappear. It took even longer to calm his shaking hands after she left.

He really should have discussed the issue with Steve. Something told him that Steve was floating on kind of the same pink clouds as him, but when the man came later on that night, after a debriefing, Bucky couldn’t think much with Steve pressing him against the door and basically kissing the daylights out of him. In fact, all reason disappeared, obliterated by the taste of Steve on his lips and Steve’s hands on his body. In between I missed you, sweetheart and God, the taste of you and other small nothings that Steve kept muttering in his ear, it was kind of difficult to remember anything else. Somehow the world seemed reduced to Steve, his body over Bucky’s and the sense of safety and love that surrounded them.

However, waking up the following morning to an empty bed did nothing to soothe Bucky’s nervousness, even when he realized that Steve didn’t leave. He turned on his back and stared up at the ceiling, his heart trying to find a regular pattern of beating again. When he got tired of being dramatic and his bladder made it clear that he could no longer wait, he stood up and took care of his ablutions, brushing his teeth and grabbing a clean t-shirt while ignoring the scattered clothes around the floor of the bedroom. Was it sappy to enjoy seeing his clothes mixed with Steve's down on the carpet, a material trail of their passion last night?
Becca would say that he needed to get a grip. And he would tell himself that he’d rather find out where Steve was, not that he could be far with how small Bucky’s apartment was. However, when he opened the door of his bedroom, it was another matter entirely.

The Saturday morning sun drenched the living room, spilling messily over every patch of space that it could find. One of the small pleasures in Bucky’s life had been to drink his coffee in the mornings there, sitting on the couch and closing his eyes like a giant cat. It was the only part of the day when the sun lit up his small apartment and its warmth seemed to sip through his bones, making him feel content and at peace.

But the vision of Steve with a cup of coffee watching out on the window, lost in thought, arrested Bucky in his movement, words frozen in his mouth. The silence of the apartment wrapped around them like a peaceful shroud, the sounds of traffic outside, of phone conversations and people talking seemingly far away and removed.

Steve hadn’t bothered to put a t-shirt on so he was just in his pyjama bottoms that he had brought over a couple of days ago and had stayed ever since. The warm feeling of Steve keeping a few spare clothes in his apartment made love surge through Bucky, unabashed and pure. He bit his lip and leaned with his shoulder against the doorway of the bedroom. Objectively speaking, Steve Rogers was a handsome man. The curve of his back and his shoulders spoke of ancient Greek statues, of Renaissance knights and painted hero figures. Bucky could talk at length about the curve of his bottom, the strong thighs, the thick hands. He could talk about the sharp jut of Steve’s jaw, the curve of his lips, the blue light of his eyes.

Yet, nothing compared to the relaxed line of Steve’s entire body right now, the sweet lingering sense that Steve felt at ease. There was no frown marring his forehead, his jaw wasn’t clenched. His shoulders drooped and his lips curved slightly into a relaxed smile. He appeared completely at peace, taking small sips of coffee and thinking of something pleasant.

He appeared at peace.

Something beautiful and warm spread through Bucky’s chest, knowing that he’d been able to offer such a moment to Steve. The happiness was so strong that for a moment, he didn’t know what to do with himself. The sudden desire to share that peaceful world with Steve sparked in Bucky and soared, pushing him to move at last and press against Steve’s warm body from behind, hugging him tight and breathing him in. He pressed his nose against the nape of Steve’s neck and kissed him softly.

“Morning,” Steve said softly, setting his cup of coffee on the window sill and then covering Bucky’s arms with his.

“Morning.” Bucky pressed another kiss on one of the knobs of Steve’s spine. “Where were you?”

“Don’t worry. You were right there with me.” Steve turned slightly and pulled Bucky gently until they were finally embracing, their bodies warm and hard against each other.

There was something reassuring in the way their bodies seamlessly melted against each other. Steve kissed him tenderly, peppering Bucky with a dozen small kisses on his eyelashes and nose and chin and cheeks. There were sweet moments of tenderness, done with such an easiness and earnestness that Bucky could do nothing but curl his hands on Steve’s hips and held on tight, allowing himself to enjoy such a show of affection without questioning it or analyzing it. As he was, more often than not, prone to do.

“Good morning indeed,” Bucky mumbled against Steve’s lips when he could finally speak again.
Steve’s hands trailed over Bucky’s back, making him shiver in pleasure. “I woke up and didn’t find you there.”

“I’m sorry. I usually wake up really early.” Steve kissed the top of his head and then nuzzled at his jaw. “I couldn’t keep on watching you as you slept. Sam tells me that is actually a creepy behavior.”

Bucky chuckled softly. “It kind of is, but I wouldn’t mind.” Bucky truly refused to go all girly on Steve’s ass but seriously, he wanted to completely melt against the other man and forget about the world forever. Allowing himself to enjoy the way they seemed to belong to each other’s arms, Bucky sighed happily. “Are you nervous about today?”

“A little.” Bucky could feel Steve’s shrug. “Your parents weren’t happy with me but I’m determined to make them like me.”

“They were unhappy with the situation, not with you.” Bucky stepped back a little, enough to be able to gaze back at him.

“Buck, they’re allowed to be unhappy with me,” Steve said gently but firmly. “They’ve been holding me to the highest standard and I failed them when I let their son get shot. Not only that, but their son got shot saving my life. It can’t be easy for them.”

Bucky opened his mouth, ready to defend them and Steve at the same time but then he closed it when he realized that his parents had been reluctant about his relationship with Steve. Perhaps that was the reason why they wanted to officially meet him in this capacity. Moreover, he couldn’t ignore the fact that Steve might actually be right. There were a lot of things that Bucky didn’t know about his time in between being shot and waking up. But the understanding that this couldn’t go on like that was finally dawning on him.

“It wasn’t easy for them,” Bucky began hesitantly, “and I made a poor job of handling the situation. Actually, this is one of the reasons why I wanted to discuss something with you.” He hid his face in the crook between Steve’s neck and shoulder, taking solace in the warmth of Steve’s skin, in the way his fingers found unerringly the scar on Bucky’s left side, gentle fingertips mapping the raised patch of skin, a little gnarled and ticklish.

“You know that it doesn’t sound good when someone says we need to talk,” said Steve, trying for amusement but kind of failing and coming out as a little vulnerable.

“I said that we needed to discuss something, not that we needed to talk. It’s not the same.”

“I guess you’re right.” They both stepped back. Steve smiled wryly when noticing Bucky’s reluctance of letting him go.

“Right.” He blushed. Hard. Great, just what he needed! “I’ll go pour myself a cup of coffee and join you then.”

“Sure, Buck.”

Bucky went quickly to the kitchen and poured coffee in his favorite cup, his hands slightly shaking. He bit his lip hard and ran his fingers through his hair a few times, before grabbing his cup again and joining Steve on the couch as promised. Steve’s baby blue eyes turned a little more serious once he saw the way Bucky chewed at his bottom lip.

“It still looks pretty serious, Buck.”
“What?” Bucky startled then smiled sheepishly when Steve raised an eyebrow at him. “Yeah, sorry, I guess you’re right. It’s just that I had a conversation yesterday with Becca, just before you came, and what she said made me think about something. Ugh, this is going to sound so damn presumptuous to say out loud but I wanted to ask you – Well, actually I wanted to talk to you about… God, why is this so goddamn difficult?” Bucky looked down at the cup in his hands, unable to find his words.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve said softly and grabbing Bucky’s chin softly, he made him look up again. His eyes were kind and patient. “You can talk to me about anything. You know that. I’ll never consider you being presumptuous or anything like that.”

“You say that now,” Bucky joked, but it kind of fell flat. He sighed and set the cup on the table before looking back at Steve. “I think what I’m trying to talk to you about is our uhm, relationship. If, you know, if you’d be willing to call it that.”

Steve’s reaction to his words took Bucky by surprise. His face suddenly appeared tense, like carved in stone. For a moment, Bucky caught a glimpse of the unyielding nature of Captain America himself and his entire stomach instantly sunk to the floor. Jesus Christ! Just because Steve said that they were dating, that didn’t mean that they were really in a relationship. It was just too goddamn early! Bucky should have known better! He shouldn’t have presumed that this was –

“You know what, Bucky?” Steve’s voice sounded harsh in the dreadful silence of the room. “You need to stop doing this.”

Bucky swallowed convulsively before asking in a small voice, “Stop calling this a relationship?”

“No, for crying out loud!” Steve snapped. “Stop acting like you don’t have any claim on me! Damn it, you have all the claim in the world. Jesus Christ, Bucky, stop acting like I wasn’t the one that wanted to date you. This is a goddamn relationship! We are in a goddamn relationship and you saying that doesn’t make you presumptuous.”

“Steve, I don’t –” Steve grabbing his hands in a vice-like hold silenced Bucky immediately.

“And while we’re at it, you need to let me say thank you, Buck,” Steve said fiercely, his voice not unkind, but holding an undercurrent of something hard and obstinate. “You need to let me be grateful to you and you also need to let me feel guilty for having let it happen. I know, I know what you’re going to say. But I was there. I was trained for this. All three of us were trained for this and we let it happen. Not only did we fail to foresee the attack, but we also couldn’t stop other people from getting hurt or killed. That’s on us, Buck.”

“But it wasn’t your fault,” Bucky replied, chewing at his bottom lip. “I know that you were trained for this and you’ve been through similar situations before. But it’s not your fault, Steve, and it’s not Natasha’s or Sam’s. It was the other guys’ fault. You can’t feel responsible for this.”

“Would you say the same if your father died? Or your mom? Or Becca?” Steve’s smile was an ugly thing, made of jagged pieces that cut. Bucky swallowed hard, the sudden lump in his throat reminding him of Dean Harris’ slumped and utterly lifeless body. Imaging the same thing happening to any of his parents or Becca or any of his family was devastating. Actually happening would have been a tragedy. Bucky pressed his clammy hands into the meat of thighs.

“You’re right,” he admitted, at last, his voice hoarse and wobbly. “I wouldn’t think like that.”

Steve nodded, his jaw tightly set. “I shoulder a lot of responsibility. Me and the others as well. It’s uhm, it’s not easy. It’s not easy at all to feel constantly guilty for so many things. But we do. I do.
And sometimes I fail. God, Buck, sometimes all I do is fail.”

The gut-wrenching words pierced through Bucky. He immediately wrapped his arms around Steve and held on tight. It dawned on him as Steve’s arms wrapped around his waist just as hard that it wasn’t his job to tell Steve to stop feeling guilty or stop taking on the responsibility. But rather to help him shoulder it in any way he could – not by taking it on, but by being there for Steve in any way he needed Bucky to be.

He sucked in a deep breath, pressing against Steve, letting his love wash over both of them in soothing waves. Reluctantly, he let go only when he felt that Steve wanted to say something else. A twinge of pain jolted through Bucky when he saw Steve’s despondent face.

“And I might fail at this as well, though I’ll try my best not to,” Steve admitted in a tiny voice, his hands not leaving Bucky’s. “But I’ll give you my best, Buck, I promise you that. And in the meantime, I can be grateful to you and find you attractive at the same time.”

“I guess I’ve been a little afraid that you might confuse them just a little.”

“Just a little? Just because I’m thankful to you doesn’t mean that I can’t find you attractive or want to spend every moment awake kissing the daylights out of you.” Steve leaned forward and kissed Bucky’s hands. “I see the way you look at me sometimes, Buck. Like you can’t believe you’re here with me. Like I’m doing you a favor when it’s actually the other way around. Damn it, Buck! Don’t you get it? You saved me in more ways than I could count!”

“But I didn’t do anything special.” Bucky shrugged, unsure when facing the magnitude of Steve’s stubbornness and appreciation.

“Yes, yes, you did, Buck. Stop selling yourself short.” Steve shuffled closer and cupped Bucky’s cheeks, trailing his thumbs over his skin, their gentleness scorching and tender. “You saved my life when you took a bullet for me and you saved my life when you sought me out, when you shared the bed with me. When you took me on dates or when you let me kiss you.” Steve brushed his lips against Bucky’s. “I’ll never tire of kissing you, Buck.”

“I’ll never tire of kissing you either.” The confession sparked another wave of emotion through Steve, whose eyes lit up even more, his hold on Bucky so tender it was heartbreaking.

“I was functioning, Buck. I was doing really well at simply functioning until I met you.” Steve pressed another kiss to Bucky’s lips, his eyes suspiciously liquid. “Your unselfishness is boundless and charming and left me utterly defenseless. The moment we shook hands, back then, before the shooting, you claimed me for your own and I’m glad for it.” Steve leaned in and licked at the fullness of Bucky’s bottom lip, kissing him hard and desperate. “You hear that, Buck? I am glad for it.”

“Steve,” Bucky murmured, grabbing Steve’s wrists and holding on to them for dear life. “Steve, what are you trying to say?

Steve pressed his cheek against Bucky’s and leaned further still. He said, “That I want you to believe me when I’m telling you that you can be a little selfish when it comes to me. That you can ask anything from me. Because Buck, it angers me when you act like you have no claim over me. When in fact, all I want is to be claimed by you.”

Bucky pressed harder against Steve’s cheek as love, sharp and powerful, jolted through his body, overwhelming and all-encompassing. “Is this your longwinded way of telling me that you’re my boyfriend?”
“Pretty much, yeah.” Steve leaned back a little, his smile cranking up a notch. “You’re my boyfriend and in case I didn’t make myself clear enough,” and Steve smiled scorching hot and assured, “I’m in this for the long haul. I’m in this ‘til the end of the line.”

“Steve,” Bucky breathed, the name sounding like a reverent prayer. “I’m with you ‘til the end of the line.”

It sounded like a promise. And it sounded like a prayer. It sounded like an oath.

Steve’s large hands wrapped around Bucky and manhandled him until Bucky sat down in his lap, pressing against each other as if they hadn’t kissed in the longest of times. There were scorching kisses, the type that distilled the world around them, reducing it to the hot slide of their tongues against each other’s, to the way their teeth nipped and their lips soothed. Steve’s hands curled tight around Bucky’s hips and rolled his hips in a way that made Bucky moan unashamed, pure lust spreading through his veins like wildfire. His hands roamed on Steve’s naked torso as Steve’s own hands sneaked underneath Bucky’s t-shirt, roaming over his skin, driving him insane with the need to be closer to Steve. Closer still.

There was nothing more pleasurable than the taste of the lush curve of Steve's lips while being held like something precious. So they made love there, on the couch, with the sun streaming down on them, but unable to outshine the love that ignited in their hearts.

Their breakfast turned to lunch but Bucky couldn’t make himself care. Inadvertently, without even saying the l word, somehow he and Steve had made a promise to each other. A promise that somehow meant something more than saying simply I love you. As he gazed at the man in front of him, Bucky understood that their worlds were going to collide at some point and they were going to collide hard. Again. But this time he would prepare his family and he’d have the Avengers. He still needed to meet Hawkeye and Thor and Dr. Banner. He still needed to discuss more mechanical engineering with Tony, spend time with Sam and have a walk with Natasha.

As Steve drove them that afternoon to his parents’ house, Bucky found himself smiling more and more, despite the nervousness that had awaken him that morning. Everything was going to be all right because as Steve said, they were both in it ‘til the end of the line.

“Ma, we’re here!” Bucky shouted as he opened the door and let Steve in before closing the door again. A delicious smell wafted from the kitchen.

“Shout louder, honey!” Ma yelled from the kitchen. “I don’t think they heard you all the way in Manhattan.”

“Then how would you know that I’ve arrived?”

“Stop shouting!”

“You’re shouting right back!” Bucky huffed as he took off his coat then held the flowers and the bottle of wine that they bought so that Steve could do the same thing. His boyfriend had changed into some dark jeans and a soft-looking green sweater, giving him the air of a respectable thirty-something-year-old. Perfect to be introduced as a boyfriend.

Just as he was handing them back to Steve, Ma showed up from the kitchen, wiping her hands with a brown napkin. She was wearing a flowery dress, comfortable and chic, making her look ten years younger. Also, she wore her patented What am I going to do with you? look.

“I am allowed to shout in my own house, Bucky. How many times have I told you to use your
indoor voice?” She gave him a one-arm hug and then smiled at Steve. “Hi, Steve. Please excuse my son’s lack of manners. I promise you he wasn’t raised by wolves.”

“Har har, very funny.” Bucky rolled his eyes just because he could, but melted a little when he watched Ma hugging Steve as well. It was a little bit awkward with Steve still having his hands full, but on the other hand, it was amusing to see a giant of a man melting in the arms of a small lady.

“Hi, Mrs. Barnes” Steve managed to get out at last. “These are for you.” He blushed sweetly when he handed her the lovely bouquet of red roses.

“Oh, my favorites!” Ma blushed a little as well as their scent wrapped around her.

“Well, a little bird told me that.”

“Because I wasn’t raised by wolves.” Bucky pouted just to make his case. “Where’s Dad?”

“In the kitchen, helping me out with the food. And-“

“What? No welcoming committee? You know what, Ma? I’m disappointed in you guys.” Bucky interrupted her. He crossed his arms and looked at her sternly. “I expected a red carpet rolled out, some petals spread over the doorway. Maybe even some music fit for an emperor. It’s not like I bring someone for dinner every Saturday.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Your Highness. I can always make you wash dishes after dinner. To ensure you remember where you actually are. Also, Ben is in the living room. Stop talking nonsense and let me take Steve in the kitchen so he can say hi to your dad and give him that bottle that he’s been holding, while you keep yammering away.”

“Oh, Uncle Ben is here?” Bucky narrowed his eyes at Ma. “Bringing out the big guns, I see.”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about.” Ma smiled innocently at him and then took Steve’s arm. “Come on, sweetheart, let’s talk to George and let this fool go and join Ben in the living room.”

“Of course, Mrs. Barnes.”

“Please, I’ve told you before. It’s Winnie.”

“Of course, Mrs. Barnes.” Steve smiled at Bucky then followed Ma in the kitchen.

“You’re not allowed to threaten my boyfriend at the beginning of the evening!” Bucky yelled at their retreating backs just make sure, but she just perfectly ignored him and disappeared with Steve in the kitchen.

Bucky sighed and went into the living room where Uncle Ben was watching a football match.

“Hey, Uncle Ben! How’s tricks?” Uncle Ben looked up and smiled warmly at him.

“Tricks are for kids, Bucky.” They shook hands and Bucky sat next to him. “Interesting game?”

“Nah, everyone is losing and I don’t care much about the teams.”

“So Ma called in the big guns, eh?” Bucky smiled wryly when Uncle Ben winked at him.
“You know it, kid.”

“You know you could have said no. Also, you know you could have called to give me a heads up.” Bucky made a point of shoving him a little, his elbow digging lightly in Uncle Ben’s ribs.

“What would have been the point if you knew about it all along? Just be glad that Becca and Michael aren’t here. Otherwise, it would have been a complete pandemonium.”

“Well, apparently, a French restaurant is more important than the première of me bringing a boyfriend for the first time at this dinner.” Bucky rolled his eyes, but smiled when Uncle Ben chuckled.

“Oh, kid, just be glad for it and count your losses. Besides, I wouldn’t have missed this opportunity for all the gold in the world.”

“Right. It has nothing to do with the fact that in between you and Dad, you could put to shame a whole army of Avengers.”

“I’m sure we’re not that scary.”

“Puh-lease, in between your skills as a carpenter and Dad’s skills as a lawyer, you’d be able to get away with murder and none would be the wiser.”

“You make us sound like we’re the scary dudes.” Uncle Ben smiled, his features softening, making him look even more relaxed. “But I promise you that I’ll do my best to be as intimidating as possible.”

“Naturally.” Bucky shook his head. He threw a look on the hallway but nothing moved so he swallowed past his sudden nervousness and glanced back at Uncle Ben. “So how’s life been treating you?”

“You know me. The usual. Nothing much is happening.”

“Found any good books lately?”

So they discussed a new novel that Uncle Ben came across, the only other avid reader from the family apart from Dad. Ten minutes later when Dad brought Steve back to the living room, his boyfriend looked flustered and abashed and smiled happily at Bucky. Hmm, maybe the short discussion in the kitchen hadn’t been that bad. The wide smile on Dad’s lips though promised only nefarious plans and seriously, how could Bucky’s heart fill with so much love for him?

“Hey, Dad!” Bucky stood up and hugged him. “How’re you doing?”

“Entertaining our guest. How are you, son? Taking your meds?”

“Yes, sir.” Bucky gave a salute. “Also, still brushing my teeth, eating my veggies, and going to bed early.”

“We know for sure which one is the lie,” Uncle Ben said and hid his smile behind his hand when Bucky sputtered, blushing furiously. Steve looked one step away from keeling over and Dad was too amused by the whole situation.

“You were my favorite uncle!” Bucky pointed his finger at him. “No more! Uncle Liam gets your present for Christmas.”
“You haven’t even ordered it yet. Stop moaning!”

“I have and it was awesome.” Bucky sat next to Steve on the other couch and immediately, Steve grabbed his hand in a clear show of solidarity. He was there as Bucky’s boyfriend and therefore determined to act like one. Bucky’s heart soared to new high levels, the gentle hold soothing and anchoring. He scowled for good measure when it was obvious both brothers looked far from feeling chastised.

“What about my present?”

“You’re on fucking thin ice, Dad.”

“I think you should mind your language.”

“I think so too, but that still doesn’t mean you’re not on thin ice.”

“Of course.” Dad nodded for good measure. “So, Steve, what do you think about the current state of affairs in the world?”

“Well, it would depend on –”

“Dad,” Bucky whined, effectively cutting off Steve. “Let’s not discuss politics. And please don’t drag Steve into another one of your rants about the system. You’re working for the system after all.”

“I work against the system through its own methods actually, thank you very much. Also, in this family, we support all political views.”

“By which he means that you’d better have the same core beliefs,” Uncle Ben added mostly at Steve, keeping it friendly. “Otherwise you’re in a world of pain. Namely, a horrible excruciating pain related to your ears.”

“I do not rant!” Dad faltered, crossing his arms. “I bring well-argued points to the discussion.”

“Sure you do.” Bucky smirked when Dad narrowed his eyes at him.

“Let the man talk!” Dad waved a hand at Steve. “I’m sure he has a few points of his own to make, without you playing the lawyer. Which might I add, would have suited as a job just fine.”

“Well, should I talk about the current bill attempting to restrict vigilante activity or about something else?” Steve said matter-of-factly.

“Oh, do tell!” Dad made himself comfortable, smiling like the cat that got the cream. A pang of regret pierced through Bucky’s heart, remembering that this had been what his dad had wanted into first place: have a chat with Steve about political affairs and get his support for certain causes. And while this was finally happening and everyone appeared at ease, it still broke Bucky’s heart a little that they had to go through a shooting and massive heartache for them to have this conversation at long last.

For the next half an hour this was exactly what they did, debating back and forth the Vigilante Act, which was currently being disputed on the Senate floor. The act was seen as a direct response to increasing vigilante activity not only in New York (which for some reason appeared to have the most) but in all the other cities across continents. Even space. Bucky listened to them attentively, quipping here and there, but for the most apart, he just held Steve’s hand and said nothing.
“George, what did I say about politics before dinner?” Ma interrupted just as Dad was launching into the old argument of who was justice supposed to serve in the first place.

“That it’s better to keep it until after the meal, that way at least we get to burn all the remaining energy,” Dad recited, still grinning widely when Ma just shook her head defeated.

“I see you’ve been taking the directive to heart.”

“Of course, dear.”

“Don’t dear me. Come on! The dinner is served!”

Bucky chuckled when they stood up. Steve’s body was a relaxed and warm line next to his, and Bucky could barely hold in his smile. Steve appeared to have forgotten his initial shyness, continuing the discussion with Dad for a few more minutes as they made their way in the dining-room.

As he turned to follow them, Bucky spotted the warm way Ma looked at them, the subtle smile on her lips. It was this particular sense of caring that spread over the conversation over dinner, which was friendlier than he expected and full of jokes. Uncle Ben was in great form and threw in a couple of sarcastic remarks towards Dad, recalling a couple of times when Dad had complained about Law School back in the days and had wanted to quit. In turn, Dad told about the time when Uncle Ben made his first chair and as soon as Grandpa Joe sat in it, the chair crashed. That had all the table in stitches.

“It was a goddamn fine chair,” Uncle Ben snarked, though he tried to hide his chuckles. “Dad just didn’t know how to properly sit in it.”

“You mean not sit at all?”

“Har har, very funny, George!”

“Maybe I shouldn’t mention then the time I painted my mom’s first portrait,” Steve said, the delicious curve of his lips twitching so slightly.

“Oh this I have to hear!” Uncle Ben said around a mouthful of lasagne. “What did you do?”

So Steve launched into a story involving his mom sitting for hours for a portrait that was far from being a successful one, rather portraying his mom like an old lady, unable to get her eyes just right.

“Yeah, I’m sure that the eyes were the problem,” Bucky piped and ignored the way Steve pushed against his shoulder, playful and sweet.

“I'll have you know that that was exactly the problem and I resent any other implication.”

“Of course you do.” Bucky briefly lost himself to Steve's playful grin, his lush lips inviting to be kissed. They must have stared one another for longer than generally accepted because Dad cleared his voice a few times for Bucky to snap out of it.

“Come on, Your Highness, help me with the dishes.” Oh, sarcasm was strong with Ma this evening. And she wondered where he was getting it from.

“Your Highness?” Dad asked confused.

“Your son wanted a welcoming committee and a red carpet rolled out for him, so I need to bring
him back to earth,” Ma explained as she started to grab the empty plates.

“Do I have to?” Bucky whined like the thirty-two-year-old mature person that he was.

“You have to,” Dad intervened and Bucky scowled at him for good measure. “Stop stalling and go! We'll take care of Steve.”

“That's exactly what I was afraid off,” he mumbled in reply but stood up and grabbed a few plates. He knew a ruse when he saw one. Still, before leaving, he pressed a sweet kiss on Steve's lips and muttered just for him to hear, “Remember you have enough money to run to a deserted island. And if not, we can always borrow money from Tony.”

“I'll be fine, Buck.” Steve nuzzled at his cheek just a little.

With another quick peck on the cheek, Bucky followed Ma in the kitchen. By some unexplained miracle, probably some magic trick known only to moms and dads across the world, there were already some leftovers ready for him and Steve to pick up when they left. He went to the sink and dumped the other plates before getting ready for the washing.

“Take next Friday off,” Ma said apropos of nothing, making Bucky almost drop the plate in his hand.

“Damn it, Ma! You almost gave me a heart attack. And I can't take next Friday off. I already had too many Fridays off. Next thing you'll know, I'll have to get three more jobs and move back with you.”

“Well, technically, now you have a boyfriend and you can move in with him.”

“Oh, so this is how it's going to be? Now that I got myself a boyfriend, you're abandoning me to his care.” Ma didn't roll her eyes but she was closer than she would have liked to doing that. Instead, she decided to bring some other pots and pans for Bucky to wash. “So, are you going to tell me why you want me to take next Friday off?” Bucky asked as he rubbed at a particularly greasy spot.

“We're going to Indiana.”

The prospect came so out of the left-field that Bucky completely forgot that he abandoned his boyfriend with Dad and his uncle and blurted the first thing that crossed his mind. “Oh, no, we aren't!”

“Oh, yes, we are! And don't think that your boyfriend is not invited.”

“Ma, that's bound to end up in a complete and utter disaster! Who the hell came up with this brilliant idea?” Bucky waved his hands around, spraying water everywhere.

“I did. Also, mind your tone, mister.” Ma stepped close to him and stared him down. “Your Grandpa Joe isn't feeling well and no matter how much we tried to protect him, he learned about the shooting.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “He found out about it because your idiot of a cousin couldn't keep his mouth shut.”

“Which cousin?”

“Callum, who else?”

“Yes, he is. But, Bucky, this isn't about you or about Grandpa only. This family has been through a lot for the past couple of months and we need some time away. Now we've all got our busy schedules but we all managed to take some time off next week. Even your sister. So I expect you to do the same. We'll have a family potluck and we'll enjoy ourselves.”

“But Ma, Steve? They will eat him alive!”

“I think it's the perfect opportunity. In any case, I think you underestimate your boyfriend.” Ma grabbed a clean towel and began drying off the dishes. “Besides, if we don't face the Barnes clan soon, we'll be swarmed. You know better than I do that they're perfectly capable of coming over to us when we least expect it. Do you want to play host to your Uncle Jacob? Because I promise you he'll sleep at your place.”

Bucky sighed heavily, scrubbing viciously at another pot. “I get it, you're right. But does it have to be next Friday?”

“It needed to be soon and this was all I could come up with on such short notice. Had your stupid cousin Callum kept his mouth shut, we might have done it over the Thanksgiving weekend. As it is, we might as well go there next weekend. We'll leave early in the morning. Hopefully, if the traffic isn't too bad, by lunch we should be there.”

“Sure, Ma. Just promise me that at least Uncle Jacob had some choice words for his offspring.”

“For once your uncle absolutely agreed with George when he called Callum a moron.”

“Was Grandpa Joe upset?”

“As you might have expected.” Ma pushed a strand of hair behind her ear before continuing. “It wasn't a pleasant phone conversation, I can tell you that. That's why we need to go there as a family. But I believe this is what your dad needs as well. I need it, and so does your sister.” Ma's hands shook a little and she needed to put the plate down otherwise it might have fallen to the floor and broken. Bucky bit his lip and drying his hands, hugged Ma.

“I'm sorry, Ma. I'm being an idiot. I'll come. We'll both come – I mean, I need to ask Steve first. But I'm sure he won't refuse. As long as there isn't another alien invasion or whatnot.” Bucky hugged her tighter, his throat suddenly tense and dry. “Ma, I'm sorry if I make it sound sometimes like all of this is a chore and I complain about you guys being overbearing, but I want you to know that I love you guys. So much. And I don't know what I would have done if something had happened to you back then.”

“Oh, Buck!” Ma buried her face in Bucky's chest. “We love you too! So much!” How come Bucky was in his thirties and Ma still managed to reduce him to a child, whose world was made better by his mom's embrace? He didn't know and he didn't care - he allowed himself to bask into her motherly love that washed over him in soothing waves.

“I thought that you were washing dishes,” Dad snarked, “not singing Kumbaya and hugging it out on the kitchen floor.” Bucky looked up to see his dad entering the kitchen with a soft look on his face, though his eyes spoke of a quiet kind of hurt.

“We're not on the kitchen floor, George!”

“Seriously, Dad, did you leave Steve with Uncle Ben?”

“He can handle himself better than I'd expected,” Dad mumbled but took a couple of steps and joined their hug. “Group hug?”
“Group hug,” Bucky confirmed and wrapped his arms around both his parents, burying his face into his dad's shoulder. “I love you both so much.” His voice was shot to hell and he could barely squeeze the words through his suddenly tight throat. “I'm so lucky that you guys are my parents.”

“We love you too, son.” One of Dad's hands settled on the back of Bucky's nape, the slight pressure anchoring and safe. “But no more jumping in front of bullets, okay? Even if I approve of your boyfriend.”

“Shocker!”

“There wasn't a moment you couldn't ruin, was there?” Ma asked wryly as she stepped away from their hug. Dad squeezed at his nape one more time before he too let go.

“Says the woman that shocked me with the news of the impending trip to Indiana.”

“But it worked.”

“The guilt-tripping worked.”

“Your family obligations don't amount to guilt-tripping.”

“What about their Bucky-obligations? Don't they have such a thing?”

“They do and they came through during our hour of need.” Dad shook their head at both of them as he grabbed the cherry pie that Ma had baked for the occasion.

“Fine!” Bucky threw his hands up. “I'm coming and I'm bringing Steve too. But if Grandpa Joe has a heart-attack because I'm dating his long-time hero, it will be your own damn fault. And I want this to be recorded officially in the official records of our family.”

“We don't have official family records,” Dad pointed out the obvious.

“Oh, jeez, Dad, really?” Buck scowled at him as he took the empty plates that Ma handed him. “I don't know why I bother with this family anymore. Everything ends up in a complete disaster!”

But later on, he said to Steve, “Well, I think that went rather well, all things considered.” Bucky gently squeezed Steve's hand as they walked the short distance to his car. The night had descended over Brooklyn with its usual choir of late-night traffic and the occasional siren. “In fact, better than expected. I think?”

“Yeah, Buck. I think it did. Your family is truly amazing.” Steve smiled then brought Bucky's hand to his lips and kissed it gently. He blushed heavily and hid his face into Steve’s shoulder. He received a barely-there kiss on the forehead for his trouble.

“Will I have to meet the Avengers again as your boyfriend this time? Being given the speech and all that?” he asked as Steve pressed the car key and the doors opened.

“I'm afraid so, but don’t worry about it. No one will bother to give you the speech, except Nat. And Sam maybe. But mostly Nat.” They both got into the car and put their seatbelts on.

“Yeah, right. Just Natasha.” Bucky rolled his eyes. “How come that’s not reassuring at all?”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, Tony has already threatened me on your behalf.”

“What?” Bucky swung his head around so hard he almost gave himself whiplash. “Are you telling me that Tony Stark – the Tony Stark - gave you the speech for me? Tony Stark liked me so much
that he told you that if you hurt me, then he’ll hurt you?” His heart expanded with so much affection, all fuzzy and warm.

“Yeah.”

“I knew there was a reason why he was my favorite Avenger.” He pretended to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye as Steve engaged the car into the traffic. “Well, my favorite Avenger, after you and Sam, of course.”

“Of course. Wait a minute! Why Sam as well?” The night sped around them, the street lights playing hide and seek with them.

“Come on, pal! He’s Falcon! No powers whatsoever and he still kicks ass.”

“Oh thanks a lot! And what am I? Chopped liver?”

“No, of course not. That’s why you are first, and then Sam and then Tony.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Bucky thought for a moment. “But here’s the thing: Black Widow is absolutely amazing and she probably knows how to kill even you. And now that I think about it, there’s also Hawkeye! I mean, the things the man can do with the bow, not to mention that—”

“I see it’s quite hard for you, Buck. Maybe you should stick with your favorite Avenger and see where it gets you.”

“You mean Sam?”

“Har har, that wasn’t remotely funny.” Steve’s smile disappeared into the darkness of the car but Bucky still caught a glimpse of it anyway.

“Then I’ll tell Sam that you don’t consider him cool enough to be my favorite.”

“It’s not that. I mean, yeah, the man has the wings. But my shield is better.”

“Oh, wow, are we doing that now?”

They continued to bicker as they made their way home, holding hands and laughing.

For once, the world seemed largely at peace.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Another year, another challenge awesomely organized by the lovely mods at CAPBB. They make it seem effortless, though I’m sure that’s not the case. :) Also, I realized I might have an obsession with shunkyclunks at this point. :)))

The masterpost for the art can be found here. Please go and shower em-dibujsh with all the love and praise because she deserves it. Not only did she create incredible art
for the story (I still marvel at it <333) but also she was an avid reader and supporter of it and I couldn't be more grateful to her. I've never thought when she picked up my story that I would gain such a great friend. You can find her and her lovely art here and here.

I'm equally indebted to fancyh, whose hard work made me look good. As I said before, English is my second language but she managed to weed out my terrible spelling and general mistakes, encouraging me with her comments and feedback. fancyh is also an incredible writer, whose stories can be found here.

And if you made it this far, dear reader, as always, thank you for reading. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!